Summary

The Kriegers have been together for 10 years now and are dealing with some teen angst, some toddler shenanigans and a big and busy life in the big old house. The extended family grows and life marches on as they face new challenges and adventures together.

Notes

Hi guys! I'm back. Happy New Year!!
I decided today was the perfect day to start posting this one. My heart hurts at the camp call-up and I'm hoping this might distract some of you just a little bit if yours does too.
This Part 7 picks up right where we left off.
Let me know what you think!

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.
Ashlyn’s phone rang shrilly from the nightstand, waking both she and her wife up with a start.

“What’s happening?” Ali’s voice was raspy with sleep as she propped herself up onto her elbows in the darkness of their bedroom.

The brunette’s eyes were still squeezed shut and she was trying to get them to open as she felt the bed move when the keeper leaned over and fumbled to pick the phone up. It was 1:45am and Ashlyn knew something was wrong. She always set her phone to silent before going to bed. It had been programmed to ring only for certain contacts, in case of emergency.

“What?” her groggy voice filled the dark room as she leaned on her right elbow and faced the nightstand.

Ali knew it was trouble too. She had her phone set up the same way. The phone was silent for all texts, notifications, and other alerts, but it would ring if someone tried to call it. Everybody understood how it worked and had adopted the same sort of system. Send the goofy picture in the middle of the night because you were awake and unable to sleep, but don’t call unless it was an actual emergency. The brunette, eyes finally open and trying to adjust, rolled over and put her hand on her keeper’s back. She could feel Ashlyn’s heart pounding and tried to quell her own rising fear.

“What? I don’t...what?” The blonde’s voice was edgy and raw. She sat up and swung her feet off the side of the bed, ready to jump into whatever action was necessary. “Are you sure?”

It was torture for Ali not knowing who was on the phone but she didn’t dare interrupt the tense conversation. She sat up nervously and tried to be patient and not freak out. She could feel the tension emanating from her wife’s body.

“Why didn’t you call me sooner?!” Ashlyn yelled as she slid her glasses onto her face. She was quiet for a minute and Ali could almost make out the voice on the other end of the call, but not quite. “You should have called me right away! This is bullshit Hannah and you know it.” Another pause. “You’re damned right we’re gonna talk more about it later...”

The brunette moved closer to her keeper and put both hands on her back, trying to soothe her frayed nerves and calm her rising temper without antagonizing her in the process. The good news was that none of the Harrises were having emergencies. The bad news was that if Hannah was calling at this hour then something had happened to Meg. Ali felt her wife’s shoulders slump slightly as she let out a heavy sigh.

“Don’t cry Han. I’m sorry” Ashlyn exhaled. “We’ll find her. She’s a smart kid. She wouldn’t do anything stupid. I’m sure she’s just at one of her friends’ houses trying to punish you...” she reached her hand back, grasping Ali’s and holding it tightly. “I’ll call her right now and text her and tell her to get in touch right away...yeah, of course, right away. You let me know too. Alright. Bye Han.”

Ashlyn pulled Ali’s arm around her and the brunette moved her whole body closer and hugged her from behind. She squeezed her keeper and kissed her shoulder, waiting for her to speak. Ashlyn pushed a button on her phone and put it to her ear.

“Hey Meg, it’s me. Listen, your mom called me and she’s really worried about you. So am I. Please call one of us right away. I don’t care where you are or who you’re with...just please call me
so I know you’re ok. Please Meg.” The keeper’s voice was as distraught as Ali had ever heard it. She waited while Ashlyn sent the newly 14-year old girl a text. Meg had just celebrated her birthday the week before, Sunday March 8th 2026. It took a painful three minutes before the blonde finally spoke.

“Meg’s...missing. She was supposed to be home after the movie tonight but she’s still not back yet” Ashlyn swallowed hard. “She went with Tiff and a couple of other girls...and they’re all home. Hannah’s spoken with all three of their parents to make sure.”

“Maybe she’s with another friend” Ali offered. “Or maybe a boy...what’s his name? Marcus? Isn’t that the boy she likes? They’re probably just fooling around somewhere...”

“Is this supposed to be making me feel better?” Ashlyn turned her head to the side and her words were short and sharp.

“No...I don’t know. What can we do?” Ali asked with a determined tone as she got off the bed and put her robe on.

“Where do you think you’re going?” the keeper asked, glancing up from her phone.

“I don’t know but I’ll never be able to sleep now.”

“There’s nothing we can do Al. Not one fucking thing but sit here and wait.”

The brunette’s heart broke for her wife when she saw the disconsolate look on her face. That was literally the worst thing to ask Ashlyn Michelle Harris Krieger to do when someone she loved was in trouble. Sit and wait. Ali took two steps and stood right in front of her keeper. As soon as Ashlyn wrapped her arms around her waist and pulled her in closer, Ali held her wife’s head against her own chest and kissed the top of it softly.

“You’re right you know. Meg’s smart. She’s a good kid and she won’t do anything dumb. She just won’t” Ali tried to make her voice sound calm and convincing even as her mind swirled with terrifying possibilities.

“Hannah said they’ve been fighting a lot the last couple of weeks. She said Meg’s really been pushing her on...everything” Ashlyn explained quietly, trying to let her wife’s hands soothe her as they moved across her upper back and shoulders and head. “She’s been late for curfew twice already this week.”

“And she still let her go out tonight?” Ali was surprised because Hannah was usually pretty strict with her daughter.

“Yeah” Ashlyn sighed. “I think she’s afraid of losing her. You know, the ‘hated mother’ thing. She’s really struggling with what to do with her right now. The whole thing sucks.”

“But Meg was so good when she was here last month” Ali frowned. “It’s hard to believe she’d be so bratty with her mom.”

“Well, I believe Hannah” Ashlyn sat up straighter and leaned her head back to look into the brunette’s face.

“Hey, I’m not saying I don’t believe Hannah” Ali said quickly, locking eyes with her anxious wife. “I’m just saying...Meg seemed good just a month ago. I can’t imagine her disrespecting the rules like that. That’s all. I know it’s different with moms and daughters though. I get it.”
Meg had come up to the big old house for her February vacation, as she usually did, and the Kriegers had spent a lot of time with her and the visit had been one of the best ever. The teenager was talkative and engaging and happy to spend time with the kids too. She had spent a lot of time with neighbor Emma Donaldson who was a freshman in high school this year. Meg was still in 8th grade but was nervous about making the big leap to the next level. She had asked Emma a million questions about what being a freshman in high school was really like.

“You don’t think she’s having sex with that boy, do you?” Ashlyn’s eyes went wide at the thought. “She just turned 14! She’s not even interested in sex yet.”

“I don’t think she’s having sex with Marcus, or anybody” Ali answered honestly and held her keeper’s face in her hands to steady her. “But she might be with him just fooling around” she shrugged. “We’ve both been there and done that. Maybe she lost track of time...”

“But he’s not old enough to drive. That doesn’t make any sense” Ashlyn shook her head and stood up abruptly.

“Maybe she’s at his house and they fell asleep...” the brunette tried again, stepping back and out of her wife’s way. She knew Ashlyn was getting worked up and was going to start pacing the room. “There are a lot of possibilities...”

They were interrupted by Ashlyn’s phone ringing in her hand.

“Hello?!” she answered before the first ring had even finished. “That’s crazy...no way she would do that...” Ashlyn looked at her wife, face full of concern. “What?! No! I have never ever told her to do that. Never.” The blonde’s jaw was flexing and her features were washed in anger as she paced at the foot of the bed. “Be very careful what you say to me next Hannah” she warned, jaw clenched. “I know you’re stressed right now but I am not the enemy here.” She was quiet for a couple of minutes as she kept moving across the carpeted floor. “Tiff finally told her mom that? Jesus Christ. Yeah, I’ll go there now and wait for her...what time? I don’t know, it depends which one, but I’m going. I’ll be there when her train gets there. I’ll call you when I’ve got her.”

“She...she got on a train from DC to Boston?!” Ali exclaimed as soon as her wife had ended the call.

Figuring out which train Meg was on was another matter altogether and Ali spent the next half hour trying to do just that. Ashlyn got dressed and made the hour-long drive into South Station in Boston, waiting for the fruits of her wife’s labor to land in her text messages. Tiff said that they had gone to the 7:30pm movie and that Meg had taken a bus to the train station right afterwards. It was hard to determine what time she might have gotten on the train but they figured it would have been between 10pm and 11pm. Then they had to wonder if she had gotten on an express train or one that made more stops along the way and took longer. The express train took about 6-1/2 hours from DC to Boston. So they were hoping Meg would be arriving at South Station somewhere around 5am, roughly. Ashlyn left the big old house just before 3am and promised to call Ali as soon as she knew anything more. Both Hannah and Ashlyn had texted Meg and told her not to leave South Station without the keeper. The teen didn’t respond to either of those texts either.

Ashlyn tried to stay calm as she drove to the city in the insanely early hours of the morning. She was furious with Meg for running away in the first place, but she was just as angry with her for not responding to her texts and calls. Her brain was telling her that the girl was fine and probably asleep on the train, oblivious to the pain and worry she was causing everybody else. But the scary little voice she couldn’t quite shut out was telling her different, terrifying things that would explain why she might not be able to get to her phone. The keeper gulped and felt her chest ache with a jolt of momentary panic. She pushed the frightening thoughts away and started doing one of the
exercises she used to calm herself from her PTSD days. She focused as much as she could on a happy memory of Meg...the happiest one she could remember at that moment.

“You’re sure that’s the spot Meg? It’s now or never. Can’t change your mind anymore” Ashlyn challenged from her place on the tattoo table. She was laying on her stomach and looking back over her right shoulder at the teen who was studying the ‘Mary Sarah’ tattoo on the back of the keeper’s right thigh. “You’re sure you want it on the bowsprit?”

“Yep” Meg replied with a nervous giggle as she glanced quickly at Naomi, the tattoo artist, and then back at Ashlyn. “The bowsprit...like you said, I came first so I’ll go at the very front of the boat” she grinned at the keeper.

“It’s a ship Meggie” Ashlyn chuckled while Meg rolled her eyes at the mistake she continued to make no matter how many times her step-mom corrected her. “But I think the bowsprit is perfect. Let’s do this!”

“Alright sweetheart, let’s make real sure I’ve got everything spelled right here” Naomi slid the piece of paper across the bottom of the table towards the teen. “Will you check it one last time for me?”

“Margaret Ann Doucette 3-8-12’” Ashlyn spoke the words and birthdate while Meg studied the piece of paper again. “Unless you’ve changed your mind and want to go back to just ‘Meggie’ again” the keeper questioned, wanting to be very sure they got this right. “They both sound good to me, but it’s your decision kiddo.”

“So what’s it gonna be?” Naomi asked, eager to get to work on the letters.

Meg paused for a minute and scrunched her face up as she thought through it again. She really wanted to use her full name but she was afraid the keeper didn’t really want her to.

“Are you sure it’s ok to use all my names?” she asked tentatively, leaning her hands on the edge of the tattoo table and pressing her knuckles into the pliant surface. “Even my last name?” she shot a quick, questioning glance at the side of Ashlyn’s face she could see.

“Hey” the blonde said softly, tugging Meg’s arm and pulling the girl up towards the head of the table so they could see each other. “I love all your names honey, even your last name” she smiled as reassuringly as possible. “Why do you think I don’t want your last name on our ship? Is it because it’s not Krieger like the other kids?”

“Umm, no. I mean, kind of, but not really” Meg sighed and looked down. She felt Ashlyn squeeze her forearm and met her concerned gaze, urging her to tell her what was really going on. “It’s just that it’s mom’s name too, well it was before she married Dev, but it’s her family name...and I know you don’t love her anymore...”

“Meggie, I love your last name. I love it because it’s yours, not anybody else’s. I’d be really proud to have it on my body, on our ship. It would make me very happy. That’s the truth.”

“Really?” the teen asked with a hopeful smile on her lips as she studied Ashlyn’s face.

“Absolutely.”

The look of pure joy on Meg’s face that afternoon in the tattoo parlor was all Ashlyn could see as she got closer and closer to South Station that chilly March morning. It had been one of the sweetest moments the two had ever shared and it had only been a month ago. What could have happened in that brief time that had made Meg so unhappy that she would run away from home?
Whatever the reason, Meg’s actions were completely unacceptable and she would be punished accordingly. But all the keeper could focus on that morning was the girl’s well-being. Once she had Meg in her arms and was sure she was ok, then she would talk to Hannah and figure out how they were going to handle the suddenly rebellious teenager.

“She’s not here Al” Ashlyn’s voice was desperate again as she spoke into her phone.

“It’s just a few minutes after 5am” Ali tried to calm her wife’s jangly nerves. “We don’t know which train she’s on. She might not get there until 6am for all we know. Try to stay positive babe. She’ll be there. She still hasn’t texted you?”

“No. Nothing. What if she sleeps through the stop?”

“It’s the last stop. They’ll wake her up if they have to” the brunette reasoned.

“If she calls you or the house...” Ashlyn’s voice was anxious again and she couldn’t do anything about it. She had done more PTSD exercises during the hour she had already been waiting at South Station and she was at the end of her rope. “Make sure you tell her I’m on the Summer Street side of the lobby. It’s pretty open right now so I can see most of the Atlantic Ave side from here too, but it’ll get busier soon...”

“I’ll tell her Ash” she cut off her wife’s worried rambling with her own soft voice. “It’s going to be ok honey. She’s ok. She’s on the train and she’ll be there soon and you’ll find her. Just bring her home and we’ll figure out the next step later, ok?”

“Yeah, ok” Ashlyn exhaled a loud sigh and closed her eyes for a few seconds. Somehow just talking to the brunette made her feel stronger and more confident about the outcome. “Thanks for talking to me baby, you always know how to keep me from losing it. I love you.”

“I love you too sweetheart. And you’re doing great. Nothing about this is easy. And it’s sure not in any of the parenting books we’ve ever read” she chuckled, trying to lighten the mood a little bit.

“Good point” the keeper laughed lightly. “Alright, I’m gonna get another coffee and try and stay calm until she gets here. Wish me luck.”

“It wasn’t until about 5:45am when a sleepy and confused looking Margaret Ann Doucette walked nervously into the huge lobby of South Station. She had her backpack over one shoulder and her face looked like she had just woken up and was impossibly young. All Ashlyn could see in that moment was the little 4-year old girl she had fallen in love with almost ten years earlier. She felt simultaneous bursts of joy and terror fill her heart, and they were closely followed by anger. She watched the girl who held so much of her own heart in her hands shuffle along with the thin crowd of other early morning travelers. Meg was still growing and was about 5’8” now and skinny. Her breasts were starting to get bigger and her body had just begun to start filling out like her mother’s. Meg could have been a carbon copy of Hannah except she didn’t have her mother’s pretty face. She wasn’t unattractive by any means, but she didn’t have the pretty, almost perfect face that Hannah did. But she was still growing and filling out so who knew what would happen in another year or two. The teen had an UNC beanie on her head and her long, dark, coppery red hair fell down from it in natural curls. She wore jeans, red, canvas, high-top sneakers, and a coat that wasn’t warm enough for Boston in March. She walked with her arms wrapped around her chest and looked cold, her cheeks pink. There were a lot of people departing South Station at that hour, but it was still early for most arrivals. Ashlyn tried to get her emotions in check so she didn’t go to one extreme or another. She was tired and spent from a night of three hours of sleep and four hours of intense
worry and stress. The keeper told herself to stay calm, no matter what, and regretted the three cups of coffee she had polished off during the two hours she waited there that morning. She watched her step-daughter continue making her way into the lobby and wondered what she was going to do next. Why had she still not called or texted? Was she purposefully being a brat? Had she forgotten her phone or lost it? Maybe it had been stolen while she slept on the train. Ashlyn’s head spun with the possibilities until she shook it and cleared her throat.

“Meg!” she shouted and stuck her arm straight up in the air, waving it a couple of times. “Meg!”

Ashlyn couldn’t contain the relieved grin that spread across her face when the girl finally followed her voice and met her eyes across the enormous space. The keeper choked back tears as she moved towards her, noting that Meg’s face was an odd mixture of happiness, or maybe relief, and fear. They embraced when they finally met in the middle. Ashlyn leaned back and lifted the girl off her feet before putting her back down on the ground. Meg was only an inch shorter than the blonde now, and heavier than when she was younger and smaller so it wasn’t as easy to do that anymore.

“Oh Meggie am I glad to see you” she gasped out, still fighting tears as she kept the hug going a full minute longer. “Are you ok?”’ she pulled back and looked the girl up and down now that she was closer and able to see better. “Why didn’t you call or text me back?” she asked quickly and kept talking fast before Meg had a chance to reply. “I was so worried about you. We all were. Oh my God I’m so glad you’re here right now.” She pulled her into another hug and then reached for her own phone. “Hold on, I’ve gotta call your mom and let her know you’re safe.”

Ashlyn kept her free hand on Meg’s arm, almost as if she were afraid she might disappear if she let go of her. She pushed the button for Hannah and only had to wait a few seconds for her to pick up.

“She’s here. I’ve got her. She’s safe.” There was a pause and Meg could hear her mother’s loud burst of crying through Ashlyn’s phone. “It’s ok Han. She’s alright...”

It took a few more minutes to get the anxious mother calmed down enough to tell her that they would talk later, once they were back at the big old house and Ashlyn had some answers for her.

“Are you hungry? Are you really ok?” the keeper asked as they started to walk across the lobby towards the exit. “Nobody...hurt you or anything, did they?” Ashlyn’s mouth was dry as a bone as she pushed the words past her lips. She had no idea what she would do if the answer was anything other than yes Meg was ok.

“No!” Meg pulled away slightly and turned her head to the side to face her step-mom. “Nobody touched me. What are you even talking about?” she seemed embarrassed and self-conscious as she frowned at the keeper.

“Well I don’t know!” Ashlyn yelled, surprising them both. “I’ve never had a kid run away from home and get on a train in the middle of the night before. I don’t know where you’ve been or what happened to you!” the tears finally won the battle and slipped down her cheeks as she kept a firm hold of Meg, her arm around the girl’s waist below the full backpack. “Fuck, Meg” she exhaled and wiped at her tears with her free hand as they stopped walking. “Are you really ok?”

“I’m sorry!” Meg yelled back and tried to pull away but Ashlyn held on to her waist tightly. “Maybe I should just get on the next train and go back home...” she tried to keep her voice strong and steady but she couldn’t do it. Her bottom lip was quivering and her own tears started two seconds after she spoke. “I’m sorry...” she cried into the keeper as they shared a long, tearful hug.

It was both the longest ten minutes of Ashlyn’s life as well as the quickest. They hugged and cried and let people move around them on their way to their own busy days. Finally Ashlyn spoke again,
still inside the hug but without tears to choke her words. Her voice was low and flat and full of worry.

“Are you ok? You haven’t answered me yet and that’s making me sick to my stomach...”

“Yeah” Meg sniffled, pulled back and wiped her nose on the back of her hand. “I’m ok. I have to pee though. And I’m starving” she giggled awkwardly.

“Oh thank God” Ashlyn exhaled again and smiled at the girl, leaning forward and kissing her on her forehead. “Ok, let’s go to the bathroom. I have to pee too” she chuckled and turned them around towards the ladies room she had been too afraid to use the whole time she had been waiting for the redhead.

“I won’t go anywhere” Meg said cautiously. “You don’t have to follow me into the bathroom...”

“Girl, I’ve had to pee for over an hour but I was afraid I’d miss you if I took my eyes off the arrival tunnel for even a minute” the keeper cut her off with another chuckle. “I’m following you because my bladder’s about to explode.”

Once they had both used the facilities and were back in the lobby, Ashlyn took Meg’s backpack and slung it over her own shoulder. She handed her a $20 bill and told her to get whatever she wanted at the Dunkin Donuts on the other side of the lobby. She took her phone out, pushed a button on it, and held it to her ear, never taking her eyes off of the girl.

“If they have French Cruellers get me one” she called out after Meg. “Or a chocolate frosted if they don’t. Please.”

“Ok” Meg turned and waved as she got into line.

“Is she there? Is she ok?” Ali’s worried voice spoke before Ashlyn had a chance to say a single word.

“Yeah, she’s here and she’s ok” the keeper spoke in a slightly shaky voice. “She got here about 15 minutes ago...”

“Oh thank God. Jesus fucking Christ my nerves are shot. I don’t know how you’re even functioning right now honey. Where is she now?”

“In line at Dunkies. We’ll be leaving as soon as she pays. Should be home in an hour or so. It’s still so early that the traffic shouldn’t be bad yet.”

“Oooh donuts sound perfect right now...” the brunette said out loud without meaning to. She was just as tired and stressed out as her wife was and not firing on all cylinders yet. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry” Ashlyn laughed as she moved towards Meg and the line. “Donuts coming up. If we’re lucky we might make it home in time for breakfast with the other munchkins.”

“Don’t tease me now” Ali sighed and the keeper could hear how tired and anxious she was.

“I’m sorry about all of this Al...”

“Ashlyn, just come home. Please” the brunette’s voice was soft and kind. “Bring our donuts and our girl home and we’ll figure everything out then. Ok?”

“Ok baby. Sounds like a good plan.”
Here's Chapter 2 for you. We're having a Nor'easter today so I'm snowed in and not complaining about it at all.
I'll post Chapter 3 later this afternoon too. It's one of the longest chapters I've ever written and mostly smut. So prepare yourself. lol
Thanks for welcoming me back everybody! <3

Ashlyn and Meg and about half of the box of a dozen donuts made it back to the big old house by 7:30am, just at the end of breakfast. Only the dogs greeted them when they took off their coats and shoes in the mudroom and the keeper knew Ali was upstairs trying to get all four kids dressed for school and daycare.

“I’m just gonna run up and help them dressed...”

“I’ll help too” Meg offered quietly as she stood up after hugging both dogs for a long couple of minutes.

She had just been there a month earlier and was still up to speed on the routine. She knew not to try and brush Dodge’s hair for him because he wanted to do it himself, for example. And she knew that Drew liked to get dressed all by himself but that he still had trouble with his shoelaces and needed some reminder instructions to get the job done. She knew that both twins wanted to dress themselves but weren’t really ready to yet. So you had to let them try it a couple of times and then step in and finish the job for them, which they usually didn’t like. They were great at pulling up their own underwear and pants but you had to make sure they were facing the correct way for them. Josie could brush her own hair for the most part, but Lily needed lots of help and cried every single morning when whichever unlucky mom, or step-sister, tried to get the tangles out of it. Meg knew whose coat was whose and whose backpack was whose but she had no idea what was supposed to go inside each one every day. Packing the kids’ lunches was no joke but Ali had put her nervous energy to good use that morning and already had the backpacks fully loaded and ready to go.

The Krieger kids were beyond excited to see Meg, and Ali finally gave up trying to brush Lily’s hair until they had all had a quick hug session in the second-floor hallway. It was an extremely close call but, with all three people over the age of 14 helping, they managed to get Ali and all four kids out the door just after 8:15am. Only a few minutes later than usual. The kids were all dressed and presentable, but Ali was not. She pulled a beanie over her head and hoped nobody wanted to talk to her about anything that morning because she had on joggers and a sweatshirt and brushing her teeth was the only personal hygiene she had managed so far that day. Some days were like that. They considered keeping the twins home but Ali decided to make the drive to Lynnfield so there were no little ears around that day to hear whatever the hell was going on with Meg.

The ride home in Ashlyn’s new Jeep had been mostly quiet with both passengers stuffing their faces with donuts and trying hard not to spill any crumbs in the four-month old vehicle. The keeper learned that Meg’s phone had died shortly after she had gotten on the train and she had forgotten her charging cord at her mother’s house. The teen had thought she had enough cash to pay for an
uber from South Station to Gloucester but admitted that she really had no idea how much that would cost. Meg choked on her powdered donut when Ashlyn told her an uber would cost about $200 and a taxi cab about $140 to get her all that way.

“Just so you know, for future reference” the blonde offered as she watched a cloud of white powder start to settle onto the passenger side dash and floor mat, as well as Meg’s lap. “How did you buy the train ticket?”

“I just walked up to the ticket window and bought one” she shrugged as she tried to wipe off the powder on the dash but only made it worse by rubbing it into the dark leather.

“Just...leave it” the keeper instructed with a stern glance. “How much was the train ticket?”

“82.00”

“Where’d you get the cash for that?”

“From my babysitting money and my allowance” Meg replied before carefully taking another bite of the powdered donut while leaning over the box of donuts in her lap.

“So your plan was just to show up at the door this morning?” the keeper was trying to keep her anger and frustration in check so she could complete her fact-finding mission. But it was getting harder and harder. “I’m just trying to understand what the master plan was, that’s all Meg.”

“Yeah” she mumbled, her mouth full of donut. “That was it.” She chewed for a couple of minutes, deep in thought. “How did you know to come and get me?”

“Tiff finally told her mom about your plan...”

“Jesus Tiff...” Meg rolled her eyes and groaned in frustration.

“Hey” Ashlyn spoke sharply. “Thank God one of you did the right thing. If Tiff hadn’t been worried about you enough to tell her mom...” Ashlyn’s throat closed up as she thought about Meg trying to get from South Station to Gloucester on her own without enough money or a phone. The keeper took a beat and cleared her throat. “You’d probably be stuck at South Station until the police figured out you didn’t have anywhere to go.”

“The police?”

“Yeah, the cops. Part of their job is to check on people, especially kids, who are hanging around train stations instead of being in school where they belong.”

They were both quiet as Ashlyn’s harsh words hung in the air between them. She didn’t mean to get started on this until they were home and settled, but she was still really upset about the whole thing. She just couldn’t believe what a dumb thing Meg had done. And they hadn’t even gotten to how risky it had been for the 14-year old to travel on the train in the middle of the night by herself. Ashlyn could hear her Gramps’ voice in her ears ‘nothing good ever happens after midnight, nothing’.

“So don’t be mad at Tiff. I’d like to think you would have done the same thing in her place. God, I hope you would anyway...”

Meg sighed heavily and leaned her head back against the headrest. She was deep in thought again which Ashlyn took as a good sign, although she wasn’t sure why. They were both quiet for a few minutes. Ashlyn wanted to lighten the mood a little for the last 20 minutes of the drive.
“Pass me that jelly stick” she nodded at the box on Meg’s lap with a small smile on her face. “Let’s see if I can eat the whole thing without wearing any jelly.”

By the time Ali got back home from daycare drop-off it was just after 9:30am. She found Ashlyn at the kitchen sink, cleaning up the breakfast mess, while Meg played with the dogs in the backyard. The brunette wrapped her arms around her wife from behind and hugged her tight. She leaned her cheek against Ashlyn’s shoulder blade and let out a long sigh.

“You doing ok?” she asked and pressed a kiss into her keeper’s back as she moved to the side of her so she could see her face.

“I don’t know Al” Ashlyn shook her head as she looked out the back window at Meg and the dogs. “I’m all over the place. I hugged her like she’d come back from the dead when I saw her at the station and then I almost ripped her head off in the jeep on the drive home.” She sighed heavily and let her hands drop to the edge of the sink in front of her. “I don’t know how to handle this.”

“Have you talked to Hannah yet?”

“Yeah, I just hung up with her and she’s as clueless as I am. Meg’s never done anything like this before and we don’t know what’s changed to make her do this” she shrugged and then let her shoulders slump. “Thanks for staying home today, by the way” she added as she turned in her wife’s arms to face her. “There’s no way I could do this without you.”

“I wasn’t sure you’d want me to be around for it or not but I’m so tired there’s no way I’d be any good at the office anyway” she chuckled and leaned her forehead against the blonde’s shoulder. “We’re lucky I dropped the kids off at the right places this morning.”

“Of course I want you around for the Meg talk” Ashlyn’s eyes were a little panicky when Ali looked up at them. “Do you not want to be a part of it?”

“No, babe, it’s ok” Ali met her tired eyes and squeezed her arm. “I’m right here and I’m not going anywhere. We’ll talk to her together.”

“Oh thank God” the keeper closed her eyes and swallowed. “Don’t scare me like that.”

“As much as we’re all dreading it, we should probably get this show on the road” Ali put the last two kid plates into the dishwasher and closed it. “It’ll be time to pick Josie up before we know it.”

Ashlyn knew her wife was right. It would be 2pm sooner than they really wanted and she was afraid this conversation was going to take a while. She took a deep breath and blew it out as she rubbed her face with both hands. She was so tired but she knew she wouldn’t be able to sleep until she talked with Meg so there was no sense putting it off any longer.

“Ok, let’s do it” she agreed and moved to the window to call the girl inside.

It was a painful first hour and all three participants looked longingly at the clock on the tv cable box. None of them could believe it was already 11am and they hadn’t done anything other than hem and haw and beat around the bush trying to get Meg to open up about what had happened that had caused her to act so recklessly. They were sitting on the couch in the front living room, Meg was in the middle by the ‘L’ bend with a dog on either side of her, Ali sat on the end near the mudroom doorway with Ashlyn on the other end by the recliner and the front hall doorway. Both women were tired and cranky and Meg was starting to get sullen and snarky.

“Alright, this isn’t working” Ali stood up and bit back the next few words she wanted to say to the touchy teenager. “I think we should take a break and have an early lunch.”
It was just a desperate attempt to change the vibe of the painful and awkward non-conversation but when Ali saw Meg’s face show the very first sign of excitement at the idea she felt more optimistic. The brunette looked at her wife who was sitting there with an exhausted and defeated blank stare.

“How about brunch?” Ali kept going, undeterred.

“Chocolate chip pancakes?” Meg asked quietly, glancing sideways at the keeper who still sat on the couch.

“What?” Ashlyn blinked as if someone had just plugged her in again. “Chocolate chip pancakes sound awesome” she gave them both a small smile. “Maybe some bacon too?” she looked to Ali for the answer to that one.

“Absolutely” the brunette nodded. “I’m on it. Meg do you want to learn how to make bacon today?”

“Ummm, sure” she shrugged shyly at the woman who had always been so good to her and had answered every one of her questions honestly and sincerely for the entire time she had known her. “Why not?”

The next half hour was spent in the kitchen making brunch, all three of them standing next to each other at the stove. Ashlyn put some music on and soon they were all much more relaxed and feeling like themselves for the first time all morning. It took a little bit for Meg to loosen up but not even she could resist the music and the dogs and the two women who she knew were trying their best to help her. Even if it didn’t quite feel like it yet. Ali pulled the extra chair they used for timeouts from its’ place next to the fireplace up to the small table in the kitchen and they ate their brunch there, surrounded by small talk and tail wags and hopeful wet noses at their feet. The twenty-minute spell of eating and pretending there wasn’t a big ugly topic to discuss when they were done was broken by Ashlyn’s phone ringing. It was 11:55am and all three of them got quiet as Ashlyn turned her phone towards Meg so she could see the caller ID.

“It’s your mom” the keeper’s voice was quiet as she finished chewing and wiped her free hand on the napkin on her lap.

Meg swallowed the food in her mouth with difficulty and took a drink of juice to help in the effort. She looked guiltily at Ashlyn and felt her lip start to quiver as she put the juice glass down again. Ali could feel the tension rise up in both Ashlyn and Meg, the nice almost-hour long respite gone just like that. She didn’t know what to do or how to help. She was tempted to just assume the bad cop role and get it over with. She would be tough and harsh and borderline mean and then Meg would cry and turn to Ashlyn for comfort and finally tell her what was really going on.

“Do you want to answer it?” Ashlyn asked Meg before Ali could even finish her thought.

The girl just shook her head no as her face got red and her eyes started to fill with tears. She looked like a little girl again. Like she had when she was five or six years old and had a boo boo that needed kissing. Her bottom lip stuck out and her face scrunched up the way it did right before a full-on cry was about to take her over.

“We’ve got to talk to her at some point Meg” Ashlyn’s voice was firm but not loud or threatening. She was just stating a fact and they all knew it. “She’s about to fly up here she’s so worried about you” she added as the phone continued to ring.

“No!” Meg shouted without meaning to, her eyes flying open wide. “Don’t let her come up here,
“Well you’ve got to talk to us then Meggie” the keeper leaned forward, her elbows on the table as she put the phone down on the table next to her. “You can’t just pull a stunt like that and not expect to have to explain yourself.”

The phone stopped ringing and the mom in Ali cringed at the thought of Hannah down in DC, wondering what the hell was going on with her baby girl. The brunette didn’t think she would be strong enough to stay away if she were in Hannah’s shoes.

“I’ll text her and let her know you guys are talking...” Ali offered softly as she got up and moved to the kitchen counter by the coffee maker where her phone was charging. “I’d be losing my mind if I was her right now.”

Ashlyn patted her wife’s leg as she walked by her, telling her thank you without speaking. She didn’t want to let Meg off the hook any more. It was time for the teen to explain herself and Ashlyn wasn’t going to let her keep stalling any longer.

“So...?” the blonde tilted her head towards her step-daughter sitting across from her at the small table. They were mostly finished eating, with just a couple of bites left that weren’t going to get finished now that the stress was back.

“I don’t know what you want me to say” Meg’s voice was quiet and she trained her eyes on her plate, her hands in her lap.

“I want you to tell me why you ran away last night. And then I want to know how you could be so foolish and careless about your own safety” the keeper’s voice was rising as she got fired up again. “And then I want you to explain how you could be so cruel to your mother and to me...”

“I don’t know!” Meg shouted and glared across the table. “Ok? I don’t know. I don’t have a good answer!”

“Well you’d better know! I don’t care if it’s a good answer or not. I want to know what’s going on with you and you’d better start explaining right now young lady!” Ashlyn yelled, her own face twisted in anger and frustration.

Ali put her phone back down on the counter and watched the outbursts, still unsure how best to help. Before she could make any decisions or even get back to the table to try and act as a buffer of some sort, Ashlyn’s voice filled the room again. Clearly the keeper was going to be the bad cop this time.

“I can’t believe you did that Meg! Do you know what you put your mother through? She was a nervous wreck when she finally called me, in the middle of the night. She was so worried about you and she was terrified that something awful had happened to you. We all were. I can’t understand how you could be so thoughtless and so selfish! I thought you were smarter than that. Just when I think you’re ready to be a teenager and go to high school and really start growing up you pull something like this...” she shook her head, furious at one of the six people she loved most in the world.

Meg burst into tears and covered her face with both hands while Persey got up from her spot on the floor and stood next to the girl with her chin in her lap. Ali took her seat again, trying to catch her wife’s eye and let her know she was coming on pretty strong, but Ashlyn’s stare was focused on the back of Meg’s hands.
“Crying isn’t going to help anything” she continued in a harsh voice. “Believe me, I know. I cried a lot last night while I was wondering where you were and if you were alright. And then I started imagining some of the terrible things that could be happening to you and I cried even more. It doesn’t help Meg. There was nothing I could do or say to keep you safe last night. I just had to sit there and wait and worry. So quit crying and tell me what’s really going on” her voice softened just a bit towards the very end but it was too little too late.

“Why bother?! You hate me, just like she does!” Meg yelled, her hands dropping to the table in tight fists as she leaned forward aggressively. “You should have just left me at the station!”

“Meg” Ali put her soft, warm hand on top of the teen’s balled up fist and squeezed it gently. “Nobody hates you honey. I can promise you that” she assured in a calm, steady voice. “The reason your mom and Ashlyn are so upset is because they love you so much. I know you know that, but sometimes it’s easy to forget how much your parents and family really love you. There’s so much other stuff that gets in the way...”

“Mom doesn’t love me, she hates me!” Meg yelled again, this time turning her head towards the brunette and pulling her fist away from her soothing hand.

“Why do you think she hates you?” Ali tried again, nudging Ashlyn under the table when she saw the blonde’s mouth open and another look of anger flash across her face. “Did she tell you she hates you?” she hoped to goad the girl into confessing what was really upsetting her so much.

“No, she didn’t say it like that...but she does. I can tell.”

“How can you tell? What does she do?” the brunette prodded gently.

“She...she...” Meg started to stammer as her emotions flew around inside her and she burst into tears again. The girl shot an angry glance at Ashlyn when the keeper sighed in exasperation at the additional tears. “I’m sorry!” she yelled at Ashlyn, “I can’t help it!”

“It’s ok” Ali soothed and patted Meg’s arm to try and calm her down. “I know it’s hard to talk about, it’s ok Meg. You cry if you need to, it’s alright.”

There was a tense silence that filled the room for almost three full minutes. The only sounds were Meg’s whimpering, Ashlyn’s heavy breathing and Persey’s occasional soft whines.

“She never lets me go anywhere or do anything...” the teen sputtered through her tears. “She always has to know who I’m with, like she doesn’t trust me! I’m not a baby!”

“You sure have a funny way of showing it” Ashlyn sniped, still reeling from their tumultuous night and unable to help herself.

Both Meg and Ali shot harsh looks at the blonde. Ali didn’t disagree with her wife, but that was not the time for a cheap shot. Meg just looked stunned, as if it was the first time the thought that her actions last night played right into her mother’s hands had crossed her mind.

“What else Meg” the brunette prodded gently. “Tell us what else she does.”

“She...she...wouldn’t let me go to Amber’s sleepover this weekend” Meg huffed out and defiantly crossed her arms across her chest.

There it was. Ashlyn’s brain was too tangled up to recognize it just yet, but Ali knew they had hit paydirt, finally.
“Amber’s sleepover is tonight?”

“Yeah” Meg’s shoulders slumped and she dropped her chin to her chest. She couldn’t resist Persey anymore and she unfolded her arms and patted the dog’s head in her lap. “Everybody’s going” she added glumly.

Ali didn’t know Meg’s friends nearly as well as Ashlyn did, but she was pretty sure Amber was one of her newer soccer teammates from her travelling league. They were in eighth grade now so they were the queens of the soccer teams. In September, when they became freshmen in high school, they would fall back to the bottom of the food chain and start their, hopefully, four-year climb back to the top again.

“Isn’t Amber the girl whose mom travels for work sometimes?” Ashlyn asked carefully.

She felt guilty for being so hard on the teen, but didn’t want to lie about how angry she was either. It was new, painful territory for the keeper as a parent. Her voice was much softer and there was no fury left in it. Meg noticed the difference and looked up quickly to see if her eyes could confirm what her ears were telling her. Maybe Ashlyn didn’t hate her after all.

“Yeah” Meg answered evenly, eyes back down on the dog’s head in her lap.

“And is she travelling for work tonight?” the keeper continued.

“Um, yeah” Meg looked up again in time to see the frown fill her step-mother’s face as the keeper crossed her arms across her chest.

“So no grown-ups were going to be at the sleepover and that’s why you couldn’t go?” Ali summarized before her wife could have another, understandable but not helpful, outburst.

“Yeah...but everybody else is going” the teen tried again to convince them of how she had been wronged by Hannah.

“Do the other girls’ parents know there are no grown-ups?” Ali asked cautiously. She didn’t want to make Meg feel like she was attacking her – that was obviously Ashlyn’s job this afternoon. When the girl didn’t answer for almost a full minute she asked again. “Meg?”

“I don’t really know, and that’s the truth” she replied quickly. “But why does it matter? We weren’t going to do anything...”

“Meg” Ashlyn leaned further across the table, her voice concerned and softer than it had been. “Of course it matters honey. I know you’re getting older, you’re practically all grown up” she sighed and paused for a couple of seconds. “But you’re not a grown-up yet. And every sleepover has to have a grown-up there all night. You know the rules. And I’ll bet that if the other girls’ parents knew what was really going on they wouldn’t be allowed to go either. We want you to be safe and to have an adult there in case something goes wrong. The rule’s not to punish you. It’s to help keep you safe.”

“But I’m 14 now” she whined, sensing she might be able to make some headway now that the keeper’s tone had changed. “I’m not a little kid...” she stopped, remembering the way Ashlyn had responded just a few minutes earlier when she had previously tried this argument.

“You’re right, you’re not a little kid anymore” Ashlyn sat up straighter but kept her voice as amiable as possible. “The rules didn’t change just because you turned 14 last month. And part of growing up is learning how to make good decisions and act responsibly, even when your friends are doing something else. You’re not a kid but you’re not a grown-up either Meggie. And you
running away like this...well, it just proves the point. And I’m not trying to make you feel bad. I promise I’m not’’ the keeper added quickly and sincerely. “But there’s a reason your mom wouldn’t let you go to Amber’s sleepover and you know it. And acting like a brat when you don’t get your way isn’t going to make any of us think you’re not still just a kid.” She paused and took the resentment-filled look Meg gave her with a calm, steady look on her own face. “We love you and we want the best for you and that means that sometimes we have to say no to things you want and things you think you need. Do you really think that means we hate you?” Ashlyn studied the girl’s face as it changed from resentment to sadness and then to something else she couldn’t quite identify. “It breaks my heart to hear you say that you think I hate you because nothing could be farther from the truth. I’d do anything in the world for you Meg, and so would your mom, but we’re not just going to say yes to things that we know aren’t right or aren’t safe for you. That’s our job as parents. But there’s never a minute in any day when we hate you. Not a single minute. And that’s the truth kiddo.”

Meg considered the blonde’s half-smiling face. It was definitely an improvement over the anger and disappointment she had seen there up until now. She knew she had done the wrong thing. She knew she had made a mistake. It was easy to believe Ashlyn. Meg didn’t really believe that the keeper hated her, but she wasn’t so sure about her mom yet. Hannah was hard on her and the girl was pretty sure she hated her at least some of the time.

“You know, I used to fight with my mom when I was your age” Ali spoke softly as the silence between Meg and Ashlyn grew longer.

“You did?” Meg’s eyes went wide with wonder at the thought. “With Deb Deb?”

“Yep” Ali smiled ruefully as she remembered her angsty teenage years. “Do you think she hates me? Or that she hated me when I was your age?”

“No way” Meg shook her head from side to side and frowned. “She loves everybody.”

“Ha” Ali laughed and smiled again. “She loves just about everybody you know, but she does not love everybody. Trust me’’ she quirked an eyebrow at the stunned teenager. “She was pretty strict with us when we were growing up and she taught us about doing the right thing and there were consequences for us when we did the wrong thing.”

“Like what?”

“Well, let’s see” Ali tried to remember some of the punishments she and Kyle had received as kids. “We got grounded a lot. And we had to do extra chores. And one time I did something so wrong that my mom sent me to my room and told me she didn’t want to look at me because she was so disappointed in me.” The brunette paused and tried not to chuckle at the rapt look on Meg’s face as she waited with baited breath for Ali to finish the story.

“What did you do wrong?”

“I went somewhere with my friends that I wasn’t supposed to go, even after my mom had told me I couldn’t go there. And I lied to her and told her I was going someplace else.”

“Really?” Meg asked but Ashlyn was thinking the same thing and looked almost as curious and stunned as the redhead did.

“Yeah” Ali replied softly and dropped her eyes. “I was so angry and embarrassed and I felt so bad for disobeying my mom and lying to her...” she took a breath. “I just felt really terrible about the whole thing and I wished I had never done it. It hadn’t even been that fun in the first place.” She
paused for a few seconds. “But do you know what I felt even worse about?” Neither Meg nor Ashlyn said anything but the girl shook her head when she couldn’t come up with the answer to Ali’s question. “As I turned to stomp up to my room that day, when my mom said how disappointed she was in me, I yelled at her and told her I hated her.”

Meg looked down and blushed when she heard Ali’s words and everybody was quiet for almost a full minute.

“It wasn’t true. I didn’t hate her. I could never hate her” Ali shrugged as she spoke softly and seriously. “She’s my mom and I love her so much. And to this very day, one of the biggest regrets of my whole life is that time when I told her I hated her. When I think of how much that must have hurt her feelings...I’m just ashamed of myself, even right now telling you this story.”

Ashlyn reached over and took her wife’s hand, touched by how emotional the brunette had become as she spoke. Ali gave her a warm smile and squeezed her hand before they both turned their attention back to Meg who had still not lifted her eyes off of Persey’s head in her lap.

“I said it too” Meg admitted in a whisper. “But I didn’t mean it.”

“Aw, I know you didn’t honey” Ali soothed as she leaned over and rubbed the girl’s arm. “And I’m sure your mom knows you didn’t mean it either. Believe it or not, this happens to most of us at some point when we’re teenagers. You’ll feel a little better after you apologize to her for it, but just like you said those words to her and they weren’t really how you felt, moms have to do and say things to their kids that don’t really sound the way they actually feel. It’s really hard to be a parent sometimes. And just because your mom won’t let you go somewhere or do something doesn’t mean she hates you. It’s actually the opposite. She loves you so much and she’s trying to help you do the right thing and keep you safe. I know sometimes it feels like everything and everybody is against you...and it’s going to feel like that for a few more years probably too” the brunette smiled as Meg finally lifted her head and met her gaze. “But your mom is never against you. That’s kind of a secret you don’t figure out until you’re all grown up yourself, but I promise you it’s the truth. Your mom loves you no matter what, just like my mom loves me no matter what, and she’ll always be there for you. And it might seem like she’s making your life harder right now, but she’s just trying to make sure you grow up right and turn into a good person and don’t make a big mistake that you might not be able to get yourself out of. That’s what a parent’s job is.”

“And that goes not only for your mom” Ashlyn added with her own loving smile, “but for me and Ali and even Dev too.” She chuckled when she saw Meg’s face twist before she rolled her eyes. “I know he has a funny way of showing it, but he really does love you too.”

“Yeah, I guess” the girl smiled a bit without meaning to. “I’m really sorry” she offered as another wave of emotion filled her eyes with tears. “I didn’t mean to make everybody worry...I didn’t think about that part. I just had to get away.”

“We’ve talked about this before Meg, you know you can call me anytime. There’s no need to run away. If you were that upset with your mom you could have called me and maybe we could have arranged for you to come visit for the weekend. You know, a normal trip...”

“Yeah, I know” she interrupted with a sad smile. “I don’t know why I didn’t call you...I just got so mad and then...I don’t know...” her face frowned as regret passed over it and she dropped her eyes again. “And I never thought about something happening to me, not until you said that at the station...I’m really sorry” she looked right at Ashlyn and then turned to look at Ali too.

“Thank you for apologizing honey” Ali squeezed her arm again and then rubbed her back for another second. “I’m glad you’re safe and I’m glad you’re here.”
“Yeah me too, and thanks for talking with us” the keeper added. “I’m sorry I lost my temper...” she grimaced. “But I was so scared and I don’t know what I’d do if...if I ever lost you...” Ashlyn’s watery eyes met Meg’s and they shared a long, meaningful look.

The blonde stood up, walked to the girl and hugged her from behind. She kissed Meg’s cheek and patted Persey’s head while she was at it.

“I love you Meggie” Ashlyn said emotionally, her head still right next to the teen’s ear.

“I love you too” Meg put her arms on top of Ashlyn’s as they encircled her.

“And I love you both” Ali chimed in, getting up and kissing the top of Meg’s head first and then the back of Ashlyn’s. “And now you get to do the dishes and clean up the kitchen Meg” the brunette picked up two plates and brought them over to the kitchen sink.

“Is that my punishment?” the teen asked hopefully.

“No, that’s just you being a nice person and helping out around here” Ashlyn replied evenly as she stood up and released the girl. “I’ll have to talk to your mom and we’ll figure out your punishment.”

“Ok” Meg sighed dejectedly.

“But the first thing we’re going to do is call your mom so she can hear your voice” Ashlyn added as she picked up her phone. “And so you can apologize” she quirked an eyebrow at the redhead as she pushed a button on her phone and walked into the front living room so she could talk to Hannah in private for a few minutes first.

It was almost 12:30pm on Friday, and it had been just under eleven hours since Ashlyn had received the frantic call from Hannah in the middle of the night. The keeper hoped Meg would be able to stay at the big old house for the weekend but would defer to what Hannah wanted. It certainly wouldn’t be a fun-filled visit. The teen would be grounded and probably lose her phone privileges for the weekend. But she really believed a little break would do both Meg and her mother some good. As nerve-wracking as the whole thing had been, Ashlyn thought the silver lining was that Meg had, hopefully, learned some invaluable lessons about behaving like a grown-up instead of a spoiled brat. And she hoped that Meg would remember to reach out to her first, in the future, so the keeper could offer her some advice or remind her of the rules so they could avoid another heart-wrenching night of wondering if the girl they all loved so much was safe or not. The thought that was foremost in Ashlyn’s mind as she stood there waiting for Hannah to answer her call was that she was glad she wasn’t a teenager anymore.
Kristie Mewis had retired from professional soccer after the 2024 NWSL season, as planned. She had spent most of 2025 running Sporting Chic and bringing it to the next level of popularity and success. She also spent as much time as possible travelling and vacationing with her husband of five years and enjoying life without soccer for the first time since she was a little girl. Her goal for 2026 was to have a baby and she and Ted were working hard to make that happen. The former midfielder had been experiencing baby fever for about five years by that point and, because she was turning 35 that year, she didn’t have much time left to mess around. Luckily for the Kriegers and the Dwyers and the Flanagans, Kristie loved to babysit their kids for them. She would often drag her husband along if she was going to try and keep up with either the Kriegers or the Dwyers, but she definitely didn’t need him to watch sweet baby Becca.

Carmelina Moscato was happily married to the love of her life, former pro hockey player Kacey Bellamy. Kacey was an assistant coach for BC’s women’s hockey team and she travelled for away games with the team from September to March, typically. Carm’s child-bearing years were behind her at 42 and with Kacey turning 39 this year they had both resigned themselves to the idea that they wouldn’t have their own kids. Kacey’s coaching career was just starting to take off – she was in the discussion to take over the high-profile head coaching position at BC in a couple of years when the current coach was planning to retire. They both came from big families and had plenty of nieces and nephews in their lives to love and cherish and that was turning out to be ok with them. Carm was another babysitter that Ali and Sydney could count on. She hadn’t been that great in the beginning but she had been battle-tested over the past six years and could more than hold her own now.

Babysitting the Krieger brood was almost always fun but often challenging for even the hardest and most fearless babysitters. There were some high school girls who could come and watch the kids for a few hours at a time, but that was far from ideal. It was almost not worth it because the house would always be in such a state of chaos and disarray when Ali or Ashlyn returned. But if they were in a pinch they would do it. If they were trying to plan a night away from home Ali and Ashlyn had to make better arrangements and if none of the grandparents were available they moved on to the next level. If none of their siblings were available, which was mostly just Koty and Brianna those days because Tanner was always travelling with the NE Revolution and Kyle and Nathan were fostering kids more often than not, then they had to go with plan C and ask their friends instead. This is exactly how Kristie Mewis and Carmelina Moscato came to be the babysitting duo for the weekend of February 7th and 8th, 2026.

It was Ashlyn and Ali’s 10th anniversary of when they first got together and they both still preferred to celebrate the February anniversary rather than their official wedding anniversary later in August (which was also a year behind). They loved their wedding and there was no doubt about that. But the February anniversary was so special to both of them that everything else paled in comparison. If they could only celebrate one thing all year, aside from kid things of course, they
would both easily choose February 8th. Kristie arrived at the big old house Friday afternoon and went with Ashlyn to pick up both Josie and Drew from school and was there when the twins woke up from their power naps at 3:30pm. Both moms had stayed home that day to finish cleaning and tidying the house and getting packed up and ready for their weekend away. They both tried their best to prep everything, from meals to activities, so it was easier for the babysitters to just focus on the kids. Once Kristie had spent some time with everybody and they were all comfortable together, Ali and Ashlyn began their two-hour drive up to the log cabin they had rented for two nights near the Salmon Falls River in Buxton, Maine. Carm was on her way up to Gloucester after work and would be there in time to help with dinner so Kristie didn’t have to worry about fending for herself for very long. The Salmon Falls River had several small waterfalls that appeared as it wound its’ way from the ocean near Saco, Maine all the way up, North and West, to where it joined the Piscataqua River in Dover, NH. In the Buxton, ME area there was a big golf course that was very popular in the summer months and a nature reserve with several beautiful hiking trails farther North of the golf course. There was a famous bridge that got publicity every year because people insisted on jumping off of it and into the picturesque falls below, even though the water wasn’t as deep as you really wanted it to be for such a risky dive.

The log cabin they found, with advice from Molly as usual, was one of five that were scattered a discreet distance apart in a campground facility just outside of Buxton. It was rustic for sure with each cabin comprised of one large room with a beautiful stone fireplace as the central element. The fireplace took up half of the back wall of the cabin and was centered in the middle of it, left to right. The small kitchenette was in the back left corner and small dining room table and four chairs opposite it in the back right corner of the big room. The cozy living room was in the front left part of the room and consisted of a weathered leather couch with one comfy armchair, a hand-carved coffee table and a couple of lamps. There was a full-size double bed in the front right corner of the room with a wooden nightstand on each side. It was angled so the headboard was in the corner and the foot of the bed pointed towards the fireplace along the back wall. Everything inside the cabin was wood from the ceiling to the floor to the walls but there were thick area rugs in each of the four different spaces, as well as one right in front of the fireplace with some large, comfy reading and throw pillows. There were stacks and stacks of firewood ready for them to use just outside the door of the cabin, as well as a big pile of it already inside and next to the fireplace. Three of the cabins shared a common bathhouse building with a men’s side and a women’s side. There were four individual showers, toilet stalls and sinks on each side and the building was located, roughly, in the middle of those three cabins. The other two cabins had a small bathroom inside, replacing the dining room area in the back right corner of the cabin. It was completely walled in, turning the space into a 2-room cabin, with a door opening towards the bedroom area in the front of the cabin. There was a toilet, sink and simple bathtub/shower combo and that was it. Rustic. It may not have been fancy but it was clean and well-kept.

Ali and Ashlyn had opted for the slightly more expensive cabin with the bathroom inside and were very happy with their decision all weekend long. The idea for their getaway was to spend as much time as close to each other as possible and sitting at a table wasn’t going to help with that. They planned to eat their meals in front of the fire or on the living room coffee table so it was an easy trade-off. The kitchenette was functional and you could bring your own food in, or go shopping at the grocery store in Buxton, and cook for yourselves if that’s what you wanted to do. There was a coffee maker and a toaster oven to go with the two-burner stove top, apartment-size refrigerator and basic sink. Or you could order breakfast, lunch and dinner a day in advance and it would be brought to your door for you, within certain appropriate hours. It was the ideal scenario for a weekend where you didn’t want to leave the cabin – at all. Ali and Ashlyn packed and brought a few things with them that they could snack on as well as some wine and whiskey to enjoy together. They stopped and got subs to eat for dinner in the cabin Friday night. They had been afraid to order dinner through the cabin that night in case they had trouble getting the kids settled down and
leaving on time, so they roughed it with subs and a bag of chips and loved every minute of it.

There was wifi but no television and precious few electrical outlets. These cabins were not meant for watching the big game or playing video games or hosting any sort of dance party. And that was just fine with both women. If they got bored they could always watch a show or a movie on Ali’s laptop. They used Ashlyn’s phone to play the soundtrack to their romantic weekend getaway. It was exactly what they needed and wanted after the hectic holiday season and a busy January that had taken the keeper all the way to Vancouver, Canada for the NWSL draft.

They talked about winter hiking at the reserve or walking to the snow-covered bridge or just exploring the beautiful river with its many waterfalls. But when it came right down to it, they really had a hard time putting clothes on and leaving the cabin at all on Saturday. There were two big, fluffy robes inside the bathroom and they spent most of their non-sexual time wrapped in those as they read to each other, played scrabble and cards at the coffee table, or lounged in front of the fire. They compromised and spent a couple of hours, after an early lunch on Sunday, checking out the falls and taking a quick hike before making the drive back home to Gloucester again. Many people would complement them on how beautiful and well-rested they looked in the selfie they snapped that afternoon at the waterfall. That picture, with their rosy cheeks pressed together with matching lazy smiles on their serene-looking faces while they stood in front of the loud and active waterfall, would become one of their favorites and find its way into a frame that hung in the family room for many years to come. Both women agreed that ‘well-rested’ sounded better than ‘sexed-up’.

“Nooo...don’t leave me” Ashlyn whined playfully when she saw her wife reach for her robe and start to push the blanket off of her naked body.

It was Saturday afternoon and they had already had sex five different times, including twice Friday night. They had slept late Saturday morning, only getting out of bed when their breakfast was delivered at 9am. They had sex after they ate and then again when they got in the shower before their late lunch was delivered. After devouring the food they managed to keep their hands off of each other long enough to check in at home, play a few hands of rummy and give each other massages that, remarkably, stayed strictly therapeutic until the very end. Then they fucked again, in front of the fireplace – nestled against all the pillows and covered by a warm, soft blanket. Then they took a lovely nap tangled up together without a care in the world other than whether or not there was enough wood on the fire to keep it going until they woke up.

“I’ll be right back babe” Ali leaned over and kissed Ashlyn’s lips softly. “I just have to pee and it’s only four feet away” she chuckled and nodded towards the bathroom in their cozy little cabin.

“But how can you get out from under this nice comfy blanket? I’ve had to pee for about an hour and I can’t do it” the keeper laughed softly as she admired her wife’s gorgeous body when Ali stood up. “God you’re beautiful Al.”

“And you’re sweet” the brunette looked back over her shoulder as she pulled the robe closed to keep the chill away. “I’ll be right back, I promise” she giggled when she saw the adorable pout on her keeper’s face.

As soon as she flushed the toilet the bathroom door flew open and Ashlyn sat on the toilet in a flurry of flying robe. Ali laughed at her as she washed her hands.

“I’m surprised it took you so long to join me” she quirked an eyebrow at her wife.

“Oh I wanted to” Ashlyn grinned as she continued to empty her very full bladder. “But I knew as soon as I came in here I wouldn’t be able to hold it any more so I waited until I knew I could pee
right away” she shrugged sheepishly as she took in the amused look on Ali’s face.

“I’ll put another log on the fire” the brunette smiled as she started to move past the blonde towards the door. “Do you want anything else while I’m up? What time is dinner coming again? I swear, my brain is totally on vacation today” she giggled as she got to the door and felt her robe tug, knowing without having to look that her wife had a hold of the bottom of it. She held it closed at the front of her waist as Ashlyn started pulling her back towards her. “Ashlyn” she giggled again before giving in and letting her robe open as she turned to face the keeper who was still sitting on the toilet.

“Stay with me.”

Ali didn’t think she had ever heard Ashlyn’s voice so small and shy and sweet before, and she was pretty sure the keeper was blushing a little bit too.

“Aw, how can I possibly resist this beautiful face” the brunette cocked her head to the side and straddled her wife’s lap. She smiled as Ashlyn put her big hands on her bare hips and pulled her closer.

“I don’t want you to go...I want you to stay with me, always” the keeper whispered with another bashful smile.

“I’d much rather be right here with you honey, always” Ali leaned forward and kissed her wife’s forehead, letting her lips linger and enjoying the warmth of Ashlyn’s skin against her own wherever they were touching. She pulled back a couple of inches and looked into her wife’s tawny hazel eyes. She was surprised at how emotional she felt right at that moment. Of all the places and positions they’d been in so far in the 22 hours that they’d been in their little cabin, this was by far the least romantic. But her heart swelled nonetheless. “I love you so much babe...so incredibly fucking much” she shook her head slowly from side to side as the words left her lips. “I’ll always be right here with you, always...no matter what.”

Since the twins had been born, and even a little bit before then, although it hadn’t been quite as big a deal, both Ashlyn and Ali relished whatever alone time they could get. Date nights with the four-families had become too difficult to schedule although Molly kept trying to come up with a viable solution that didn’t leave one couple home with a slumber party, for up to twelve kids, from hell. The couple tried to have a date night once a month, even if it was something as simple as dinner and a movie. But a romantic weekend getaway where they could enjoy each other, uninterrupted, for at least one night was like a dream come true. It didn’t happen very often so when it did, both women had developed a tendency to cling to the other for all they were worth. Ashlyn asking Ali to wait for her while she finished peeing was a perfect example. The Ashlyn from six years ago would never have done that and even the Ali from back then would only have done it if they had just finished having sex and being as intimate as humanly possible. But things were different now, after almost seven years of being parents and giving up control of their schedules and lives to their children. As much as both Ashlyn and Ali wanted to go out and explore whatever place they were visiting, they really had a difficult time tearing themselves away from each other. Their anniversary weekend in the log cabin was certainly no exception.

They maturely decided not to have sex again until that night, after dinner. They weren’t sore yet, but they were getting close and wanted to try and make sure their Saturday night was special. That left them with three hours to kill before their food was delivered to the cabin. They did practical things like tidying up the mess they had made and bringing in more firewood from the outdoor stack so they wouldn’t have to worry about running out when it was later and they were otherwise occupied. They made the bed and straightened up the bathroom, doing each chore together like
adorable little teenagers who couldn’t stand to be apart for more than thirty seconds. They didn’t care how corny it was or how silly it might seem to anybody else. Ali wanted to be as close as possible to her wife and Ashlyn felt the exact same way. They checked in with Kristie and Carm again and were happy to receive a good report. They even put shirts on and Facetimed the kids, carefully hiding the hickey Ali had accidentally left near Ashlyn’s collarbone.

As soon as ‘mothers’ time was over, they snuggled together on the couch and played naughty scrabble. It was just like regular scrabble but you got extra points if the word had anything to do with sex. Surprisingly, Ashlyn kicked her wife’s butt and gloated about it for the remaining hour until it was time to eat. Ali pulled out a book of poetry that she’d been trying to read for months and lay with her head on her keeper’s lap on the couch. Ashlyn ran one hand through her wife’s dark chocolate locks as she listened to her read beautiful words about love and the sea and nature and loss and so many other emotions that made it so challenging to be a human in this world. The blonde let her other hand wander across Ali’s stomach and hips as they took the pretty words in, accompanied only by the occasional crackling of the fire. They spent the last fifteen minutes making out, unable to resist any longer. They were careful to keep it as innocent as possible so they could answer the door when the delivery person knocked at 7pm.

“That was so delicious” the brunette sighed as she happily rubbed her own belly and dropped her napkin across her empty plate.

“Sooooo good” Ashlyn agreed with a content smile on her face. She leaned back in the armchair she had dragged over to the other side of the coffee table for their dinner date. “Remind me to send Molly flowers for finding this place.”

“Already put it on my to-do list” Ali laughed. “We owe her big time for this.” She paused and met her wife’s gaze, her voice getting softer and more serious. “This has been the most perfect weekend. It’s everything I was hoping for.”

“Everything huh?” Ashlyn tilted her head to the side and smirked. “Well you better buckle up buttercup, because I’ve got more to give you.”

“Well duh” Ali giggled. “I don’t mean the weekend’s over. I have plans for you too” she licked her lips seductively and winked at the blonde before laughing again.

“What’s so funny?”

“Oh, I don’t know” the brunette shrugged. “I guess I feel silly sometimes trotting my old moves out for you. I mean, we’ve been having sex for ten years now...”

They both stopped and were quiet for a minute as those last few words hung in the air around them.

“I can’t believe it’s been ten years” Ashlyn finally broke the silence with a soft chuckle. “It feels like just yesterday you turned my whole world upside down when you let me touch you for the very first time. God, I’ll never forget that night as long as I live” the keeper grinned from ear to ear.

“It was a pretty great night” Ali giggled again. “I’ll always remember it too” she dropped her eyes bashfully. “You were so sweet to me Ash. Really, and I thought it was just because, you know, it was new and exciting and you were still kind of wooing me or something.” She looked up through her lashes into her favorite hazel eyes. “But you’ve never stopped being sweet to me. Even after all these years and all the ups and downs. You’re just as sweet and thoughtful to me now as you were back then. Thank you babe.”
“Well it’s my pleasure sweetheart” Ashlyn smiled sincerely at the love of her life and reached across the coffee table to take her hand. “I was thinking the same thing this afternoon while we were tidying up. I was so afraid we’d mess something up...well not we, mostly me. I was afraid that I’d mess everything up” she admitted with a shy blush.

“What do you mean?”

“Oh you know you hear about how hard it is to keep the romance alive once you get married. And that the sex gets boring or stops altogether...”

“Yeah, I’ve been petrified of ‘lesbian bed death’ for ten years now” Ali confessed with a soft laugh that hid her true nervousness.

They looked at each other for a minute as they held hands, connected but still a little anxious about the subject matter. They had always been honest and open with each other about sex and what they wanted and what they didn’t feel comfortable with. It had been one of the strengths of their relationship, almost from that first, memorable night together. But ten years was a long time to keep having sex with the same person in the same bed in the same positions.

“You don’t think that’s happened to us, do you?” Ashlyn asked in an odd, almost foreign sounding voice.

“What? To us?” Ali raised her eyebrows. “No, I don’t think so...” she glanced down for a quick second before studying her wife’s face for her response to the next question. “Do you?”

“God no” the keeper shook her head vigorously. “No way. I think we’re great. We’ve always been good about keeping things fresh...right?”

“I think so, but if you think we need to do something else...”

“No, I don’t think so...unless you think we should?”

They exchanged a few nervous glances and Ali felt her palms start to sweat a little from the stress. She started to pull her hand out of Ashlyn’s but the keeper wouldn’t let it go.

“This is silly” Ashlyn said and rolled her eyes, still holding tightly to her wife’s hand. “We’re literally taking care of our relationship right now. We made plans to celebrate ten years together in a romantic cabin in the woods and we’ve hardly let each other out of our sight for...28 hours now...”

“Yeah, that’s right” Ali agreed, starting to feel better about it. “And we’ve been having lots of sex...”

“Lots of great sex” Ashlyn interrupted confidently, but then started to doubt herself. What if Ali didn’t think it had been great sex?

They stared at each other for a long minute, trying to work past the slightly awkward turn their evening had taken.

“This is ridiculous” the brunette finally sighed heavily and squeezed her wife’s hand. “I love our sex life” she announced, suddenly feeling confident again. “And I think it’s better than most couples who have been together for ten years, but I don’t care about that. I don’t want to compare us to anybody else. I don’t want to go back either. I love the way we are right now Ashlyn. I love that we both ordered something for dinner tonight, without discussing it, that we knew the other would also like so we could share our meals. I love that I knew what snacks to pack for you for this
weekend and what sub you were going to order for dinner last night. And I love that you knew I was getting nervous just now and that I would try to pull my hand away because my palms were starting to sweat..."

“I love your sweaty palms and I’m not ever letting them go” Ashlyn smiled sweetly at her wife who was talking rapid-fire style because she was worked up.

“Exactly!” Ali returned the smile and blinked softly at her keeper as her body started to calm itself down again. “Those things, those amazing things only happen once you’ve been together for a long time and I wouldn’t trade them for anything in the world.”

“Me neither, baby” the keeper brought Ali’s hand up to her lips and kissed it.

“And as long as you and I think things are good in the bedroom then that’s all that matters...”

“Great, Al. Things are great in the bedroom. Get it right, will you?” Ashlyn teased and they both laughed, letting the relief sweep any lingering tension away.

“I think our sex is great and I’ve never been more attracted to you” the brunette lowered her voice and got a little bashful as she continued, determined to finish making her point. “And I trust that you’ll tell me if we need to do something different or if we need to spice things up somehow. And I promise that I’ll do the same, babe. I promise.”

“I promise too honey” the keeper got up and sat next to her wife on the couch, never letting her hand go. She kissed her deeply and they both got lost in the emotion of the moment.

“See, I love that you didn’t sit on my lap right now because you knew I was too full from stuffing my face...” Ali giggled and kissed her keeper again.

“Well, that’s just common courtesy really” Ashlyn joked. “I mean, what kind of jerk does that?”

“The single kind” Ali quipped and they both laughed.

“Dance with me?”

“Yes please!” the brunette’s eyes lit up as they got off the couch and moved to the center of the room, closer to the fireplace.

They spent the next hour dancing and laughing and reminiscing about their very first date, complete with dancing in the kitchen of the big old house. And just like that evening ten years earlier, the longer they danced and held their bodies close together, the more their desire and want built and climbed. Soon they were making out again and letting their hands wander as they moved to the music. They were both still wearing their robes and had kept them tied up, even through the dancing foreplay. Tomorrow, Sunday, was actually their anniversary so there were no gifts or cards exchanged this night. This night was for a different kind of celebration and they were both looking forward to it. When Ashlyn started to get more handsy, Ali pulled back with a sexy smirk.

“Give me just one minute, ok All-star?” she asked breathlessly as she ran her finger down the top of her wife’s chest that was visible through the V in her robe.

“Ughhh, you’re killing me” Ashlyn groaned but couldn’t help smiling when she heard her brunette’s throaty chuckle in response. “Fine. But I don’t know why you have to go into the bathroom to take your robe off” she patted her wife’s butt as the brunette turned towards the bathroom. “I know what’s going on under there already” she winked and made Ali giggle. “I’m assuming you want me to wait out here?”
“Yes, you big goof” Ali laughed and stopped near the small suitcase she had brought for the weekend. “Now turn around for a second, please.”

“Why do I have to turn around? I can’t watch you walk away? That’s the only bearable thing about it” the blonde teased as she complied with her wife’s request.

“Alright” Ali tucked something from the suitcase inside her robe and hopped quickly into the bathroom. “You can turn around now” she giggled, with just her face visible as she closed the door. She caught Ashlyn’s twinkling eye and grinned. “I’ll be right out.”

As soon as the door closed, Ashlyn moved quickly to her own overnight bag and dropped her robe. Three minutes later she dove under the blanket in front of the fire and pulled it up to her neck. She had just gotten into position, propped up on her elbow among the big, comfortable pillows on the floor, when the bathroom door opened. The room was very romantic and they hadn’t had to do much besides turn off the other lights to achieve the effect. The keeper had changed the playlist on her phone to one of their favorite sexy, slow jams and the fire threw a lovely, warm and inviting glow across the whole room. Ali turned the bathroom light off so the fire was the only source of illumination and walked slowly towards her wife in front of the fireplace, waiting for her eyes to adjust.

“I’m so not complaining” Ashlyn spoke softly as she watched her beautiful brunette come closer, “but didn’t you go into the bathroom to get out of that robe?”

“Just hush” Ali quirked her eyebrow.

“Oooh, that means there’s something sexy, besides you, underneath there” the keeper wagged her eyebrows as images of all the lingerie Ali had unveiled for her like this over the years. “Damn, I’m a lucky woman.”

Ali rolled her eyes and feigned annoyance but they both knew she loved the sweet compliments and Ashlyn’s enthusiasm.

“Don’t get too excited” the brunette chuckled. “I thought, since it’s our tenth anniversary, that I’d do a little throwback...” she let the robe slip off of her shoulders and down her arms to the floor as she finished speaking, eyes locked on her wife’s face dancing in the firelight.

“Ali...I...” but Ashlyn was speechless.

She lay there, gazing up at the most beautiful woman, still, that she had ever seen. Ali’s shoulder length hair fell loose and messy from spending most of the day naked and in love. Her cheeks were slightly pink from either the fire or the wine or the thoughts that filled her head of the woman laying at her feet. Ali’s whiskey-colored eyes sparkled with mischief and love but Ashlyn knew they would start darkening with desire any minute. Just the thought of that look in her brunette’s eyes made Ashlyn wet and she shifted her hips under the blanket.

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big jersey fell to just below the curve of her ass. It gave the blonde a perfect view of the bottom half of Ali’s butt and Ashlyn had never wanted to cup her wife’s gorgeous ass more in her entire life.

“Are you upset that I’m wearing this?” Ali’s worried voice broke through the haze of love and nostalgia and want that had clouded the keeper’s mind. The blonde hadn’t said anything as she tried to process the very meaningful surprise, and it made her wife think something was wrong.

“Here, I’ll just take it off” the brunette offered quickly as she started to lift the jersey up past her hips. “I’m sorry babe. I don’t know why I thought this would be a good idea...”

“No, don’t” Ashlyn shook her head. “Please...don’t take it off. I’m sorry I’m just...I mean, wow Al” she raised both eyebrows and blew a breath out as she started to blush. “You look incredible in that and it just caught me by surprise. It wasn’t what I was expecting...”

“I told you not to get too excited” Ali pouted a little, misreading her wife’s reaction, as she pulled the jersey back into place.

“What? No...” Ashlyn started to sit up and reach for her girl but remembered her own little surprise beneath the blanket and stayed put instead. “Honey, you look amazing and I love that you’re wearing the fuck out of that jersey” she grinned up at her wife. “It’s never ever looked better.”

“Are you just saying that to make me feel better because I messed up our anniversary sex?” she crossed her arms tightly over her chest which caused the jersey to ride up a little bit in the front, exposing most of her short, dark curls and making Ashlyn’s heart skip a beat.

“Al, I swear to you” the blonde’s eyes darted quickly down to her wife’s exposed short hairs even though she tried with all her might to keep them up at her face, “just looking at you in that has me so wet...” she swallowed hard and tried to focus on beautiful cinnamon eyes. “I love you in my jersey, my favorite jersey too, and I just wasn’t expecting it is all. It’s an awesome surprise and I love you and I’m losing my mind just looking at you right now.”

The brunette put her hands on her hips and did another slow turn for her horny wife, loving the fact that her plan had worked after all.

“I honestly can’t remember the last time I wore your jersey for you” she confessed as she bent and stretched from a side view to tease her keeper. “But I don’t think I’ve done it since you retired. Are you sure it’s ok honey?”

“It is so much more than ok baby. Fuck, you look good” she licked her lips. “You know seeing you in my clothes does things to me...” she rolled over onto her back, still covered entirely by the blanket. “Come down here so I can get my hands on you” she wagged her eyebrows again, “or, better yet, my mouth. Mmmmmm...”

“So I should leave it on then?” Ali teased with the naughtiest smirk she could muster.

“Oh yeah. Come here woman!” Ashlyn could barely contain herself and they both chuckled at her impatient shout.

“Well, since you asked so nicely” the brunette laughed and did another turn, this time bending over and stretching with her backside towards her wife. She was backlit by the fire and Ashlyn groaned at the sight, making Ali let out a low, sexy giggle. “Alright, here I come.”

Ali took her time and even got on her hands and knees to crawl the last couple of feet towards her awaiting wife. She knew she was making Ashlyn’s head spin and wanted to make it last a little
longer. When she finally got to Ashlyn’s side and reached for the blanket, the keeper grabbed her and pulled her underneath it in one quick motion, making the brunette squeal and giggle in the process.

“Mmmmmmm, so strong babe” Ali purred as she felt her wife pull her up close so they were chest to chest under the blanket. “Sooooo sexy.”

The brunette was so wrapped up in Ashlyn’s strong arms and passionate kiss that she didn’t notice what her wife had going on underneath the blanket for a couple of minutes. When they broke apart for air after their first desperate kiss, Ali moved her hands down to fondle her favorite breasts.

“Hey” she pulled back and lifted her torso up a little bit so she could see what her hands were feeling. “What have you got on under here?”

“Oh, you know, just a little something for my best girl on our big night” Ashlyn panted out, breathless from the steamy kiss.

Ali rolled off of her wife, laying next to her, and pushed the blanket out of the way so she could get a good look at her keeper’s outfit.

“Holy shit” she gasped and felt more passion pooling between her legs as she took in the sexy black bra and boyshorts her keeper was wearing. “It’s so shiny” she enthused as she ran her hands all over Ashlyn’s breasts and crotch, touching every part of the new lingerie.

It was a pair of shiny black boyshorts, but not too short, with decorative stitched seams in all the right places. The bra was the same shiny black material and it was shaped almost like a halter top, very square, and just as high in the back as it was in the front. It had a thin black strap on each side that went up behind the keeper’s neck and there was a big silver zipper that ran down the middle of the bra, right between Ashlyn’s breasts. It was hot and sexy but not too feminine. The stitching made it look rugged and a little severe. Ali loved the way her keeper looked in it.

“I think it’s vinyl or, like a vinyl/leather combo or something like that” Ashlyn explained, amused by her wife’s excited reaction. “Do you like it?”

“MmmmmHmmmmmm...” Ali replied with a little moan. “I love it. I especially love this zipper up here...” she tugged playfully at it with her fingers while she straddled Ashlyn’s thighs, not wanting to cover up the sexy boyshorts just yet. “When do I get to pull that down?” she bit her bottom lip and rolled her hips as she sat on top of her wife.

“Fuck Al” Ashlyn groaned and grabbed the brunette’s hips with her long arms. “Jesus you feel good...” she licked her lips again without even realizing she was doing it. “So wet for me already” she gave her wife a devilish smirk. “God, I love that.”

Ali leaned down and captured her lips in another slow, deep, passionate kiss that they could both feel down to their toes. Things escalated quickly but neither of them should have been surprised. They’d been teasing and touching each other ever since they woke up from their nap late that afternoon. It had been four hours of non-stop foreplay and they were both more than ready for the pay-off. The brunette slid over and started to grind against Ashlyn’s right thigh as they continued to kiss and grope each other with eager hands. The keeper had a handful of her wife’s bare ass and was really getting worked up as she felt Ali sliding back and forth against her leg. She was so wet and she was still wearing the jersey and Ashlyn could feel the haze coming back into her brain as she started to feel overwhelmed by all of the intense excitement and emotion.

“Damn, babe” Ali panted out, face already red and chest already starting to heave. “I don’t know
what I want more...you in this sexy outfit... or you out of this sexy fucking outfit...” she growled and bit down hard on Ashlyn’s neck, unable to control herself.

“Ow, no more hickeys” the blonde chuckled and then moaned when she felt Ali’s smooth tongue lick the bite and try to soothe it.

“Sorry, but you’re driving me absolutely crazy right now” she whined seductively and continued to drag her fingers all around her keeper’s breasts and down her sides. “I’m about to lose all control...fuck, Ashlyn...”

The blonde reached between Ali’s legs and teased her entrance with her fingers, making them both close their eyes and moan together.

“Fuck...” Ashlyn brought her fingers to her lips and licked her wife’s juices off of them with a look of sheer pleasure on her face. “I need you in my mouth...right now...fuck Al...” she tried to move the brunette up her torso by pulling on her hips. “Please baby, please...”

Ali was legitimately about to experience one of her own spazzy, out of control moments and she didn’t think she could do much about it. She was dimly aware of Ashlyn sliding down between her legs and then lifting her up and putting her where she wanted her – right on her face. The brunette felt her own legs shake a little as she got used to the new position, her knees on either side of the keeper’s head. She felt Ashlyn’s fingers underneath her jersey, caressing and squeezing her breasts and then pinching her nipples and making her groan out loud in response.

“Oh Jesus” she moaned with her eyes closed and her head tilted back just a bit, enjoying her keeper’s long, strong fingers as they worked her up. “Yessssssssss” she let out a long, low, guttural groan when she felt Ashlyn’s tongue start slowly licking up all of the passion between her legs.

“Mmmmmmm...oh my fucking God you taste so incredible baby...Mmmmmmm...” the keeper moaned into her wife’s folds and pulled her down by her hip so she was even closer to her face and her hungry mouth.

As Ashlyn feasted on her wife’s sweetest flesh, Ali bent over and tried to hold herself up with her hands on the floor above her keeper’s head. The blonde kept one hand under the jersey, still playing with her beautiful breasts and now rock-hard nipples. Ashlyn started thrusting her tongue as deep as she could inside her beautiful brunette, alternating with strong licks and powerful sucks to her dripping pussy lips.

“Unnnhhhh...oh...my...God...” was all Ali could muster as her moans got louder and louder.

The heat from the fire felt extra intense to both women who were wearing more clothes than they had at any point since they had arrived the night before. They were both hot and sweating as they tried to move together. Ali was almost useless, so far gone in such a short period of time that her body was literally putty in Ashlyn’s strong hands. But the keeper didn’t care. She was loving every second between her girl’s legs and had no intention of stopping anytime soon. But it became clear to her that the brunette would probably be more comfortable on her back, so Ashlyn slowly rolled them over, never losing contact with the sweet treat at her lips.

“I’ve got you” the blonde mumbled into her wife’s core as she got onto her knees and switched her fingers for her tongue.

“Oh shit...yes...” Ali panted out and pressed her head back into one of the pillows while she pulled the jersey up above her breasts to try and cool off.
Ashlyn brought her lips down onto those perky breasts and started sucking hard all around each one. She kept pumping her fingers into the brunette’s pussy, enjoying the sloppy sounds they made. It didn’t take long for Ali’s silky walls to start to constrict and grab at them as they kept pounding inside.

“You look so sexy right now” the keeper husked out, overwhelmed by how delicious her wife tasted and smelled and felt and sounded. “Fucking hell Al.”

“Unnnhhhh...oh so good...babe...unnnhhhh...” Ali replied as her whole body started rocking with her wife’s strong thrusts.

Ashlyn moved her left hand up to tug on the brunette’s stiff nipples while she licked her way down her body. She traced a zig zag line down past Ali’s breasts and around her navel and then down to one hip and back across to the other. She kept pumping and tugging and then added her mouth to the dance, lowering it over her wife’s swollen clit and lapping at it with her tongue. Ali’s whole body jerked to attention and she arched her back and grabbed a fistful of Ashlyn’s hair when she felt the tantalizing new touch.

“Yes...fuck...please...more...more...” she groaned and tried to open her eyes but it was no use.

The keeper felt Ali’s legs start to tremble and knew her orgasm couldn’t be far off. She changed from the gentle lapping to a strong sucking of her wife’s entire clit. She moved her lips up and down, sucking hard, as far as she could without getting in the way of her own fingers. She moaned at the sweet taste and felt another gush between her own legs as her excitement rose exponentially with her wife’s pleasure level. Ashlyn released the delicate nub and the flesh around it and then began flicking her tongue across it as fast and as hard as she could.

“Jesus!” Ali’s eyes flew open and she moved her free hand to one of her own breasts and pinched her nipple hard. “Yes...oh fuck...yes!”

“Mmmmmmmmm...” Ashlyn hummed loudly against the brunette’s sensitive clit as she kept flicking it. She knew she couldn’t go much longer but she also knew Ali was only seconds away from her release. “Come on baby...let go for me...” she mumbled against her clit before setting her tongue back to work on it again.

She could barely move her fingers inside Ali’s pulsing center anymore, the walls were closing in so tightly. She scratched at the outside of the brunette’s breast and gave another pinch to her nipple at the same time she clicked her tongue with one last burst of strength and speed.

“Oh my God” Ali gasped as her whole body stiffened and stilled for a long five seconds. “Yessssssss!!!!!!!!!” she yelled out loud, not caring who the fuck heard her, as she came hard. Her eyes slammed shut again and her stomach muscles all clenched as the orgasm hit her. Her legs both shot out, one of them catching Ashlyn in the thigh as she tried, unsuccessfully, to dodge them. Ali’s body shook as her wife kept her fingers moving slowly inside her, trying to prolong the pleasure for as long as possible. “Mmmmmm...Jesus...fuck...” she panted out while her keeper pressed warm kisses across the top of her mound and her Penn St tattoo and the sweet spot, covered by her wave tattoo, by her left hip.

“You are...the sexiest...fucking...thing...in the whole...world...do you know that?” Ashlyn spoke around big breaths as she tried to recover her own breathing.

“I don’t know about that, but I know you make me feel sooo good” Ali replied breathlessly and gave her wife a slow, satisfied smile. “God, your tongue...mmmmmmmm...I didn’t think you could go that long” she let out a low chuckle and then realized her words might be misinterpreted. “Not
that you can’t go for a long time...” she stammered quickly. “It’s just that it was so hard and so fast too...”

“Relax” Ashlyn laughed softly as she dragged her lips up the brunette’s still twitching body. “I know what you meant. I didn’t think I was going to make it either. I think I broke my tongue” she giggled, as did her wife, and cupped both of Ali’s breasts as she lowered her body onto hers, her head at the bottom of her ribcage.

The keeper loved the feel of Ali’s coarse short hairs scratching at her chest. She felt her core twitch as she watched the fingers of her right hand spread the brunette’s own juices around her left breast. The slick passion almost shone in the firelight and Ashlyn moved her body up so her mouth could reach it. Ali’s whole body trembled when her keeper’s hot lips made contact with the sensitive skin of her breast.

“Mmmmmm, that feels nice, babe” she purred and moved her arms around Ashlyn’s upper back, softly running her fingers up and down the soft skin there. “But you’d better rest up and take care of that glorious tongue of yours” she chuckled. “Can’t have that out of commission now, can we?” she quirked an eyebrow at the keeper and chuckled again. “Besides, it’s my turn. And I’m dying to unzip you and see the rest of your beautiful self” she gave her a smile that was half naughty and half adorable and Ashlyn couldn’t help but laugh.

“I’m all yours my queen” she gave one last kiss to the underside of Ali’s breast and then pulled herself up so she was straddling her hips.

Ali moved both hands to her wife’s toned thighs and massaged them slowly while she looked her up and down, still in the sexy lingerie. Her favorite look for Ashlyn when it came to their sexy times was definitely naked. It wasn’t even a close comparison. Sometimes she felt like she lacked creativity or imagination because her preference was so basic and simple. But why in the world would she want to cover up Ashlyn’s gorgeous body with anything else? To that day, their tenth anniversary of being together, Ali still had trouble walking by the shower when her keeper was naked inside it. That magnetic pull that had always been there between the two of them was just as strong as ever and it practically threw the brunette against the glass shower door every single time. But the occasional times that Ashlyn wore something sexy for her, Ali truly did enjoy it. A lot. It was sort of like the wrapping paper on the present that you loved. You were there for the present, first and foremost, but you could appreciate the wrapping job too.

“I know I don’t tell you often enough Ash, and I’m sorry about that, but you are so fucking gorgeous honey. I mean, like...I’m reduced to a quivering mess every time I see you naked.”

“Still?” Ashlyn asked, a sweet and surprised half-smile on her face as she gazed down at her wife. “After ten years and twins and...”

“Still” Ali answered definitively and slid her hands up to Ashlyn’s hips. She ran her fingertips beneath the edge of the shiny black boyshorts and locked eyes with her keeper. “Always.”

The sincere, almost urgent, look on her face let Ashlyn know just how truthful Ali’s words were. The keeper knew she meant every word and it felt wonderful.

“So skip the lingerie next time?” Ashlyn teased as she let her hands come to rest on her wife’s warm stomach.

“Well, I didn’t say that” the brunette bit her bottom lip as she felt the heat emanating from between Ashlyn’s legs. “I appreciate the effort, first of all” she trailed her hands up the blonde’s stomach, ghosting feathery touches with the back of her fingers. She held her breath when she saw the
goosebumps appear and Ashlyn close her eyes in pleasure. “And second of all, it’s hot as hell taking it off of you.”

Ali sat up and took her wife’s lips in a bruising kiss. The Breakers jersey fell back down, covering her body again but Ashlyn quickly lifted it over her head and tossed it aside. They both let their hands wander and grab and scratch at each other’s inviting skin while they made out for a few minutes. The brunette finally pulled away and trailed hot kisses down her wife’s neck and chest. Ashlyn was incredibly turned on and not sure she could take much more teasing. She had been ready for her release since she had given Ali hers a few minutes earlier.

“Ohoooh, yeah baby...” she gasped out after their passionate kiss.

Ali’s hands were at Ashlyn’s ass while her lips found the zipper at the top of her sexy bra. The brunette let out another throaty chuckle and took the metal zipper pull between her teeth with a lascivious look in her eyes.

“Oh fuck...” Ashlyn let out a desperate whimper as she watched her wife slowly pull the zipper down with that talented mouth of hers.

It was hard to say who got more turned on just then. Both women felt their cores twitch and Ashlyn knew her boyshorts were absolutely flooded with her own passion. When Ali got the pull all the way down to the bottom of the zipper she gave it one more tug and then sucked in a breath when the two sides of the bra flew open and over to each side. Ashlyn gasped when she felt the cabin air on her delicate and overheated skin. That vinyl combination material did not breathe well.

“There they are” Ali cooed as she admired her wife’s pretty pink nipples, still moving slightly from the release of the tight garment. “God I love your boobs” she moaned as she took a semi-hard nipple into her mouth, closing her eyes in delight.

She spent the next several minutes tending to both breasts with her mouth and her hands while soft mewls and moans and gasps escaped from Ashlyn’s lips. When both nipples were stiff and red from all of her nips and nibbles and sucks, Ali turned her attention to the boyshorts that were still very much in her way. She took advantage of her keeper’s distracted bliss and rolled them over.

“Whoa” Ashlyn yelped and then giggled as they repositioned themselves and got comfortable again. She pulled her beautiful brunette down onto her chest and gave her another passionate kiss. “I love having you on top of me...and in my arms...” she mumbled with her eyes closed as their lips pulled apart.

“Me too, beautiful” Ali agreed, her voice husky and full of desire. “But you’ve still got too many clothes on.”

Ali slid down her wife’s long body, ignoring the stab of pain when one of her breasts caught the edge of the less-than-flexible boyshorts. She let her hands travel all the way down Ashlyn’s long legs and back up again, scratching lightly with her short nails. The brunette thrilled when her keeper sucked in a breath at the new sensation.

“Shit Al” she groaned as her hands found the back of her wife’s brunette head. “Keep that up and I’m gonna come before I even get out of these things...”

It wasn’t easy. In fact, it took an almost-comical amount of effort to peel those sexy boyshorts off of the blonde’s body. But neither one of them was willing to give up. With one final, mighty tug, Ali was able to free her wife from the underwear. They both laughed for a good two minutes before they could get back to business. But that was another benefit of ten years together – not much
could embarrass you anymore when it came to having sex. Granted, Ali embarrassed easier than most, but even she had learned to appreciate a good sense of humor in the bedroom.

“Just think” Ashlyn laughed as Ali righted herself again, the boyshorts twisted and mostly inside out in the brunette’s hands. “We got our workout in too.”

“Yep, arms done. Check.”

They laughed together for another minute and then Ali got quiet as she turned the boyshorts over in her hands.

“Ashlyn, what’s this?” she asked softly, raising her shining eyes to meet her sweet wife’s.

On the back of the shiny black boyshorts, stitched like the other heavy seams, except in bright purple, were the words ‘Sugarplum Fairy Hands Only’ in two rows. It hadn’t taken them long, seven or eight years ago, to make the connection between Ashlyn’s favorite nickname for her wife, Sugarplum, and one of the characters from their favorite ballet, the Sugarplum Fairy from ‘The Nutcracker’. The Sugarplum fairy was every little girl’s dream and had been Ali’s favorite part of the beloved ballet since she and her mother had first started attending the annual event. One thing had led to another and, although Ashlyn freely and openly used Ali’s sugarplum nickname in front of anybody in their lives, the much more intimate Sugarplum Fairy was reserved for their most private and romantic times together. Ashlyn had a lot of underwear that said a lot of things but she had never gotten anything custom made or printed before. So as silly as it seemed, it was really sort of a special thing and Ali appreciated it immensely.

“Oh, yeah” the keeper blushed a little bit. “I fucked that up didn’t I?” she looked down sheepishly. “I was supposed to show you my ass while they were still on” she shrugged her shoulders and reached out for her wife’s hand.

“I swear, you are the only woman in the world who can make a pair of naughty lingerie shorts still be romantic” Ali cocked her head to the side and beamed at her thoughtful and adorable wife. “Thank you, sweetheart.”

She crawled up and hovered over Ashlyn’s body, delicately dragging her nipples up her chest as she went. Ali brought their lips together in a soft, slow, romantic kiss. They smiled sweetly at each other when it was over and there was a moment that seemed frozen in time as they told each other how incredibly much they loved each other without moving a muscle or saying a word. And then the sweet moment was over and the lust took control again, for both of them. Ashlyn slid her hand down between Ali’s legs and groaned when she felt how wet the brunette still was. As soon as Ali felt her wife’s fingers in her slick folds again she moved quickly out of her reach, lowering her body back down so she could taste her keeper’s own sweet flesh.

“Fuck” Ashlyn moaned when Ali’s fingers slid easily through her drenched pussy lips and started to spread them out and open them wide. “That might not be the best...” she started to warn her wife about how hot and sweaty she had been in the boyshorts but lost all use of her words as soon as Ali pressed her face into her quivering entrance. “Fuck...yessssss...”

“Mmmmmmm...Jesus Christ you taste...so fucking good...mmmmmmmmmmm...” Ali mumbled into her keeper’s folds as she licked and sucked every inch from the bottom of her slit up to her clitt. “Mmmmmmmmm...”

The brunette wanted to take her time but knew Ashlyn was wound so tightly already that the slightest contact would probably set her off. She couldn’t blame her. She had already had a mind-blowing orgasm and could still feel the very gentle tinglings of the next one starting deep inside her
as she ate her keeper out with enthusiasm. Ali thrust her strong tongue up into the blonde’s pulsing core and swirled it around as far as she could reach. Ashlyn arched her back and rocked her hips as she started the climb towards her long-awaited release. Ali moved one hand from breast to breast, fondling and squeezing the luscious flesh and then pinching and tugging on the hard nipples. Ashlyn moaned and groaned as she continued to get lost in all the pleasurable sensations and glorious sounds of her wife working between her legs. The keeper’s face and neck were red and the top half of her chest was pink. She bit down on her bottom lip and closed her eyes when Ali’s tongue pressed up against her g-spot.

“Oh yeah, shit...” she growled out as she felt her level of desire shoot up about ten notches just from that one touch. “Right there baby...mmmm...”

The brunette mumbled and moaned into her wife’s pussy as Ashlyn’s hands held her head tightly against her center. Ali loved when her wife directed her like this. She only did it when she was desperate to come and that concept alone made the brunette hornier than ever. Ali felt Ashlyn move one of her hands to her own clit and start circling it as one of her legs trembled. She was tempted to let her do it herself but the brunette really wanted to get her off without Ashlyn lifting a finger.

“No sexy, let me” she purred into Ashlyn’s folds, pulling her head back just enough so that the keeper could hear her. “I want to make you come...I want to take you there right now baby... I want you to come all over my face Ashlyn...drown me with all your sweet sweet juices.”

The sound of raw desire in Ali’s voice made her keeper’s clit ache and her core twitch almost painfully. Fuck that was hot. Ashlyn was unable to speak so she just grunted and put her hand back into soft brunette hair, giving a more than gentle tug and making Ali moan.

The brunette didn’t waste time. She knew her girl was right on the edge and all it would take was some clit work to send her over and into ecstasy. Ali kept one hand up at Ashlyn’s breasts, squeezing and tugging and scratching at one and then the other. Her other hand moved quickly to her wife’s swollen clit, already wet from spreading Ashlyn’s passion around with her mouth and tongue. She started slowly, circling the sensitive area with her fingertip and then working her way in, adding more pressure all the way.

“Al...please...” her strangled voice managed to get out as she panted and tried to breath through all of the stimulation and touches. “Please...” she begged.

Ali made one more round with her tongue up and down her wife’s soaked pussy before focusing it inside. She pressed it up into her g-spot again and then swirled it around. She repeated the routine, spending more and more time on the g-spot than the swirls as she ramped up her pace and pressure there. She began rubbing Ashlyn’s throbbing clit with her finger, increasing her pressure and speed there in tandem with her tongue. It was a powerful pattern that had Ashlyn gasping, her chest heaving and her body shivering in a matter of minutes. Ali felt her wife’s thigh quiver again and knew her orgasm was about to hit her. She stopped swirling her tongue and just kept thrusting up into her g-spot as hard as she could.

“Oh! Oh fuck! Aliiiiiiiiiiiii!!” Ashlyn shouted as the powerful orgasm raced through her body.

She released Ali’s head and grabbed the blanket beneath them with both hands in tight fists as she came hard. Her body shook and her legs trembled and twitched as she rode out her high. Ali pulled her hand away from her wife’s oversensitive clit and licked up all of the passion she spilled as she came. That had to be one of the brunette’s absolute favorite views in the entire world. She caught glimpses of her wife’s beautiful face in the throes of passion, the view interrupted by her hips rocking and her body shaking and contracting right in front of her face. Goddamn that was fucking
sexy as hell. Ali felt an overwhelming urge to plunge her fingers into her own aching pussy to relieve the almost painful buildup there. But she didn’t. Instead, she pushed two fingers deep into Ashlyn’s core and began pumping at a medium pace, surprising the blonde and making her moan even louder.

“Unnnnnhhhh...shit...unnnnnnhhhhhhh...oh yeah Al...”

Ali got up on her knees and moved her other hand back up to her keeper’s breasts while she pressed hot, open-mouthed kisses to her stomach and hips and short hairs.

“Come for me again” she commanded breathlessly. “I know you want to...come for me again babe...”

“Jesus...unnnhhhh...unnnhhhh...” her body rocked with the rhythm of Ali’s thrusts as they got stronger and faster. Ashlyn felt another orgasm rising quickly and making her entire body tingle in anticipation.

“That’s it sexy...good girl...” Ali’s voice was low and husky and intoxicating.

The brunette moved her mouth up and sucked Ashlyn’s right breast in. She nibbled at the soft skin around it and then flicked her tongue across the nipple several times, making the keeper arch her back again and cry out.

“No! Fuck, unnnnhhh...that’s it...mmmmmmmm...” Ashlyn groaned and put one of her hands into Ali’s hair and held her head closely to her breast. “Oh baby, that’s so good...unnnnnhhhh...” she moaned loudly. “Fuck me Al...unnnnhhh...fuck me!”

The keeper was sweating and panting and her body was rocking, her breast bouncing along with her wife’s hard, steady pounding inside her pulsing pussy. Ali moaned just as loudly when she heard her wife’s lust-filled words. She added a third finger and increased her speed and power so she was thrusting as fast and hard as she possibly could. She had to sit up to get enough leverage and replaced her mouth with her left hand on Ashlyn’s breast. She immediately pinched the nipple hard and watched her keeper press her head back into the pillows as her mouth dropped open.

“Oh my God Ashlyn...” the brunette panted as she took in the sight of the love of her life spread out in front of her, just about to have another big orgasm. “Fuck, babe...you’re absolutely incredible...unfuckingbelievable...I love you baby...”

It only took another minute once Ashlyn brought her own hand down to her still sensitive clit and began rubbing it just the way she needed it. Her entire body started to spasm and shake, all four limbs flailed weakly, her back arched and her eyes slammed shut as she came again, even bigger than the first time.

“Holy shit!! Yes!!!!!!!!!!!” she yelled out and then bit her bottom lip as she rolled over onto her side, body still twitching and shaking. She reached down to still Ali’s hand between her legs which had been slowly stroking her through her high. “Oh my fucking God...” she gasped out. “What the fuck...did you...do to me?”

Ali knelt next to her keeper’s hip and lovingly licked all the juices off of her fingers with a sexy, satisfied grin on her face. She got up on her knees and straddled Ashlyn’s left hip as the keeper lay on her right side. The brunette lowered her soaked core down onto her wife’s hip and slowly started grinding back and forth as she finished the treat in her mouth.

“Oh, just my favorite thing in the whole world” Ali replied in a sultry voice from atop her wife.
“Jesus you’re so wet baby” the blonde panted out, still trying to catch her breath. “Sexy as fuck...” she turned her head to look up at her beautiful brunette. “What...what’s your favorite...thing in the world?” she asked, her brain trying to process Ali’s words instead of just how fucking hot she looked sliding back and forth on her hip like that.

“Making you come” the brunette answered as she finished licking the last of Ashlyn’s passion from her fingers. “It’s my very favorite thing...ever...and always will be.”

“Even in another...ten years?” Ashlyn quirked an eyebrow at her and sucked in another breath.

Ali took in the sight of her sexy keeper beneath her and felt her stomach flip wildly. She continued moving slowly as she considered her wife’s question and found her attention captured by the vibrant colors that adorned Ashlyn’s side. The blonde’s tattoos had always done something to Ali and she knew they always would. She loved Ashlyn’s sleeve and got to see it a lot because it was rarely hidden beneath too many clothes. It was the same with her other forearm and sometimes her lower leg. But the ink on her right thigh and her left side was covered more often than not and the brunette relished every minute she got to admire them. Ali let her eyes focus on the beautiful blue butterfly up at the top of her side. The tiny orange spots at the top of the wings almost matched the yellow in the center of the flower just below it, with its’ lush red petals curling outwards and down towards the vine-like stem. Ali felt her passion flare as her eyes moved to the right and appreciated the pretty yellow flower that was more on Ashlyn’s back than her side. It didn’t stand out as brightly as the deep reds and beautiful blues, but that made it all the more special to the brunette. 

Every new inch of colorful skin that her eyes devoured caused her mind to flood with even more desire. She rocked slowly and steadily on her keeper’s hip, loving the way her skin felt against her wet pussy. Ali looked to the left, just below the first red flower, and smiled, even through her lust, when she saw the light brown bird with the ribbon in its mouth. Next came another red flower, this one seen mostly from the bottom where the sepal met the base of the petals, and the orange hibiscus flower just to its’ right. The gold cross sat just below the second red flower, tilted at an angle as if it were pointing towards the middle of the keeper’s back. Ashlyn wasn’t a religious person but her Gram certainly had been. The image of Gram’s face momentarily threw the brunette and felt like a glass of cold water thrown at a roaring fire. It didn’t douse the flames but it gave Ali pause and made her furrow her brow for a few seconds. The tattoo was busier down here by Ashlyn’s stomach and Ali tried to focus on each part instead of just skipping down to the bottom of the tattoo where her favorite flower rested. The tug she felt on her excited clit every time she slid her soaked folds back down her wife’s hip made Ali’s desire return to its previous soaring level. Fuck, that felt so good. The brunette smiled again when her eyes fell to the pretty blue hibiscus flower at the bottom of the tattoo, down near her wife’s hip. She wasn’t exactly sure why she loved this flower so much, but thought it was because it was so blue after about twelve inches of reds, oranges, yellows and greens. It was the prettiest flower of them all and maybe it made the brunette think of how pretty her wife was, even though the keeper often tried to roughen up her beauty. The blue butterfly at the top made the brunette think of Gram, as it was supposed to, but the blue hibiscus...that was all Ashlyn. Ali might never understand why it moved her so much and right at that moment she didn’t really care to try and solve the riddle. All she knew was that the gorgeous body beneath her had this amazing artwork that spoke to her very soul. Ali had never tired of touching and tracing her wife’s tattoos, even though she could do them by memory and with her eyes closed now. They were sexy and beautiful, edgy and romantic, pretty and badass. And they made the brunette’s pulse quicken faster than anything else, except for her wife’s actual touch. Ali put one hand on Ashlyn’s thigh, behind her, leaned back a little bit, and then brought her other hand to her own clit. She loved the way her keeper’s face got even redder and her eyes got even darker as she watched the brunette’s every move.

“Even in another hundred years” Ali husked out, finally answering her wife’s question, as she started rubbing her own clit slowly.
Ashlyn reached her arm out and grabbed onto Ali’s thigh, wanting to feel another connection. She was so wiped out from the two orgasms that it was all she could do to hold onto her wife’s leg.

“I really...want to fuck you...again...” she groaned as she watched Ali’s nipples harden as her body quickly responded to the grinding and the rubbing and the tattoos and the whole fucking sexy atmosphere in the room. “Damn baby...” Ashlyn whimpered in a low, hungry voice.

“Can’t wait” the brunette teased and shook her head as she started to get lost in the strong sensations coming from her core and her clit. “Am I hurting you?” it occurred to her to make sure she wasn’t causing her keeper any pain in that position.

“No way baby...you killed me, but I feel no pain” she let out a deep chuckle as she watched Ali’s stomach and hips roll with her movements against her hip. “You’re so beautiful Al...so fucking gorgeous...mmmmmmm...Fuck, you feel good right now...fuck.”

“Watch me Ashlyn” Ali instructed in a hoarse whisper. “Watch me come for you...all for you baby...always, only for you...”

The brunette took her arm from Ashlyn’s thigh and started tugging at her own nipples while her other hand rubbed her clit hard and fast. She kept sliding and grinding and rocking on the blonde’s hip, enjoying every inch of contact. It was a struggle to keep her eyes open and her head from falling back as the orgasm got closer and closer. But she wanted to see her wife’s face. Ali wanted to watch her keeper’s beautiful face while she came on top of her. She could feel the low, steady thrum of electricity where Ashlyn’s hand held onto her thigh. God that felt good.

“I see you. Jesus fucking Christ do I see you” Ashlyn swallowed hard as she watched all the tell-tale signs that her wife was about to have an orgasm. “I’m ready baby.”

“I’m ready...too” Ali replied breathlessly as she started to come, fingers furiously rubbing her clit. “Fuck. Fuck!” she grunted and locked eyes with Ashlyn all the way through her orgasm. Her stomach muscles contracted and she stood up on her knees, which Ashlyn assumed was the equivalent of kicking her legs out, as her body shook with pleasure. “Oh...shit...ummmmhhhh...”

The brunette finally collapsed down onto Ashlyn’s side and the blonde pulled her around and into her arms. They were laying on their sides, facing each other, and the keeper placed soft, slow kisses all over her wife’s sweaty face. She carefully tucked the soft brunette hair behind her ears and moved it off of her neck so she could start to cool down. They kissed and snuggled and gently moved fingers over exhausted but sated skin. They were both tired but didn’t want the night to end. They knew they should get up and get into the bed so they didn’t wake up stiff and sore in the morning but neither one of them was willing to make the first move. They just wanted to stay there, together, reveling in their sexy, intimate moment and the magic of the firelit cabin. It sure didn’t feel like they’d been doing this for 10 years. Their bodies and minds and hearts responded to each other as if they were 32 and 31 again. Honestly, neither of them could imagine a time when they wouldn’t be madly attracted to the other. It just didn’t seem possible. Their love for each other had only deepened and grown over their first decade together, making every intimate moment like this that much sweeter and sexier and more meaningful. Gradually, their breathing came back to normal as they gently stroked each other’s arms and cheeks and sides. They blinked lovingly at each other and placed soft kisses to foreheads and noses and lips and cheeks.

“That was the very best Sugarplum Fairy dance I’ve ever seen in my whole life” Ashlyn teased sweetly. “I’m going to think of that every time we go to the Nutcracker now, you know that, right?”

“That makes two of us.”
Our Bodies, Our Selves

Ali and Ashlyn had gone out of their way to make sure that their children grew up loving and respecting their own bodies. It was an important concept to both women and they knew it would empower their kids for the rest of their lives. Much as they had done previously with Meg, following Hannah’s lead, Ashlyn and Ali made sure to have age-appropriate books about the human body for the kids to read and look at. They made sure to talk about everybody’s body parts, using the correct names. They made sure not to make any of the kids feel bad or self-conscious about anything their bodies did. It had been pretty easy with Meg because Hannah had done most of the heavy-lifting already. Ali and Ashlyn had to answer some awkward questions but that was basically the extent of it with their oldest step-child. And, of course, the tampon instruction Ali had given the redheaded teen. The two moms quickly discovered that the heavy-lifting was tough fucking work. And it was more difficult because there were four little kids to handle it with who were all in different places developmentally.

They started with the low-hanging fruit which was words, and talking about their bodies and the different things their bodies did. A lot of parents they knew instituted a pretty harsh “no potty talk” rule as soon as their kids started using any of the bathroom words in conversation. It was almost always poop jokes that started these conversations that were really more giggle-fests centered around pee, poop and fart jokes and noises. It was understandable to put the kibosh on this kind of talk because no parent wanted their kid to be the one who dragged the whole class down into the gutter with them at school. The teachers wouldn’t stand for it either. It was also socially unacceptable to discuss bathroom things in front of company. These were all known facts that backed up the strict enforcement of the “no potty talk” rule.

But Ashlyn didn’t want that rule in her house with her kids. She thought it stifled their creativity and limited their senses of humor.

“Are you kidding me?” Ali had asked her, her mouth open in disbelief, 2-1/2 years earlier when Drew was about 4-1/2 years old. He had just started the poop talk and was crazy about talking about his pee-pee or his wee-wee, even though both his moms continued to call it his penis. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

“No, I’ve been thinking about it a lot and I get why other people do it, I really do, and I respect their decision” the keeper patiently explained. “But I want the kids to be able to say whatever they want in their own home.”

Ali thought her wife had finally succumbed to the overall stress their household had been under as they prepared for the twins’ first Christmas. It had been a busy couple of months back at the end of 2023 where Drew started riding a bike with training wheels, Josie, at 2-1/2 years old, finally got her big girl bed, and little 6-month old Dodge had decided to start crawling earlier than either of his older siblings ever had. Things were wonderfully chaotic and the topic of the “no potty talk” rule had come up because Drew wouldn’t stop talking about any of it and Josie was a more than willing audience and occasional participant. The only thing that held her back was her still-limited vocabulary.

“You’re serious?” Ali closed her mouth and squinted curiously at her wife as they stood at the kitchen sink finishing the dishes that they hadn’t had a chance to do right after dinner. “You’re really not just messing with me?”

“No, Al, I’m absolutely serious” she turned to the side to face her wife. “I know it sounds crazy but I really hate the idea of muzzling them and controlling what they think is funny. I know they have
to follow those rules everyplace else. I’m not an idiot” she rolled her eyes and turned back to wash the last pot in the sink. “But I think here at home they should be able to be free from those restrictions.”

They were both quiet for several minutes as they finished the dishes. Ali’s mind was completely blown by the whole concept, but the more she thought about it the more sense her wife’s point of view made to her. After another lengthy discussion as they got ready for bed, they tentatively agreed to not enforce the “no potty talk” rule inside the big old house. They agreed on some very important rules that were absolutely non-negotiable. The first time these other rules were broken would be the end of the potty talk freedom experiment. The kids could joke and talk and laugh about whatever they wanted when they were at home, inside the house, and there were no guests there. As long as they weren’t hurting anybody else’s feelings. That was it. Outside the house, even in the yard or the driveway, they had to adhere to the universal “no potty talk” rule that everybody else lived with. If anybody had a friend over, then they had to go back to no potty talk. It was a bold and slightly terrifying proposition but it had worked pretty well over the last 2-1/2 years. Now all four kids had joined the fun and both Ashlyn and Ali were hopeful that it would keep working like a charm. Thus far, none of the kids had slipped up at school and Ashlyn was convinced it was because they did it enough at home that they didn’t need or want to do it anyplace else.

“It’s like in Europe where teenagers drink wine and it just becomes a part of their normal everyday life. Nobody even notices it. It’s just how it is and they don’t go sneaking around trying to drink all the time” the keeper illustrated her point the night before Easter as they were putting the finishing touches on some cupcakes they were bringing with them to the Dwyers in the morning.

“She’s just waiting for daycare to call us in to talk to us about Dodge’s poop jokes” Ali sighed heavily and licked some purple frosting off the side of her pinky finger. “You’d better make sure he understands the rules babe.”

They didn’t have to worry about Lily getting into trouble with her mouth because she was so quiet at daycare that she hardly said anything. The almost three-year old had a funny little mumble that was practically impossible for anyone to understand unless they lived with her and spoke to her every day. And even then, sometimes only Dodge knew what she was trying to say. Ali and Ashlyn hadn’t really thought much of it until the daycare coordinator mentioned it to them as something the little girl would need to work on before going to preschool in another year. They had a full 18 months to try and get Lily to speak up and enunciate her words and they were both already working with her on it.

“He gets it” Ashlyn countered. “He knows if he screws up he won’t get the privilege of doing it here at home.”

But teaching the kids to control their words had been so much easier than teaching them to control their actual bodies. As was the case with most babies, as soon as their diapers were removed, their little hands went right between their legs. It didn’t matter if it was a boy or a girl. It made sense. That was how they learned about their bodies. But nothing had prepared either mom for how much time their kids would spend touching themselves as they got older. The whole concept of kids masturbating was something even good friends who spent time in the parenting trenches together didn’t discuss very much. It happened in stages, at least it had with the Krieger kids. As babies they explored what was down there just to figure out what was what. Then, when the kids got a little older, they started to figure out that those private parts felt pretty good if you pressed on them in just the right way through their diapers. The boys seemed to find it easier to just reach inside their diaper though. Which began one of the other most common refrains in the history of the big old house, ‘get your hands out of your pants, please’.
Ali couldn’t believe her eyes the first time she saw 2-year old Josie rocking back and forth on the corner of the dog bed in the front living room. It was one of those beds with the firm back to it that looked almost like a miniature couch, but with no legs, and she was leaning on it and moving her little body against the edge of it. Drew was in preschool and Ali had just put the twins down for a nap upstairs. She came down the front stairs and went into the front living room, finding her daughter in this odd new position. From the back, Ali didn’t know what was going on. She was about to start talking to Josie but something made her wait just a minute. The brunette walked around to the middle of the room and was stunned when she got a side view and saw that her little girl’s face was bright red. Josie looked dazed and completely pre-occupied by the task at hand. Ali didn’t know what to do because not one of the parenting books or articles she had ever read had talked about this. The brunette just left the room and when she went back a few minutes later Josie was playing with some toys near the toybox.

All the kids had done it and would continue to do it and it was perfectly normal and healthy. When Ashlyn and Ali did finally find some advice columns about it they all said the same thing – discourage it in public and start teaching them about the very important concept of privacy. The kids would almost jokingly ask for privacy when they were pooping sometimes but their moms were pretty sure that was mostly just so they could be bratty or playful to one of their siblings who had followed them into the bathroom. They would loudly ask for privacy just to wield the power to make their brother or sister have to leave the room. But the toilet was the first place the idea of privacy had taken root. So the kids had at least a basic understanding of what it was. Ashlyn, and especially Ali, had been asking the kids for privacy their whole young lives so it wasn’t an unfamiliar phrase.

“Mommy needs some privacy right now guys” the brunette spoke clearly and firmly as she tried to close the bathroom door. “I’ll be out in a minute. Just go play and I’ll be right out.”

It rarely worked, but she tried like hell anyway. As the kids got older they started to understand. One time, recently, Drew even tried to coax his younger siblings back into the front living room with him so Ali could poop in private. Truthfully, the brunette had barely enjoyed that luxury since Josie had been born. It was something every mother in the world could relate to. As soon as she closed a door, no matter how quietly or discreetly, at least two of the kids would come and open it almost instantly. It didn’t matter if it was the bathroom door or a bedroom door. They had to know what their mother was doing behind it and what they were missing.

Of course two and three-year olds aren’t going to understand any of the privacy discussion so the best you could hope for at that age was to distract them out of masturbating in front of anybody else. One theory on the subject was that it was just another ‘bad habit’ like nose picking, hair pulling, thumb sucking, nail biting, lip chewing and teeth grinding and should be handled the same way. But that assumed that masturbation was harmful to the child as all of the other ‘bad habits’ were. And yes, Evan Cross used to pick his nose so much that he gave himself nosebleeds.

Once the kids were old enough to be potty trained and the diapers stopped acting as a buffer, it got more difficult to keep the boys’ hands out of their own pants. It wasn’t until Drew was almost 6-years old that he finally started to understand the privacy thing. The moms had been telling all of their children the same thing whenever they saw them playing with themselves. The girls hadn’t figured out how to touch themselves yet but used other household furniture much as Josie had used the dog bed when she was still in diapers. Lily’s favorite spot was on top of one of the little foam kids’ chairs that every house with children had at least one of. They were usually adorned with a Disney character or theme, or some other popular children’s icon. You could pull the seat out straight and turn it into a little bed if you wanted to. Lily would tip it over, or find it tipped over after some playtime with her siblings, and when it was upside down she would straddle the bottom edge of it that was sticking up in the air. Once up there she would rock back and forth along the
semi-hard foam like a champ. Josie wasn’t that fussy and when the spirit moved her she just found something that worked. Both Ashlyn and Ali had died of embarrassment one Christmas Eve at the big old house. Everybody was there and gathered in several different rooms having a nice time – the usual Krieger/Dwyer Christmas Eve gathering. Josie, in her cute little holiday dress with her sparkly shoes and her pretty ribbons in her adorable little pigtails, straddled the arm of the recliner, with Grandpa Ken sitting in it. She had been sitting in his lap and then quietly shifted positions and started to get busy. She was 3-1/2 and didn’t care that half the room realized what she was doing and wanted to crawl into a hole. A few people got up and left the room, and it was only then that Ashlyn saw what the little redhead was up to. She blushed furiously, picked Josie up and carried her upstairs to her room. The keeper was careful not to shame or frighten her daughter and she spoke calmly when they were in Josie’s bedroom.

“Remember JoJo, that’s something you do in private, right?” she nodded encouragingly at her daughter as she knelt on the floor in front of her on her little princess bed. “If you want to do that you come up here to your room, ok?”

“Ok” she said sweetly and smiled at the blonde. “Can I have a cookie Mama?”

By the time Drew was almost six he seemed to finally understand how it worked and would go to his room, seemingly out of the blue, for a few minutes and then come back and pick up whatever he had been doing previously. This was also about the same age that he started wanting privacy when he got changed or dressed. It wasn’t all the time, just every once in a while. But his moms knew he was learning important new boundaries for himself. He hadn’t asked them any questions yet about sex but they knew it wouldn’t be too long before he did. Their oldest son had gone through the cute but scary stage where kids are curious about other people’s bodies too. It didn’t matter whose body it was and it wasn’t really personal to the kid. He or she just had questions based on what they were seeing. Drew’s questioning stage had been shorter than Josie’s. He had started wondering and asking just before he went to preschool and had just recently moved out of that phase, so from 3-1/2 to about 6-years old for Drew. Josie’s curious stage started at about 3 and she was still smack dab in the middle of it, two months before her 5th birthday. The twins, thankfully, hadn’t begun to wonder about other people’s bodies as much yet, just their own. And their siblings’ too, occasionally.

The first time Ali had gotten a phone call from Jeri at daycare about Drew was for pulling his pants down with two other boys so they could compare their penises. It was the summer before he started preschool and all three boys were potty trained and out of diapers so the access couldn’t have been easier.

“I’m so sorry Jeri” Ali apologized that afternoon as she picked her son up from daycare.

“It’s ok” the teacher smiled. “It happens all the time but we have to document it and call the parents for legal reasons...”

“Oh God, I never thought about that” Ali’s eyes went wide as she watched her boy playing with a race track across the room. “We tell him all the time about keeping private parts private and not touching anybody else’s privates...”

“Those are all the right things to say. We teach the same thing here” Jeri nodded encouragingly. “Really, don’t feel bad. Drew’s great and perfectly normal. All little kids go through this phase where they’re trying to see what other people’s bodies look like. It’s all part of the process.”

“Well, thank you for being so good about it” Ali smiled back. “We’ll talk to him some more and hopefully he won’t do it again.”
Another time Ali had walked in on Drew, Cash and Evan during one of the four-family vacation weeks. Drew was almost 5-1/2, Cash was 6-1/2 and Evan was 4-1/2. They were all still in the exploration and questioning stage, although Cash was at the very tail end of it. Ali stopped dead in her tracks when she saw all three boys standing in a tight circle in one of the bedrooms on the second floor of the sprawling vacation house. Their bathing suits were around their ankles, their hands were on their penises and their heads moved from one to the other as they compared. Again, Ali didn’t know quite what to do. They weren’t touching each other and it all seemed adorably innocent. But this was one of the brunette’s greatest fears about being a mother. She had no idea what to teach her sons about their penises, other than the basics, of course, and there was no dad to step in and fulfill that role for her. She slowly backed out of the room and ran right into Sydney who had come up to see what was taking Cash so long to get changed into his bathing suit. The coach peeked into the room after Ali told her what was going on and stifled a giggle.

Later that night the adults were talking about the three boys and laughing.

“Who had the penis talk with Noah?” Ashlyn gave Niki a puzzled look.

Evan’s brother was 8-1/2 and well past the discovery phase.

“My brothers” Niki grinned. “Sounds like it’s time to get them to talk to Evan now too.”

“So, what, do you ladies just pretend the penis doesn’t exist until the boy starts playing with it?” Dom laughed good-naturedly and looked at the four lesbians around the big kitchen table.

They all rolled their eyes at him and Ali smacked him in the arm from her seat next to him.

“Yeah, of course” Molly teased. “What other way is there?”

They all shared some funny penis stories from their children’s lives and laughed for another half hour or so.

“I’ve told Drew everything there is to know about his penis” Ali explained in a softer voice after the laughter died down. “I mean, I almost feel like I’m over-compensating because I don’t have one” she shrugged. “But I don’t know how else to do it. I can’t tell him what it feels like to have one or use one or any of that fun stuff” she blushed a little and looked at Dom and then at Ryan. “Remember right after I had Drew and I told you guys I was going to need your help?”

“Yeah, of course Ali” Ryan spoke first even though he was much more reluctant to help with the matter. “Whatever you guys need.”

“So, I’ve got a proposition for you” Ashlyn looked seriously at Dom and then at Ryan.

“But darling” Dom leaned in conspiratorially, “our wives are right here” he whisper-yelled and made everyone laugh.

“Ha ha ha, very funny” Ashlyn made a face while Ali smacked his arm again. “Seriously” she looked at two of the men she knew and trusted most in the world. “If you guys can talk to my boys about their penises I’ll handle any gay stuff any of your kids ever have questions about. What do you say?”

“Sounds like a good deal to me” Ryan chuckled. “I’m in.”

“I think you’re forgetting who I’m married to” Dom quirked an eyebrow at the keeper. “If you think she’s going to shy away from any of the gay stuff just because she’s not gay...”
“Let me put it this way” Ashlyn considered both Sydney and Dom before continuing. “Syd can have that talk just about as well as Ali and I can have the penis talk. We understand the mechanics of it, but we don’t really get it from a user’s standpoint. You know?”

“Ahh” Dom nodded and grinned. “Gotcha. Then sure, sign me up. But I’m holding you to the gay stuff” he cautioned with a quirked eyebrow.

“I should hope so” the keeper leaned back in her chair with a smug look on her face. “It is my specialty, after all.”

True to her nature, Josie asked a lot more questions about her body and her siblings’ bodies and her mothers’ bodies. She was a curious little kid. As the kids got older, bathtime turned into shower time unless somebody specifically wanted a bath. Drew had been their best bath kid but he had outgrown playing with his toys in the bathtub a couple of years ago. Now that he would be turning 7 years old in another month he showered like the big boy that he was. When the kids turned 4 and went to preschool it seemed like a natural time to make the switch to showers. It didn’t really matter much to either mom, as long as their kids got clean. Showers typically went faster because there was no playing in there. Ashlyn or Ali would stand just outside the tub and wash the kids while they were in the shower. They knew it wouldn’t be too long before Drew would want to shower on his own but he wasn’t there yet. There were a lot of things that could go wrong for a kid in a wet and slippery shower and neither Ali nor Ashlyn was willing to take any unnecessary chances with any of their kids.

Sometimes the kids would shower with one of their moms. This had been happening all of their young lives whether they remembered it or not. Ashlyn used to bring each of the babies into the shower with her, usually with Ali standing right there watching the cute show. Sometimes a spill would happen and one of the moms would run into the master bathroom with the sticky kid and usher them into the shower with the mom who was already showering. Ali would never forget the time she was trying to have a nice, relaxing soak in their big tub after an insanely busy week at work. Her kind wife had told her she would handle the kids herself for a couple of hours and to just go ahead and enjoy her lovely, fragrant bath. The brunette had only been in the tub for about fifteen minutes but she could already feel the stress starting to leave her body, transported away by lavender scented bubbles.

“Honey, I’m so sorry but there’s no other way for me to do this right now” Ashlyn had said as she burst through the bathroom door with 2-year old Lily who was covered from head to toe in what looked like chocolate syrup. The little girl had been making a bee-line for Fred and Ashlyn did not want to have to give the dog a bath too so she plucked Lily up first. The keeper held her out in front of her body to try and keep the sticky substance off of her own clothing for as long as possible. “Here you go” she handed the little blonde girl to her wife with a regretful smile. “I’m so sorry. I’ll make it up to you” she said as she quickly turned and jogged towards the backstairs, calling out over her shoulder as she went. “I’ve gotta go get Dodge before he touches anything else, he’s covered too!”

But the questions and observations never stopped. The kids didn’t mean to be hurtful, not even the least bit. They just didn’t know any better. They didn’t yet understand the weight of words. As with everything else regarding sex and their bodies, Ashlyn was much more chill about being naked in front of the kids. She certainly didn’t try to be naked in front of them but she didn’t skip a beat when it happened. There were four of them and they had few, if any, boundaries which meant they went where they wanted most of the time. Both moms tried to teach them to knock on doors that were closed and worked that in to the whole privacy conversation. The kids were cute. Sometimes one of them would knock as the door was already halfway open so it completely defeated the purpose anyway. All they could do was try to keep teaching them, and try they both
certainly did.

“Mommy, why are your boobies so small?”
“Mommy, why is there so much hair there?”
“Mommy, what are all these squiggly lines?”
“Mommy, how come your bum looks different than Mama’s?”
“Mommy, why are Mama’s boobies bigger than yours?”
“Mommy, did your body always look this way?”
“Mommy, are these your private parts?”
“Mommy, will my privates look like that when I’m old?”

The questions came when Ali was in the shower or just getting into or out of the shower. They came when she was getting changed after work or in the morning when she was getting ready to go to work. They came sometimes completely out of the blue when one kid would come up to her, lift her shirt up and poke the side of her breast before yelling back to one of their siblings what color bra the brunette had on that day. The kids did the same thing to Ashlyn and were just as blunt. They were equal opportunity inquisitors. The big old house still had safety gates at the top and bottom of all four flights of stairs, including the basement now that the playroom was down there and the kids spent much more time there. So the twins weren’t just wandering around the house willy nilly. Well, they were, but they were restricted to whatever floor of the house their moms decided was necessary at the moment. The front parlor, with the piano, was also still blocked off by gates at both entrances. If Josie, or one of the other kids, wanted to use the piano they asked one of their moms who would go in with them and supervise. That room was the only room in the house that Ashlyn wanted to keep safe from the damage and messes of the kids. It was a special room for the keeper and it was where she felt closest to Grandma Lilian. Ali knew the front parlor was special and did her best to make sure no harm came to anything in it. It wasn’t easy. But they implemented different rules for that room. There was no roughhousing or playing with much of anything in there. It was the quiet room in the house and the kids were encouraged to read when they were in there, or do a puzzle, or color, as long as they were careful with the crayons.

But the kids were always coming into the master bedroom and master bathroom whenever they felt like it, which was usually when one of their moms was in there. If Ali or Ashlyn was home alone with the kids and needed to do something upstairs she would just bring all the kids upstairs with her so she could keep an eye on them. Drew and Josie could both open doors and the twins were getting pretty good at it too, so privacy could be hard to come by.

“So how are we supposed to know when it’s not ok to be naked in front of them anymore?” Ashlyn asked her wife and best friend as they ate lunch at the Knight-Harris offices one day in early March.

Whitney had just asked them about Ryan taking showers with baby Becca, who was turning one year old at the end of the month. Ryan’s mom thought it was inappropriate and couldn’t believe that Whitney let it happen. The three friends had finished a frank and supportive conversation about the subject, both Ashlyn and Ali reassuring the lawyer that it was perfectly fine.

“I don’t know” Ali shrugged as she finished the last couple of bites of her salad, her mouth still half full as she spoke. “I mean, it’s not like either one of us parades around naked so it’s not really something for us to do much about.”

“Well who else is going to do something about it?” the keeper frowned in confusion and Whitney chuckled.

“No, I’m just saying we don’t have to change anything we’re doing. They see us naked when they
walk into our room or the bathroom and we’re changing or showering” Ali clarified. “If they get to the point where they don’t want to see us naked or half-naked or whatever then they’ll stop walking in on us.”

“I read something about that when I was trying to figure out if Ryan’s mom had a valid point” Whitney furrowed her brow as she tried to remember what she had read. “I think you’re right Al, you’re supposed to follow the kids’ lead. If they start wanting more privacy and closing their bedroom door when they get changed, that’s your cue to start doing the same thing. But you guys already do that. So once they’re old enough to want some more boundaries they’ll sort of help themselves out.”

“And Drew knows how to knock and wait for someone to tell him to come in...he just pretends not to sometimes” Ashlyn added thoughtfully. “So they’ll get better about respecting closed doors when they’re ready for us to start respecting theirs?” she asked, studying her best friend’s face.

“Yeah, that’s the gist of it” Whitney nodded and started to tidy up her own empty salad bowl and lunch mess. “But you guys don’t still shower with them do you?”

“No, not unless there’s some sort of emergency mess situation” Ali offered. “But if one of them asked I don’t think I’d say no” she considered the question some more. “What about you?” she looked at her wife.

“No, I wouldn’t say no either. But you’re right Whit, Drew hasn’t asked to take a shower with me in a long time. And he’s the water kid. I think if any of them would want to it would be him.”

“And maybe he’s grown out of it” the lawyer proposed.

“But they’re not showering with us to see us naked” Ali stood up and collected all of the empty salad bowls and trash items from the coffee table in her office.

“No, it’s more because they want to hang out with us and sometimes they think a shower can be fun” Ashlyn continued her wife’s thought. “Even though it never is.”

“I think you guys are doing it right with the whole not freaking out about your body if they do see it thing. You know, like, we all knew kids when we were little who got screamed at if they happened to see their mom or dad without their clothes on. And now everybody agrees that’s not the best way to help your kid with body image or self-esteem or any of that stuff” Whitney had clearly done a lot of thinking about all of this since her mother-in-law had made her objection known. “So you have my mother of the year stamp of approval” she laughed and rolled her eyes. “Because I know you’ve just been dying for it.”

“Hey, listen Whit” Ashlyn leaned forward and looked seriously at her bestie. “You’ve gotta figure out what’s right for you and Ryan and your kid. Don’t worry about what anybody else is doing or saying. Don’t do something we’re doing unless it’s something you believe in. And don’t stop doing something your mother-in-law thinks is wrong if it’s something you and Ryan are cool with. Just do your own thing and it’ll be the right thing because she’s your kid, not anybody else’s.”

“Thanks Ash” Whitney flashed a grateful smile. “You guys were right, this parenting thing is not easy” she chuckled. “I need more black and white decisions in my life. But parenting is just a constant stream of gray areas that can be interpreted differently every time a situation comes up. It’s terrifying.”

“You’re right, but you’re doing great Whit” Ali added with a warm smile of her own. “Try not to overthink it too much. And when you figure out how to do that,” she chuckled, “please let me
know.”
Foster Parents

Chapter Notes

Happy Epiphany everybody!

Kyle and Nathan had fostered three different children by the time the end of February rolled around. Starting with the week between Christmas and New Year’s when they had to cancel their plans to join the Kriegers at the club in Miami, they had fostered three challenging but short-time kids. The first foster kid, a girl, stayed with them for just over a week until her mom got out of jail and took her back home with her. There had been two other boys who had lived with them at different times in January and early February, also for only about 2 weeks each. There hadn’t been any issues or problems for the new foster parents, other than the typical, heart-breaking situation that each child had found themselves in to require their help in the first place. It was impossible not to feel gutted for each one of them as you got a brief glimpse into their chaotic and unsteady upbringing. Kyle and Nathan were certainly not immune to any of that and they felt it acutely with all three foster kids who had lived with them thus far.

“Alex, you cannot believe the fear these kids have” Kyle explained emotionally during one of his phone calls with his younger sister. “It’s not like something just spooked them and once they settle down a little bit they’ll realize they’re safe and everything’s ok. They’re fucking terrified. All the time. Of everything.”

“Jesus” Ali breathed out softly as she tried to comprehend the picture her brother was trying to paint for her. “It sounds horrible Ky.”

“It is. It’s absolutely awful...for them. These poor kids haven’t done anything to anybody. They’ve spent their whole lives, all four or five or six years of it, trying desperately to please their insane parent. Their whole goal, every single day of their miserable lives, is to try not to piss off their mom or dad. Because when they do, they get the shit kicked out of them. It’s absolutely disgusting what these kids go through. And we haven’t even had any “challenging” ones yet” he lifted his voice when he said the word challenging. “I’m afraid to even think about what happens next.” He sighed heavily and paused for a few seconds to collect himself. Ali didn’t say anything because she knew her brother had to get this off of his chest. “And the saddest part is that it’s a big fucking merry-go-round for these kids. They go into some strange foster house for a week or two and then they go back to their hellish homes for a month or two. Then they go back to a different strange foster house for a few weeks and then back to their dirtbag, neglectful parent and it just keeps fucking going around and around.”

“You and Nate are doing so good though BB. You’re giving these kids a wonderful, loving home to be in, even if it’s just for a short time. I guarantee you those kids know the difference. They can feel the difference when they’re with you guys. Kids feel everything” she tried to explain. “They don’t understand what they’re feeling and can’t explain it, but they feel it. Shaniqua and Jeremy and D’quan all felt how good you and Nate are. They all knew you were there to help them. And that means so much Ky. Don’t think it doesn’t.”

In February of 2026 Edgar and Cristina Guerrero came to live with Kyle and Nathan. Edgar was 6
years old and his little sister was 4 and they were going to be, hopefully, Kyle and Nathan’s first long-term foster kids. There were some extenuating circumstances that made the Krieger-Kimball household more suited for the Guerrero children than some other foster homes. First of all, they had Luna. Dogs were often a big problem for some foster kids, but they were also often a huge plus for others. Cristina would only talk and open up if there was a dog around, the Child Protective Services (CPS) counselor had learned the hard way. She made a dog required for any foster home that they considered for the Guerrero children. The other special situation which was much more serious and would prove to be the root of most of Edgar and Cristina’s long-term problems, was that they were both afraid of mother figures. So a home with two dads and a dog seemed like a God-send at the end of February when CPS was trying to place the two children. Kyle and Nathan were it and they were happy to accept both kids for long-term placement.

Kyle and Nathan hadn’t been able to bring their three previous foster children up to Massachusetts to meet their extended families because their stays had been so brief. CPS allowed foster parents to travel with the foster children as long as it wasn’t too far and as long as the foster parents submitted advanced notice and details at least one week before the trip was to be taken. Once the CPS case-worker got to know the foster parents and the foster children and their situations, it wasn’t such a big deal. Yvette was the case-worker for the Guerreros and she had heard good things from other case-workers about Kyle and Nathan and Luna. She thought it was great that they wanted to take the kids up to meet their families and maybe help them take their minds off of their troubles and be kids for a little while again. A weekend away sounded like a great idea, but not right away. Edgar and Cristina had to settle in to their foster home in NYC first before they’d be ready for a weekend away.

Kyle and Nathan’s condo had been perfect for the two of them, and Luna. The second bedroom had been Kyle’s office and studio until they started fostering kids. Then it went back to being a second bedroom with bunkbeds, a little desk, a bookcase, and two dressers. It stayed the muted earth tones that it had been because they weren’t sure if they would be fostering boys or girls so they just kept everything neutral. Kyle had started renting a studio space with a couple of his friends and colleagues that wasn’t too far from home. The gays had taken over Brooklyn years ago so there were days when he never had to cross the bridge or leave the burrough to get his work done or find his inspiration and creativity. It had definitely been easier having his own tiny studio in his own condo, but things had changed in his life and that was just one of them. Edgar took the top bunk so his little sister could stay in the safer, lower bunk. This also made it much easier for Luna to sleep next to her or with her sometimes. The first thing the girl had done was to drag one of the big dog’s beds into the bedroom and put it right next to her bottom bunk. It was the only thing she changed in the first three weeks she lived there, and it was definitely the most important to her.

After those first three weeks were up and both kids seemed to be feeling comfortable in their foster home, Jared and Bill Kimball, Nathan’s brother and father, spent the third weekend of March in NYC visiting. Ken Krieger and Koty Wild visited the next weekend too, hoping to get some of the introductions out of the way before the big trip to Boston for Easter the first weekend in April. It killed Mrs. Kimball and Vicki and Deb and Brianna and Ali and Ashlyn and Sydney not to be able to meet Edgar and Cristina. But Kyle and Nathan had seen firsthand how terrified both kids were of anyone who they perceived as a mother figure. Teachers were ok because they had provided and occupied some of the only safe places the kids had ever known when they were living with their own mother. School was the safest place the Guerrero kids knew, followed by their Grandfather’s apartment. Both Edgar and Cristina had taken quickly to Ken and Mr. Kimball because of this grandfatherly connection. But any woman between the ages of 25 and 45 caused both kids to panic and start to shake in fear. It was easily the saddest thing Kyle had ever seen in his entire life. They were hopeful that Grandmothers wouldn’t cause so much anxiety but they really weren’t sure because neither child had ever been around either of their grandmothers. Yvette, their case-worker,
was ok with both kids and she was a middle-aged black woman so they were optimistic for the
grandmothers in their lives. Everybody, including the psychiatrists and therapists that the CPS had
working with the kids, was hopeful that once Edgar and Cristina were in a stable, safe home for a
few months the mother trigger would start to go away or at least lessen a bit. Nobody expected a
quick fix or overnight solution. They all knew it would take time and patience and dedication and a
lot of love to get these children past the trauma they had lived.

“I know it’s a lot to ask Syd, so I understand if you say no. I swear I won’t hold it against you...”

“Kyle, of course we can do the Easter Egg hunt like that this year. Whatever you guys need. I’m
just so glad you’re bringing them up” she chuckled. “You can pretty much have anything you
want, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Mom and Mike are totally saving us by letting us use their condo. I really didn’t want to stay in a
hotel so this’ll be perfect.”

“Oh, you know Deb loves staying with Al and the kids” the coach laughed. “She was probably
angling for that the whole time.”

“No kidding!” he laughed with her. “God, I’m so nervous about everything, but it really feels like
the right thing to do. It’s been six weeks and they’re both doing so well” he sucked in a dramatic
breath and held it for a few seconds. “So why am I so terrified?!?”

“Welcome to parenthood bro. You love ‘em and you want what’s best for ‘em and you’re realizing
just how little control you have over that sometimes. It fucking sucks” she chuckled ruefully. “But
they love you back and it makes it all worth it.”

“You think they might love us someday?” Kyle’s voice was soft and shy.

“I do boo boo” Sydney’s voice was full of sincerity and love. “I’ve watched every video you’ve
ever sent and I can see it in their eyes. They trust you more all the time and that’s how it starts,
right?”

“Yes, I guess” he replied thoughtfully.

“Before long they’ll both understand what love really feels like and it’ll be you and Nate that teach
them.”

Easter Sunday was early that year, a full two weeks before the Boston Marathon and the Breakers
home opener. There were no distractions or scheduling conflicts and everyone could focus on
Easter ham, and colorful dyed eggs, and pretty Easter dresses. Kyle and his family had arrived
Friday afternoon after taking a leisurely drive with three different stops to sightsee and stretch their
legs. It was normally a 4-1/2 hour drive but the kids had the day off from school for Good Friday
so they stretched it out and tried to make it as much fun as possible. They spent Saturday visiting
Grandpa Ken’s house and Grandpa Bill’s house. Both Koty and Jared made sure to be there to
welcome the kids and continue their uncle duties, hoping more familiar faces would help them feel
at ease. The day had gone really well and even Vicki and Nathan and Jared’s mom, Iris, were able
to meet the kids. Kyle and Nathan had started talking about their own moms once the Grandpas
had visited. They explained who Vicki was and called her ViVi like Ali’s kids did as they pointed
her out in pictures and videos. They did the same thing with Deb, calling her Grandma, and Mike
Christopher, calling him Grandpa Mike.

“What should we call her?” Kyle pointed at the picture of his mother-in-law and asked the kids as
they sat together on the couch at home. “You guys are her first grandchildren so she doesn’t have a
grandmother name yet” he explained. “Neither does Grandpa Bill really. You can pick what you want to call him too.”

All three of them studied the iPad on Kyle’s stomach and nobody said anything for almost a full minute. Kyle watched as Edgar reached out and swiped through a few more pictures of Iris Kimball and Bill Kimball with their grown sons from the most recent Christmas. He stopped on a photo Kyle had taken of Iris with James Dwyer and Josie Krieger. The older woman was leaning over the two 4-year olds as they decorated sugar cookies at the kitchen table. She wore an apron with Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer on it and was smiling as she tucked her medium length grey-brown hair behind her ear. She had a medium build and was average height with hazel eyes and a fairly plain face. Iris had one of those faces that looked stern unless she was smiling or laughing, but she was a very nice lady.

“Abuela” Edgar shrugged and looked at his sister on the other side of Kyle.

“Ah-huh” Cristina agreed, still looking at the picture. “Abuela.”

Both kids spoke English as their primary language because it had been what their mother had spoken exclusively and almost defiantly. They had learned their broken Spanish from their Mexican Grandfather, their Abuelo, when they had lived with him periodically. Their Abuelito, or Tito as they called him, was their mother’s father and he was a strict old man who still went to work every morning as a grocery bagger at the supermarket near his apartment in the Bronx. He took his only two grandchildren in when his drug addict daughter disappeared for weeks at a time. They fought bitterly about the welfare of the children but the old man’s words fell on deaf, drug-added ears. He did as much as he could for them but that was precious little. He barely made enough money to take care of himself, let alone two young children. He had learned the hard way to buy the kids what they needed instead of giving his daughter any money.

“Well ok then” Kyle nodded at both kids. “Abuela it is. Do you still want to call him Grandpa Bill?” he swiped back to a picture of Nathan’s father. He knew the name Abuelo might be too meaningful to them to give it away again so soon after they lost their own Grandfather. “You don’t have to know right now either guys” he reassured them both. “There’s no rush. And who knows” he shrugged his big shoulders, “once you get to know them better you might change your mind and want to call them something else anyway.”

The fact that both Edgar and Cristina didn’t freak out when they met Vicki and Iris was a monumental win in Kyle and Nathan’s book. They were thrilled that even little Cristina had remained calm when they had introduced the grandmothers, one at a time in each house so as not to overwhelm anybody. The little girl sat quietly with Bandit and Luna when she met Vicki and did the same thing at the Kimball’s when she met Iris later that same day. So it looked like, at least for now anyway, Grandmas were ok with the Guerrero kids.

“So, why are we all in here when the kids are all out there doing the Easter egg hunt again?” Erica asked Ali Sunday morning.

Sydney, Whitney, Ashlyn, Ali, Brianna and Erica were all standing in the Dwyer’s kitchen with their faces pressed close to the sliding glass doors that looked out onto the backyard where eleven children hunted desperately for Easter eggs. Luna and Boss were the only two dogs allowed outside because they were the only two who would leave the eggs alone. Persey, Fred, Bandit, and Ziggy were all inside with the younger women, watching all the backyard activity. Cassius and Drew had been told to leave the easy eggs at ground level for the younger kids and, so far anyway, seemed to be honoring that request. It helped that Jared was overseeing them and reminding them along the way. It was Becca Flanagan’s first Easter egg hunt. The little girl had turned one-year old
the week before and Ryan was trying his best to help her snag a few eggs before they were all gone.

“Because Kyle and Nathan’s foster kids are terrified of moms” Ashlyn answered quickly, with a bite in her voice. She wasn’t angry at the kids of course, but she was absolutely furious at the piece of shit mother who abused them so badly in the first place. “Whitney’s in here instead of out there for Becca’s first Easter egg hunt because of that fuc...”

“Babe...” Ali squeezed her wife’s arm before she could finish the four-letter-word laced diatribe she was about to unleash. “The bad guy’s not here. Everybody here’s on the same side” she spoke softly. “You’ve got to let that tension go or we’ll never get to meet them.”

“Wait, you guys haven’t even met them yet?” Erica asked, her eyes wide. She glanced quickly at Sydney for confirmation and, after getting a solemn nod from the coach, dropped her jaw in shock. “What is going on?”

“Oh E” Ali sighed when she felt her friend drape her arm around her shoulders. “It’s so fucking sad you just won’t believe it.”

“I thought Koty was exaggerating when he told me” Brianna offered. “Or maybe he had just misunderstood something, you know how guys are...”

“Boy do I wish it wasn’t true” Whitney exhaled her own frustrated sigh at the plight of the two adorable foster kids running around the backyard with Kyle and Nathan right that very minute.

They were beautiful children, both Edgar and Cristina. They had thick dark brown hair and big beautiful brown eyes. When they smiled, which they had started to do more and more often since coming to live with their foster parents, their faces lit up into one big grin. Neither of them had much of a half-smile. It was either nothing or a real ray of sunshine beamer that stretched from ear to ear. Kyle had tried to control himself while shopping with his foster daughter for her Easter dress. It was no easy task but he had managed to rein himself in and let her choose something she liked and felt comfortable in. He had been relieved to see a pretty yellow and white dress with matching white sweater catch her eye. She was only four so he couldn’t actually let her pick by herself – she could just as easily have selected the supergirl costume in the next aisle. Edgar had been more difficult to shop with. Kyle could almost see all the conflicting feelings filling the boy’s small brain. He was sure he could almost hear Edgar’s mom’s voice yelling at him about how he looked and what he was wearing, even though the bitch was cold and in the ground. Eventually they picked out a nice pair of dress pants that he wore with a soft dress shirt and a cute little bowtie. Edgar seemed surprised that Kyle was ok with the bowtie and that just made the foster dad fall even more in love with him.

The moms stood watching their children gleefully enjoying the Easter egg hunt while they took turns telling Erica the story of Edgar and Cristina.

“Their mom was a 24-year old drug addict who was a complete fucking mess” Ali began as she watched Drew point out an Easter egg to Lily. The interaction made her smile, even though her heart was full of sadness for her brother’s foster children. “They ended up with Kyle and Nathan because their mother, wasted out of her mind, stabbed her own father to death when he tried to stop her from taking the kids from his apartment.”

“What?!?” Erica’s jaw dropped back to the floor again.

“Yeah, Juanita was a real piece of work” Sydney picked up the story. “She got mad at her dad for giving a shit about his grandchildren, picked up a knife from the kitchen table and gutted him like a fish.”
“In front of the kids?” Erica’s pale face registered the shock she felt.

“No, thank God. At least neither of them have admitted that yet” Ashlyn clenched her jaw, and her words were terse. “Who knows though really? Once they finally feel safe enough with Kyle and Nate I’ll bet they’ll tell the truth, one way or the other.”

“The only good thing about that day was that Juanita od’d.” They were all surprised to see the hateful look on Whitney’s face as she added that little nugget of information to the story. “What? I hate that fucking bitch and I’m glad she’s dead. I won’t apologize for it either.”

“I’m with you Whit” Ali patted her arm. “I think Juanita dying is the best thing that ever happened to those kids.”

“Where’s their dad?” Erica spoke up after a long moment of tense breathing by everybody. “Not in the picture I assume?”

“Nobody knows” Ashlyn shook her head. “No fathers are listed on the birth certificates. I think it’s pretty safe to assume it was two different guys though.”

“What makes you so sure?” Brianna asked, unaware of this new information.

“Well, she was a junkie without a job” the keeper explained. “Both kids talked about all the men who were in and out of their apartment almost constantly. She traded her body for drugs and rent money and not much else.”

“Oh God, how awful…” Erica’s voice was a whisper.

“The good news is that she would take off and the kids would go to their grandfather’s. The bus stop was right in front of the supermarket where he worked” Ali filled in some more of the blanks. “He did his best to take care of them but he didn’t have much to give. There was nobody else but he and Juanita. Juanita’s mother had died when she was only 3 or 4 years old. Edgar, that’s the grandfather’s name too, he tried his best to raise her right but he had to work three jobs to make ends meet and he was never around much for Juanita. I’m not making excuses for her, but she had a tough life growing up too.”

“Oh my God” Erica whispered as she took in the harrowing details.

“She dropped out of high school right before graduation so she could give birth to her son, Edgar. The case-worker believes Edgar, at least, was conceived like most high school pregnancies…”

“In the backseat of a car” Ashlyn interrupted her wife, who frowned at the keeper and continued talking.

“At least it wasn’t forced prostitution or rape…”

“That we know of anyway” Ashlyn interrupted Ali again.

“It all went downhill from there” Sydney spoke now as Ali and Ashlyn stared at each other, both on edge because of the heart-breaking story they were telling. “Juanita never graduated, had a newborn son to try and take care of on her own, and no prospects of any kind. Kyle said that all the medical records show that things didn’t start getting bad for the kids until after Cristina was born, two years later.”

“Wait, so the state CPS people knew about what was going on the whole time?” Erica’s eyes were wide again.
“Yep. They ‘monitored the situation as best they could’” Whitney used air quotes as the disdain dripped from her tongue. “I wonder what it would actually have taken for them to have removed the kids four years ago before they had to go through all that hell?”

“She beat the crap out of them.” It was Brianna’s turn to speak through clenched teeth. “From what little the kids have told the therapists and shrinks, she beat them for no reason, whenever she could reach them, with whatever she happened to have in her hands.”

“Kyle called me in tears the first time they gave the kids their baths” Ali offered grimly. “He couldn’t even tell me what he had seen. He said he just couldn’t get the words to come out of his mouth.”

“So now they’re afraid of anybody who reminds them of their piece of shit mother, and that includes all of us” Ashlyn spit out angrily.

“Jesus Christ” Erica exhaled as she took in all of the devastating information. “And I’ve been feeling sorry for myself.”

“It helps put a lot of things in perspective” Sydney added. “For all of us. But that doesn’t mean you haven’t had a shitty couple of years E.”

“The good news for Edgar and Cristina, and us too really,” Ali said optimistically as she watched Deb run around trying to keep up with Dodge, “is that they seem to be ok with Grandmas now. So that’s a step in the right direction.”

“And someday, hopefully soon, they won’t be afraid of us and we can start loving them up too” Whitney smiled at the thought.

Her smile turned into an enormous grin when Ryan carried Becca up to the deck and the other side of the sliding glass door to show the lawyer her basket full of eggs. All the women gathered there smiled and congratulated Whitney on her girl’s first Easter success. Seemingly from nowhere, Dodge ran at the sliding glass door with his own goofy grin, Deb lagging behind him. Ryan reached down and grabbed him by the arm just as he was about to make contact with the glass.

“He was gonna stop, right babe?” Ali asked hesitantly as she waved at her son through the glass.

“We definitely should have put Koty on him” Ashlyn chuckled and waved too. “Josie is just gonna have to deal with it. Let’s switch them up before your mom passes out.”

As the kids periodically came up to the sliding glass door to show their moms their burgeoning egg baskets, Cristina and Edgar noticed and stopped what they were doing to watch.

“They’re showing their mamas all the eggs they’ve found so far” Nathan explained evenly when he realized what they were looking at.

Ken Krieger was helping little Maisy, who would be 4 in June, show Erica what was in her basket and Sandi Leroux was laughing as 4-1/2 year old James dumped his whole basket on the deck to show his mom all of his eggs. The five moms and Brianna were all smiling and laughing and waving at the kids on the deck and the Guerrero children stood and silently watched from the middle of the big backyard.

“Do you want to go up and show them your Easter baskets?” the pharmacist asked with an easy smile. “We can totally do that guys. But it’s ok if you don’t want to.” His voice was level and calm and didn’t reveal any tension or pressure. “They’re really nice ladies who would love to meet you, but it’s totally up to you guys.”
The two foster children watched for another few minutes as Dom brought Maddox up to the door and Vicki helped Lily show her moms all her eggs. The sound of Josie’s laughter filled the whole deck area as Koty spun her around while making sure not to spill any hard-won eggs in the process. All six women behind the glass were laughing at something one of the kids had done in front of them which made both Maddox and Lily giggle too. It was a pretty inviting scene, but maybe not for Edgar and Cristina. Maybe not quite yet.

“Hey, you know how Cristina is your sister” Kyle knelt next his little family and swung his camera around to his back so it wouldn’t be a distraction to any of them. He waited until Edgar nodded his head at him. “Well remember I was telling you about my little sister, Ali? She’s right up there right now watching all of us out here having a fun time. Can you see her? She’s the one with the purple dress on.”

“Yeah, I see her” Edgar answered cautiously as his eyes focused on the brunette behind the glass. He nudged his sister and pointed. “See her Cris?”

The little girl nodded and chewed on her bottom lip. The sliding door opened and Maddox ran inside and into Sydney’s arms. He was closely followed by Ryan handing Becca to Whitney, and Lily running to her mama. Ali, Erica, and Brianna were still standing there and the brunette caught her brother’s eye and cocked her head to the side in curiosity. They had a moment of silent communication and then Ali shooed everybody away from the door as calmly and discreetly as she could.

“Should we go say a quick hi?” Kyle asked optimistically with excitement in his voice. “We’ll just stand on the deck and wave and say hi. What do you think?”

“We can all go” Nathan offered as he straightened up and put his hand on his father’s shoulder. “Grandpa Bill and Tuba will come too.”

Neither foster dad would have pushed any farther than that. If either child had said no then that would have been it. But neither child said no. Instead, all five of them started walking towards the deck while Dodge, Drew, Cash, and James were still wandering around the yard looking for any last eggs they could find. Ken guided Maisy through the sliding door and then stood at the edge of the big, open deck, waiting to greet Edgar and Cristina once they got there. He waved at them and asked them if their baskets were full, just to give them something to think about during their walk. Sandi stood next to him, not sure if she should stay or go. Iris and Mike Christopher were in a similar situation on the other side of the deck, sitting in chairs and watching things unfold.

“Up” Cristina said and tugged on Nathan’s hand when they were about four feet from the steps up to the deck.

“Do you want a piggy back?” he grinned down at her and then lifted her onto his back when she nodded yes.

As their group climbed the three wide steps to the deck, Cash, Drew, Dodge and James all ran past them up into the middle of the deck. The two older boys sat down at the picnic table there and started to open up their eggs full of candy. Dodge and James went right towards the glass, at a slow, reasonable pace, and made faces at Ali who returned each goofy face with one of her own, kneeling down to be at their level.

Edgar giggled when he saw the interaction and Kyle’s face lit up with hope as he squeezed his husband’s arm. Before they could get to Ali though, Cristina recognized Iris and pointed at her from Nathan’s back.
“Abuela” she said softly and leaned her cheek against Nathan’s shoulder blade.

“That’s right” he confirmed carefully, without using the words ‘mother’ or ‘mom’ to identify her. “That’s Abuela. Hi Abuela,” he spoke to his mother who thought the name was a fine choice. “And hi Grandpa Ken.”

Ken and Iris both said hello, waved and smiled, careful to not do too much and overwhelm anybody. Nathan greeted Grandpa Mike next and then Grammy Sandi while Bill moved closer to the sliding glass door and Iris joined him, wrapping her arm around his waist and tucking herself into his side. Boss and Luna joined everybody on the deck and that helped keep both kids, but especially Cristina, calm.

“I sure do like your dress Cristina” Sandi complimented. “It just might be the prettiest one here today” she whispered that part and winked playfully at the little girl. “Just don’t tell your cousins I said that.”

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The kids had all been getting along famously so far that day. It was a good bunch and there were enough of them that chances were very good that at least one of them was going to be in a similar mood so you’d always have a comrade in arms for whatever you felt like doing. James was about as mellow a kid as anybody had ever seen in their lives. Dodge was as active and engaging as any kid in the whole world. And the other kids ran the gamut in between those two extremes. Cristina smiled bashfully at the attention and then giggled. Kyle took advantage of the good feelings to move closer to the sliding glass door. He had to suck in a breath when he looked up to see that his mom had come to stand with his sister on the other side of the glass. Deb had hit it off with both Edgar and Cristina when she had met them earlier that morning, and she had been her usual playful, awesome self while she was helping Dodge during the egg hunt too. The Guerreros had noticed her right away and responded the way most people responded to Deb Deb – with a smile and a hearty laugh. Kyle could feel Edgar start to tense up as they got about six feet from the door so he stopped and knelt down next to him, with his arm around the boy’s waist. Just as he was about to say something encouraging, Dodge did something wacky and ended up laying on his back with his basket of eggs spilled all around him. Both Deb and Ali laughed out loud and you could hear them through the glass as they made identical gestures – throwing their heads back and then bending over a little bit so they could slap their thighs with their free hands as they held onto each other with their other arms. Dodge laughed too and then his irresistible giggle took over, making everybody on the deck chuckle or laugh along with him.

Maybe it was all the laughter on both sides of the glass. Maybe it was the fact that Ali looked just like Deb and Deb Deb had already passed muster. Maybe it was the way Kyle’s entire body relaxed and seemed to emit love as he looked at his two favorite women in the world. It would be hard to pinpoint exactly what gave Edgar the courage to take two more steps towards the glass door and Dodge, but he did it. Kyle went with him, walking on his knees, and never took his arm away from the boy. Ali saw Edgar approach and knelt down too, unsure if that was a good thing to do or not. She felt comforted by Deb’s hand on her shoulder as she stood next to her, smiling down at the emotional introduction that was about to happen.

“Hi Edgar” Ali waved and gave him a small smile.

“This is my sister, Ali” Kyle tried to speak clearly even though his emotions were all over the place. “She’s younger than me, just like Cristina is younger than you” he smiled when the boy looked at him curiously. “Remember? We talked about that at home. She’s only one year younger than me though, instead of two years like you and your sister...”

“Oh yeah” the boy smiled as he remembered. He looked over his shoulder at his own sister, still
perched on Nathan’s back. “See Cris?”

Nathan felt the girl nod her head against his back as he watched Edgar turn around again to face the glass door and wave back at Ali. It was a little tentative but it was definitely a wave and Ali had never been more happy to receive one.

“It looks like you did a good job” she pointed at his basket. “Are you sure you’ve never done this before?” she teased him, cocking her head to the side and chucking.

Edgar blushed and looked down shyly while Kyle squeezed his waist and giggled. Dodge had sat up by this time and begun putting his eggs back into his own basket while this was all going on around him. Nathan moved forward and squatted down to help his nephew, still with Cristina on his back. The little girl looked over his shoulder at the glass door and the smiling brunette behind it. She watched Ali carefully, clutching Nathan’s neck but not panicking yet. Edgar stepped to the side and helped pick Dodge’s eggs up, happy for the distraction. He was a shy little boy and the attention he was garnering was starting to be too much. Ali and Kyle shared a moment of eye contact, both fighting back tears of relief and happiness. And then Ali saw Cristina watching her. They all knew Edgar was going to be the easier of the two to break through to, even though he had suffered more abuse at their mother’s hands. His two extra years had made a lot more things make sense to him, including his own emotions and fears. Ali met Cristina’s eyes and gave the girl her own little wave. She ducked her head down behind Nathan’s shoulder and Ali frowned, discouraged. But only a few seconds later, Cristina poked her head back up again. Ali waved again and this time the little girl stayed put. She didn’t return the wave but she didn’t look away either.

“Cristina” Kyle turned to the girl and touched her back as he knelt next to his husband. “This is my sister Ali. She’s one of your aunties” he spoke carefully again. “She’s also one of the nicest people in the whole world and I hope, one day, when you’re ready, that you’ll find that out for yourself when you get to know her better.”

“Hi Cristina” Ali waved again. “It’s nice to meet you sweetheart. I’m so glad you’re here to celebrate Easter with us. Did you have fun finding the eggs?”

The little girl kept her eyes on Ali but didn’t say anything. Kyle could feel that she wasn’t freaking out or anything, his hand on her back told him she was relatively calm. After what felt like forever but was really only a minute, she nodded her head ever so slightly and then smiled when she saw Ali’s face break into an even bigger smile.

“Great job honey” Kyle praised the girl and pressed a kiss into her white stocking-covered leg. “I’m so proud of you.”

The rest of the day went on as all of the Krieger/Dwyer holiday celebrations usually did. It was a warmer than usual day and there was no snow on the ground so the soccer game was particularly entertaining. Edgar really enjoyed the soccer and Kyle kicked himself for not figuring out about that common interest sooner and taking advantage of it. But better late than never. They ate a ton of good food and laughed as the kids tore through more candy than they really should have and negotiated some pretty impressive trades among the ten of them. Baby Becca didn’t participate in the trading but Ryan acted as her proxy and did what he could to keep everybody happy. The five moms and Brianna kept their distance from Edgar and Cristina as much as possible, gathering in Sydney’s family room for most of the day and letting their kids come to them when they needed them. Everyone was starting to get comfortable with how well it had been going and they got cocky. Sydney had jumped up to help James get something from the fridge and didn’t check the kitchen before running into it, loudly telling her son to wait for her before he pulled the whole shelf down on himself as he reached for a sippy cup. The large kitchen island that separated the rest of
the kitchen from the refrigerator and the sink and a few more cabinets and countertops, was blocking Sydney’s view. Cristina was standing there, on the other side of the island, waiting for Nathan to come help her wash her hands in the kitchen sink. When the little girl saw Sydney come running and speaking loudly towards her, her whole body started shaking and she backed up into the counter trying to disappear into it. Tears streamed down her face as her eyes grew to the size of saucers and filled with terror. Cristina’s mouth opened as Sydney came even closer, finally reaching the fridge and James who was completely oblivious to what was going on with the girl standing a few feet away from him. Nathan entered the kitchen from the living room at the same time Sydney saw Cristina and realized what was happening. The little girl, mouth open as if she was screaming, never made a sound.

“Oh shit...” the coach whispered under her breath when she saw the terrified little girl. “I’m sorry if I scared you baby girl” she softened her voice, dropped to her knees and opened her arms for James to come into as she wiggled her fingers at him. He was irked because he still didn’t have his sippy cup. “It’s ok Cristina” Sydney cooed and smiled. “I didn’t see you there. I didn’t mean to scare you. I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Oh God” Nathan choked out as he got close enough to see the situation in front of the kitchen sink. He walked steadily towards Cristina as Ali’s voice came into the room from the family room, asking Sydney what was taking so long. “Just stay there Al, we’re all good in here” he tried to keep his voice calm.

“I was running in here because this little guy was about to make a big mess in the fridge and maybe even hurt himself at the same time” Sydney continued to talk to Cristina, trying to explain why she had been moving so quickly and speaking so loudly to her young son. She knew the girl was 4 and James was 4-1/2 so they could totally relate to each other. “See, he’s your age and he still needs some help with big things like the fridge” she nodded at the appliance between them. “Just like you still need some help with the big sink” she nodded above the girl and winked, hoping it would somehow make her stop crying.

Ali couldn’t help herself and she carefully peeked around the corner from the family room. Her view was blocked by the counter island in the middle of the room. All she could see was Sydney, kneeling with James in her arms at the very end of the island, and Nathan’s anguished face looking down from the other end of the island at what she assumed must be Cristina. If it had been Edgar she could have seen at least the top of his head above the counter island.

“It’s ok Cristina” Nathan’s voice was quiet and soothing as he crouched down beside her. He knew not to touch her until she made the first move. It was very much like Carol’s PTSD episode during Christmas all those years ago. You just had to wait for them to come back to you a bit before you could engage with them or try to help them very much. Nathan just kept telling her over and over again that she was safe and that Sydney wasn’t going to hurt her. Sydney hadn’t wanted to leave the little girl all alone but now that her foster father was there to comfort her, the coach thought it would be best to just take James and leave the room. She inched backwards on her knees, afraid of startling Cristina with any big movements.

“Nate’s here with you now honey, so I’m going to take this little guy and go back to the family room” she explained, still smiling but unable to keep the worry off of her expressive face too. “I’m so sorry baby girl.”

It took several minutes longer, but the little girl finally responded to Nathan’s voice. She turned her head, her face red and splotchy from all the tears that had been falling down her cheeks, and walked the two steps into his arms. She buried her head in his chest and let him wrap her up in his
strong, safe arms. They had come such a long way that day but it was obvious to everyone that there was still much to overcome before the Guerreros would be ready to freely join the bigger Krieger-Kimball family. Nobody was giving up and nobody was getting discouraged. But the startling reality of just how damaged both kids were by their brutal first few years of life was impossible to ignore. The brief moments on the deck with Ali were something to start with, a good first step, that would hopefully help them take the next step and then the one after that. Ali and Kyle both shared the same dream for that year. They wanted Edgar and Cristina to be able to come back up for Thanksgiving and Christmas and be comfortable in the same house with all of the moms. No personal contact or shared moments or anything like that – just the ability to be in the same house and not have episodes like the one that ended their Easter gathering. The Krieger siblings did everything they could over the next seven months to make their shared dream come true.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sad (and bitter) that Ali's not at January USWNT camp but how sweet is it that Pinoe posted that IG story of she and Ash Facetiming with Ali?? So cute. Sigh...
Ashlyn and Ali had misread each other’s moods occasionally over the years when it came to sex, but not very often. It was the one constant that always seemed to ground them as a couple, as a partnership, as a team. Neither of them could remember the last time they hadn’t felt tired, but they were sure it was before Josie had been born. Being tired hadn’t stopped their sex life, it had only slowed it down. By the time the twins were almost 3-years old, March 2026, Ashlyn and Ali had sex about once a week. Sometimes it was twice a week, but the bare minimum, they had come to agree upon without even discussing it, was once a week. If six days had gone by since they last connected that way, one of them always made sure they didn’t stretch past day seven. But since Meg’s runaway episode in the middle of March, it had been a struggle to connect in the bedroom. Ali had even tried shower sex, the week after Easter, to catch her wife in a good mood, but that hadn’t worked either.

“What are you doing?” Ashlyn asked irritably when she felt her wife’s arms slide around her waist from behind while she showered.

“Wow, it has been a long time then if I need to explain what I’m after” Ali chuckled and kissed her keeper’s shoulder blade. The annoyance in Ashlyn’s voice stung but the brunette swallowed her hurt and worry and kept going. “I think we’ve got about twenty minutes before their show ends...”

“You know that never works” Ashlyn sighed and Ali couldn’t tell if it was in frustration or defeat. The fact that the blonde hadn’t stopped washing her hair was not a good sign though. “Al, come on...” It was definitely frustration and it was directed at Ali and not at having insufficient time for a quickie in the shower. “Just let me finish up in here” Ashlyn pulled her wife’s arms away from her stomach and stuck her head under the shower spray, effectively ending the conversation just like that.

Ali dropped her arms and stepped back against the glass wall of the shower, hoping she had misinterpreted the obvious dismissal. After a few more seconds she had to admit defeat and then quickly stepped out of the shower without another word. That was the last straw for the brunette. She wasn’t going to let whatever was bothering Ashlyn fester into something too big to handle. The keeper had been moody and distant and irritable for three long weeks and instead of getting better, it was getting worse. Ali had traced it back to Meg’s runaway weekend but thought they had all processed that and handled it and moved on. Meg had stayed at the big old house for the weekend, but she had been grounded and punished by limited access to her electronic devices while she was there. The big punishment that Hannah and Ashlyn had decided on was that the teen couldn’t go down to Florida with the Kriegers for her April vacation as they had planned. Instead, she would be grounded at home in DC and only allowed to go to Satellite Beach for the final weekend of her break, which was when Tammye and Carol’s wedding was taking place. It was a harsh punishment and Ali had been surprised that Ashlyn was the one pushing for it. Hannah had proposed grounding her for the four weeks between her runaway weekend and April vacation, and allowing her to make the trip as planned. But Ashlyn didn’t think grounding was enough. She wanted Meg to really miss out on something that meant a lot to her. The idea that the girl could have come to
harm during her ill-conceived adventure still haunted the keeper and she felt like she had to do something serious to make sure Meg knew just how deadly her actions could have been.

“Alright ladies, it’s good to see you” Mattie smiled at them both as they sat on the therapist’s couch Tuesday morning of the following week. It had been five days since the failed shower sex and it was five days before they were scheduled to fly to Florida. “I’m sorry we missed each other last month Ashlyn” she added innocently but knowing she was probably throwing the blonde under the bus with her wife.

Ali set her jaw and tried to tamp down the angry words rising in her throat when she heard the therapist’s remarks.

“Yeah, sorry about that” Ashlyn looked down at her hands in her lap. “I meant to reschedule...”

“Why did you miss our appointment?”

“We had a...family emergency” she offered limply.

Whenever Ashlyn was told by her wife that they had an appointment to go talk to Mattie she usually responded in one of two ways. She was belligerent and angry about feeling ambushed, or she was simply resigned and morose. Ali never knew which one they were going to get and Ashlyn’s reaction to the actual news of the appointment itself didn’t always act as a bellwether. This time when the brunette told her wife she had made them an appointment with Mattie, Ashlyn threw down the laundry basket and stormed up to her studio without saying a word. That made Ali think she was going to be difficult and combative about the actual appointment. But now it seemed like the keeper had swung back to melancholy resignation. Mattie knew the two scenarios well and was able to work with them no matter what mood Ashlyn was in.

“That was over three weeks ago” the therapist spoke evenly, trying not to seem like she was attacking Ashlyn the minute she stepped into the appointment. “Our next scheduled appointment is this Friday...”

“Yeah, I know...I just forgot to reschedule it. I’m sorry” Ashlyn lifted her eyes to meet Mattie’s and was relieved to see nothing but concern in them.

Ashlyn had just switched back to monthly sessions with Mattie in February, after her issues with her health and turning 40 last Fall had been processed and taken care of. The fact that she missed the first monthly appointment and didn’t come back in right away meant that she hadn’t seen her therapist since the middle of February. Two long months ago. It was just bad luck. Her March appointment had been scheduled for the Friday that began with her driving to South Station to wait for Meg’s train to arrive. The keeper hadn’t willfully or mindfully skipped it.

“It’s alright” the therapist smiled at her. “I just want to make sure you’re not avoiding me.”

“No doc, I’m really sorry. It’s just been...busy and stressful and I was definitely planning to come see you this Friday” she replied sincerely.

Ali hadn’t said anything or even looked at her wife while she apologized to Mattie. But knowing that Ashlyn hadn’t seen her therapist in two months explained a lot. The brunette chastised herself for not paying better attention to her keeper’s schedule. They shared a calendar and Ali had seen the appointment back on March 20th. She just never followed up to make sure Ashlyn rescheduled it. But that was one of their biggest issues as a couple and it always had been. Ashlyn hated when Ali treated her like one of the kids. Even before they had kids she didn’t like when the brunette coddled her. It was their wife vs agent debate all over again. It was the ‘walk beside me and help
me up when I stumble’ thing. Ali tried really hard not to treat the blonde like one of their kids and it took conscious effort on her part not to handle her schedule while she was mapping out everything for their children at the same time. Honestly, she was thankful that she didn’t have to do it because she had her hands full with the four little Kriegers who depended on her keeping their schedules straight.

“Ali, are you with us?” Mattie asked, interrupting the brunette’s mind working overtime.

“Yes, sorry” she shook her head and gave her an apologetic half-smile. “What was the question?”

They spent the next thirty minutes talking about the change in Ashlyn’s behavior and attitude and demeanor over the past four weeks. Ali explained what had happened with Meg but was careful not to share her diagnosis. Mattie didn’t like them to analyze each other while they were there until she had had a chance to do it herself first. It was a fair point and they both honored the request as best they could. Sometimes a reason or a solution popped into one of their heads as they were all working through something and they blurted it out. Mattie was wonderful with them both and it had been a great asset that she had known them and been working with them both for so long. This is exactly what the couple had had in mind all those years ago when they started seeing her. Neither of them could fool Mattie for a second because she knew them both so well. Ali described a few examples of her wife’s short temper and anger, specifically talking about how angry she had been at Easter every time anybody brought up Edgar and Cristina’s mother. They had all been outraged by the horrible circumstances surrounding the foster kids but Ashlyn’s level of agitation had been significantly worse than everybody else’s.

“Alright, well it seems like there’s been a lot going on” Mattie looked down at the notes she had been making as the couple talked about the last four weeks. “Is there anything else either of you want to add to this before we move on to possible explanations?”

The disconnect between the two was obvious by the way they were sitting on the couch. They both sat facing Mattie with their hands in their laps, not looking at or touching the other. It wasn’t hostile or anything like that. They just weren’t connected. Ali glanced quickly at her wife and then spoke.

“Now that I know she hasn’t seen you in so long everything makes more sense” she began cautiously. “She’s been very irritable and distant and she’s had a very short temper with all of us, even the kids…”

“I haven’t been that bad” Ashlyn countered, defensively.

“Honey, you made both twins cry at the supermarket and then left your cart full of food behind and stormed out” Ali’s voice was soft and tender as she finally reached over and put her hand on Ashlyn’s thigh.

“They were impossible that morning. Ask Anton, he’ll tell you how awful they were…” she defended herself again, referencing the deli and butcher guy that had been all of the Krieger kids’ favorite person at the supermarket for years. The fact that he always gave them two slices of cheese each certainly helped their opinion of him. “It was like they were trying to push all of my buttons and make me lose my temper!”

Ali kept her hand in place but looked at Mattie who just nodded thoughtfully at the outburst. The brunette knew that meant to keep going, so she did. She dropped her eyes and blushed a little as she spoke.

“She hasn’t been interested in sex…”
“What do you mean?” Ashlyn’s face turned red and she looked angrily at her wife for divulging something so private. “You don’t know what I’m thinking about or what’s going on inside my head” she replied quickly but without the anger this time.

“Ok” Ali bit back her own anger and kept her cool. “She hasn’t been interested in sex with me then...”

“Oh come on, that makes it sound like I’m having sex with somebody else” the keeper protested, looking at Mattie like she was a referee who could call a foul on the play.

“Are you having sex with someone else Ashlyn?” the therapist asked evenly. She was almost sure the answer was no but she wanted to see if this prod would bring the couple to more productive common ground.

“No!” they both answered immediately and definitively, looking right at their interrogator.

“Ok, well that’s good to hear” Mattie smiled and then busied herself with her notes for a few seconds.

Ali and Ashlyn looked at each other and grinned sheepishly. The blonde’s heart had swelled when she heard her wife answer the question as resolutely as she had answered it herself. There was the trust and the faith that had always held them together, on display again, just in case they needed a reminder. Ashlyn covered her wife’s hand with her own and squeezed it.

“You did that on purpose” the keeper challenged the therapist with a smirk.

“Maybe” Mattie winked. “I never like to manipulate answers here but I was hoping to remind you both of what was still working for you, even though you’re going through a tough time right now.”

“So, what’s wrong with me this time?” Ashlyn asked with a heavy sigh as Ali intertwined their fingers.

“You know I don’t like that phrase” Mattie corrected with her own small smile. “There’s nothing wrong with you Ashlyn. I think you’re suffering from another bout of PTSD. Or, rather, you’re having a flare-up of your usually well-controlled PTSD.”

“Really?” Ashlyn asked, her face scrunched up in confusion.

“Really. The episode with Meg was the trigger and it was just unfortunate that we haven’t seen each other before now...”

“I’m sorry Doc, how many times do I have to say it?” Ashlyn blew out a frustrated breath.

“I’m not trying to make you feel guilty” she clarified. “I’m just stating a fact. If we had seen each other a few weeks ago we could have talked about what happened with Meg and your reaction to it before it got to this point. None of this is your fault Ashlyn” she leaned across and touched the keeper’s knee.

“But I’ve been doing my exercises when I feel angry and out of control” Ashlyn replied, confusion still clouding her face. “Nothing changed so I figured that wasn’t the problem” she shrugged.

“That’s good to hear that you’re still able to use those exercises when necessary” she nodded approvingly. “That’s very good work Ashlyn. But I think this time the PTSD is more severe than some of the lower-level things you deal with on a weekly or even sometimes daily basis. Are your exercises still working in those types of situations?”
Ashlyn used her relaxation and breathing exercises any time she felt like her anger or sorrow or anxiety were out of her normal control. Any time something scared or worried her enough, like if she went to pick up Drew from school and he wasn’t where he was supposed to be. For those few moments where her imagination went to horrible places, the keeper would start doing a deep breathing exercise and then a conscious image exercise. It usually only took her a couple of minutes to get her anxiety back under control and sometimes the situation would resolve itself before she even completed one exercise. For example, Drew would appear two minutes late, which was completely normal, and she wouldn’t have to finish the exercise. It didn’t happen that often. She was usually able to control her reaction just with her own willpower. She would tell herself to relax and just wait a few minutes before getting upset. But every once in a while she started to feel herself winding up and that’s when she would do her exercises. She was doing just what she was supposed to be doing, and had been functioning very well because of it, for the past five years since Josie’s harrowing birth.

“Yeah, that’s why I didn’t think this was PTSD. I guess I didn’t really think much about what this was, to be honest. I was just trying to get through it” she dropped her eyes again, ashamed that she needed more help.

“Honey, I didn’t recognize it either” Ali offered softly with another squeeze of her hand. “You’ve been doing great up until this. Don’t beat yourself up, please babe” she leaned over and kissed her wife’s shoulder.

“The event with Meg was much more severe than the usual things that start to get you worried, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yeah, definitely” Ashlyn looked at the therapist again. “I was terrified. And I was so mad at her...” she sniffled as tears started to form in her eyes. “She could have been killed. She could have been abducted and...and...raped...” she covered her mouth with her free hand as the tears started to slip down her cheeks.

“That’s right” Mattie agreed evenly. “But she wasn’t. Ashlyn, she wasn’t hurt. She’s ok and she’s safe. Remember that. All of those frightening possibilities didn’t actually happen.”

“Yeah” she nodded and sniffled again, wiping the tears from her face with the hand that had been over her mouth. “That’s right. I know that” she kept nodding as if she was trying to talk herself into believing it.

“I think the reason this is bothering you so much, even now, is because it was one of your children at risk again. That’s every parent’s worst nightmare. It’s not just you. But you’ve had a couple of close calls already with your kids so it makes perfect sense that you’re more sensitive to it. I don’t think there’s anything going on here that’s new or that you can’t handle.”

“Really?” the blonde gave Mattie a bewildered but hopeful look.

“Really?” she smiled back and patted Ashlyn’s knee again. “We’ll have to find some new exercises that might work better for you when a really tough situation like this comes up. But I know you can do this Ashlyn. You’re so strong and you’re such a fighter. Your PTSD will not defeat you.”

The three women talked for several more minutes about exercises and other possible solutions that would help the keeper get past this latest hurdle. They talked about Meg’s punishment and Tammye and Carol’s upcoming wedding. They talked about Edgar and Cristina and then tried to figure out a good approach to helping the children conquer their fear of ‘moms’. They went back and touched base on the issues that had come up last year but had been resolved, for the most part. Ali’s ongoing ultrasounds and bloodwork as she hunted for the ovarian cancer they knew was
lurking somewhere in the family dna. Sam Machado and his dwindling presence in their lives.

“It sounds like once you told your friends and family about Sam it really got easier to just file it away for you both. Is that a fair assessment?”

“Yeah, absolutely” Ashlyn nodded. “For me anyway. I hated not telling people, especially your mom and dad” she turned to look at Ali. “I know how much they worry about you, you know, based on what happened in the past…”

“You mean with Emily?” Mattie clarified as she studied Ali’s face.

“Yes, I know” the brunette nodded and smiled at her wife. “They both made big promises to themselves and to each other that they would never sit idly by and let somebody hurt me again. I hated not telling them too.”

“What made you change your minds about sharing the truth?”

“Well, it got to the point where we were both, like, why are we lying to our people just to protect his feelings?” Ashlyn offered with a shrug.

“It seemed ridiculous when we looked at it that way” Ali added, enjoying her keeper’s thumb rubbing gentle circles on the back of her hand. “Why the hell does he deserve protection for what he did? We were so worried our friends and family would treat him differently if they found out and then we just realized, why the hell shouldn’t they treat him differently? He was a jerk and he behaved horribly and there are consequences for that behavior.”

“I think our main focus at the time was on Ethan and making his life stay the same, you know, so he didn’t have to suffer because of what his idiot father did. But as we started to see less and less of Sam it hit us that we just wanted him gone from our lives. And then it was easy to not really care what our people thought about him” Ashlyn explained.

“They just can’t say anything about him in front of Ethan” Ali added quickly. “That’s the only rule. And, honestly, we don’t talk about him anymore” she shrugged again. “Once we told everybody they stopped asking where he was or what had happened and then the whole thing just sort of went away. We had made it worse by trying to keep it quiet, we just didn’t realize it right away” she looked at Ashlyn who smiled back at her.

“And how often do you see him these days? At school and sports and things like that?”

“Not too often at school” Ali replied. “Sometimes, but it’s not like we avoid him or anything. We just go about our business and he goes about his.”

“Sports is tougher because Ethan and Drew are on the same teams so we always see Sam at games. He coaches their little league baseball team…”

“And we coach the soccer and basketball teams” Ali finished her sentence. “But we’re all pretty mature about everything. We can have a civil conversation when we need to, especially in front of the kids.”

“And how about the rest of the family?” Mattie asked. “How did they take it?”

“Oh man” Ashlyn laughed and Ali joined her with a chuckle of her own. “I thought her dad was gonna knock him out the first time they saw each other at basketball back in January” the keeper grinned.
“Well, we had just told him what happened, we waited until after the holidays and then told people as we saw them” Ali clarified. “In hindsight, we probably should have waited until right after a game so Dad had a whole week to process it.”

“Oh Mattie, you know I’m not big on fighting or any of that posturing bullshit” Ashlyn’s dimple had appeared as her grin kept growing. “But I swear I really wanted Ken to punch him in the face. Just, without even saying anything. Just walk up like they were still friendly and then boom!”

“Some unfulfilled fantasies of your own I presume?” the therapist quirked her eyebrow at the blonde.

“Absolutely. I’m proud of the way I handled myself that day, for the most part” Ashlyn looked quickly at her wife. “But yeah, I really wish I had decked him. I can’t help it.”

“Well it’s very commendable that you didn’t. That’s a wonderful example of the strength of your willpower Ashlyn” Mattie praised her as she closed her notebook and looked at the clock. “Alright, we’re out of time. I’ll see you in two weeks” she nodded at the keeper, emphasizing their decision to go back to more frequent appointments until this latest bout of PTSD had been conquered. “Have a good vacation and enjoy the wedding.”

As almost always happened after one of their couples therapy appointments, Ashlyn and Ali felt closer to each other than they had in a long time. Once Ali had put her hand on her wife’s leg during the appointment, they had remained in touch the entire time. They held and caressed each other’s hand as they shared their fears and concerns with their therapist. They had both been so relieved to find out what was really bothering the blonde, that there was almost a feeling of celebration as they left her office. They dropped their hands but only so they could wrap their arms around each other instead, walking side by side through the maze of hallways and finally out to the enormous parking lot. They had taken their time, strolling along and enjoying the closeness that had been missing from their relationship for four long weeks. It was 11am and Ali had planned to go into the office for a few hours, but now that they were approaching her truck she didn’t want to go anywhere that would mean letting go of her beloved wife. Ashlyn must have sensed her hesitation because she steered them away from the truck and over towards her new Jeep that was parked in the far corner of the lot, way in the back row.

“Babe...” the brunette whined but couldn’t keep the tiny smile from her lips.

“I don’t want to let you go yet” Ashlyn answered honestly and sweetly. “Will you sit with me for a few minutes? I just...I need to feel you” she squeezed Ali’s side and hugged her tighter as they kept walking through the cool and damp April morning air.

“Why did you park all the way out here?” she asked as she leaned her head against her keeper’s strong shoulder.

“I got here early and I just wanted some privacy. I just wanted to try and think.”

The parking lot was huge and it went around all four sides of the gigantic building. There were retail spaces and offices and tiny food shoppes and even a mini post office in the enormous complex. That meant there were loading docks and dumpsters and tractor trailers scattered around the parking lot in different areas. Several idle tractor trailers were parked at the end of the parking lot that was farthest away from the building and that’s where Ashlyn’s Jeep was located. It was nestled in between an industrial size dumpster and a big rig.

“I can’t believe you parked your new baby way out here with all these big trucks” Ali’s eyes went wide when her eyes finally located the shiny new Jeep.
“Gramps always used to say these big rig drivers were the best on the road. He always trusted them ten times as much as all the idiots driving their own cars around” Ashlyn leaned over and kissed her wife’s cheek, loving the feeling of her soft, warm skin against her lips.

“Well, I guess if Gramps says it’s ok then it must be ok” Ali smiled into the kiss and wrapped her other arm around Ashlyn’s front, giving her a side hug and squeezing her hard. “God, I love you so much Ashlyn. Thank you for coming with me today. I know you didn’t really want to...”

“Hey” the keeper stopped when they got to the passenger side door and turned to face her beautiful brunette. “I’m sorry...I hate that I have these problems and I swear to God I try so hard to take care of them. I’m so sorry baby” her eyes were trained on her favorite cinnamon ones and, as usual, she saw nothing in them but love and faith and concern. “I promise I’ll get better.”

“I know you will” Ali nodded, holding her wife’s intense gaze. “But remember I’m always here if you need help, with any part of it. Always, my love” she leaned up and gave her a slow, sweet kiss as they held each other around their waists.

“I’m sorry about...”

But Ali didn’t let her finish. She brought their lips together in another kiss, this one deeper and longer and filled with all of the different emotions they had just been surrounded by for an hour. Fear, trust, love, worry, anxiety, lust, guilt, peace, remorse, anger, frustration, relief, happiness, and more love washed over them both as they embraced and kissed with Ashlyn leaning against her wife and pinning her to the Jeep.

“Damn baby” Ashlyn gasped out when they broke for air.

“Apology accepted” Ali giggled as she moved a hand up to the back of her keeper’s neck. “God I’ve missed you” she confessed, still catching her breath, as she nuzzled into Ashlyn’s neck.

“Was that what finally did it?” the blonde asked seriously, still holding her girl in her arms and leaning them both against the passenger door. “When I turned down shower sex...is that when you knew I was in trouble?”

“Oh sweetheart, if I’d been smarter I would have known a lot sooner” Ali pulled her head back so they were face to face again. She slowly moved her finger across her wife’s lips, side to side, as she studied the tiny smile lines at the corners of her mouth. “But yeah, that’s when I knew we had to do something” she smiled shyly and closed her eyes when she felt Ashlyn reach up and kiss her forehead.

“Me too” the blonde admitted softly, bringing her face back down so they were nose to nose in their embrace. “Even in all my confusion and frustration, part of me knew turning down shower sex was the act of a desperate, borderline-delusional woman.”

Ali hesitated with her eyes still closed, not sure what to say next. Ashlyn was being surprisingly serious, far more than the celebratory situation called for. It wasn’t until a minute later when she opened her eyes and saw the playful smirk on her keeper’s face.

“You big jerk” she giggled and playfully swatted Ashlyn’s shoulder as the blonde laughed. “Just see if I ever offer you shower sex again” she threatened with a quirk of her eyebrow.

“Oh you love me” Ashlyn teased and began nibbling on her wife’s neck as she kept giggling and pretending to try to get away. “You’ll come back for shower sex if you get desperate enough” she mumbled against the sensitive skin just inside the collar of Ali’s blouse, near her pulse-point.
“Oh please” the brunette huffed out with another swat. “I’d better not get that desperate again” she threatened with a warning look that quickly melted into a loving smile as Ashlyn brought her lips back up to meet it.

They kissed again, this time with more heat behind it. Ashlyn pushed her tongue inside Ali’s warm, inviting mouth and enjoyed the moan it elicited from the brunette. They deepened the kiss, neither one sure exactly who had made the first move and not really caring, until it turned into a low-level make-out session.

“Mmmmmm” Ashlyn hummed as they came up for air, both smiling and looking guilty but happy. “How long has it been anyway?” she asked in a soft but urgent voice.

“2-1/2 weeks” Ali panted out and moved a hand to her wife’s ass and gave it a soft squeeze.

“So the shower sex was at 2 weeks?” Ashlyn pressed her leg in between the brunette’s, happy she was wearing slacks instead of a skirt so she could put pressure right up near her crotch.

“Stop bringing that up” Ali bit her keeper’s earlobe.

“Ow! Ok, ok” the blonde let out a low chuckle.

“But yes, 2 weeks without you was more than I could take” she breathed out against Ashlyn’s neck, up near her ear.

“So did you take care of yourself then?” she applied more pressure to Ali’s core with her thigh.

“Fuck babe” the brunette swallowed hard as she felt her body respond to the contact, a gush between her legs and a shiver up her spine. “No” she husked out as she pulled Ashlyn’s body into her even more.

“I think we need to fix that right now” the keeper said hotly as she licked her wife’s ear and sucked on the lobe there.

Just then there was a loud bang as one of the big trucks dropped its tailgate down by the loading dock next to the building. Both women jumped and suddenly were reminded of their public location. Ashlyn could see the whiskey-colored eyes start to clear and focus and she spoke quickly to keep her girl from snapping out of the spell they had both fallen under.

“Here, get in” she instructed as she lifted the handle of the back door, never letting her other arm leave Ali’s waist.

“Ummm, nope” she made her judging duck face as she looked into the Jeep and saw the two carseats attached to the backseat.

“Oh shit” Ashlyn muttered when she followed her wife’s eyes and saw the problem. “Just, hold on. Give me two seconds...”

The blonde sprang into action and disconnected both seats and tossed them into the third row on top of the other carseats attached there as well. She took her big hands and quickly wiped any kid debris that had been left on the backseat onto the floor and was standing back in front of her wife in less than a minute.

“I’ve never seen you get carseats out of a vehicle that fast before” Ali challenged with a hand on her hip and a lift of her eyebrow.
“Well, maybe I’ve never had the proper incentive before” the keeper wagged her eyebrows and tried to pull her wife towards the open door to the backseat. “Come on baby, it’ll be fun” she smirked wickedly and Ali felt her resolve starting to melt.

“Are you kidding me?” the brunette looked around them, wondering if the truck driver in the big rig next to them was asleep in the back of his cab or not. “I am not having sex with you in this parking lot...”

Ashlyn cut her off with another deep, passionate kiss. She knew Ali was just as worked up as she was, she just had to remind her. The keeper slipped her hand inside her wife’s cinched trenchcoat and found her breast buried beneath her push-up bra, blouse and suit jacket. She tried to move the suit jacket aside and had almost managed it when Ali pulled back from the kiss.

“Don’t you dare pop that button off” she warned, breathlessly, and reached inside her own coat to unbutton her suit jacket. She pulled up her blouse, untucking it from her pants, while she was in there as Ashlyn kissed her again, hard. “Mmmmmmm...” she moaned in reply.

The keeper guided them towards the open door and turned them so Ali could back in, struggling with her long trenchcoat beneath her on the seat.

“Just take it off” Ashlyn urged seductively as she moved her hands to start unbuttoning and unzipping her wife’s suit pants. She took advantage of Ali lifting her hips to get the coat out of the way and quickly pulled her pants and panties down at the same time. “Jesus Christ you’re gorgeous” she exhaled while the brunette wrestled her coat out from underneath her, keeping it on but bringing all of the garment up to the middle of her back and letting it pile up on the floor to her left, next to the seat.

“Shut the door!” Ali whisper-yelled and then giggled. “Oh my God I can’t believe we’re doing this” she rolled her eyes but couldn’t keep the mischievous grin off of her face.

Ashlyn removed her wife’s low heels and freed her left leg from her panties and pants and then spread both legs out wide as she licked her lips in anticipation. Ali’s right leg was bent up at the knee and pressed against the back of the seat, clothes bunched at her ankle. The keeper took her own jacket off and wadded it up as a pillow behind Ali’s back which was half-propped up against the opposite side door.

“Mmmmmmm, you’re nice and wet” she smirked again at the brunette as she got into place. “I knew you were ready for this...”

Ashlyn didn’t waste any time. She got as comfortable as she could, which was really not very at all, and pressed her face between her wife’s legs.

“Oh fuck” Ali moaned and brought both hands to her own breasts, fondling and squeezing and pinching through her clothes while her wife’s tongue made her feel wonderful things. “I’ve been ready for 2-1/2 weeks” she groaned and then winked at her wife when her hazel eyes met her own.

The keeper was kneeling on the floor of the Jeep wishing she had thought to move the front passenger seat up so she had more room. Those thoughts only lingered for a second though, the scent and taste of her feast quickly becoming the only thing she cared about. Ali was definitely ready. Her silky folds were drenched from all of the passion dripping out of her hot center. Ashlyn moved her tongue quickly and forcefully, licking every part of her beautiful brunette’s sweetest flesh and then hungrily lapping up more freshly spilled juices.

“So fucking wet baby...shit, that’s sexy...” the keeper mumbled against her clit as she slid her
mouth up.

“Oh, your seat” Ali tried to lift her hips up in a vain attempt to protect the new leather material that her wife normally went to great lengths to keep clean.

“Relax” Ashlyn pushed her hips back down and reached one hand up to play with her wife’s breasts. “This is not the kind of mess I’ll ever mind. Not ever” she purred out just before thrusting her tongue deep inside her wife’s pulsing core. “Fuck, you taste incredible” she groaned and dove back in for more, thrusting her tongue fast and deep as she grabbed at Ali’s bare ass with her other hand.

The brunette finally got frustrated with her bra and blouse and just pulled them up above her breasts so her fingers, as well as Ashlyn’s, could pinch and tug on her nipples. Ali could just see the top of the parking lot through the windshield from her hunched down position. She tried not to look to the left, afraid of what she might see. The windows were starting to fog up a bit as their breathing got hotter and heavier.

“Hey, stay with me beautiful” Ashlyn encouraged when she noticed her wife starting to get distracted. “Slide down a little bit more” she suggested as she stood back up on her knees and pulled the brunette’s body down so it was flatter on the seat bottom. “That’s better” she smirked again and wiped some of Ali’s juices off of her face as they locked eyes. The desire was still there and the whiskey color was darkening again. “Now I can reach you better” she cooed as she brought her face close to her wife’s again.

They kissed each other hungrily and Ali held the back of her wife’s head in one hand as she reached down and grabbed at her jean-covered ass with the other. Ashlyn had moved up to the middle of the seat, still kneeling on the floor, and she began squeezing and scratching at the brunette’s left breast with her right hand as they continued kissing. It had been kissing that had started this whole thing in the first place and Ashlyn regretted not keeping it up as soon as they got into the backseat. She made up for it now though. She let her strong tongue explore every inch of Ali’s eager mouth. She tugged on her lip with her teeth and then sucked on the brunette’s tongue hard. Their mouths moved fast and their lips made every kind of sloppy, sucking, slurping sound you could think of as they got lost in the moment. It wasn’t until Ashlyn slid her left hand between Ali’s legs that they pulled apart for breath. The keeper dragged her lips down her wife’s neck and throat, breathing heavily as she nibbled and licked at the skin there. Ashlyn loved hearing her wife’s moans of pleasure and feeling her hips lifting up off the seat to try and meet her left hand that was still lazily moving through her soaked folds.

“Jesus Ashlyn” she panted. “Fuck me. Just fucking fuck me” she begged. “I can’t wait any more” she reached down and undid her keeper’s jeans so she could fit her hand inside them and feel her soft, warm skin.

“Shit, your hand is freezing” Ashlyn exclaimed but didn’t try to pull away.

“Not any more it’s not” Ali purred back with a sexy grin as she felt her hand warm up where it rested against Ashlyn’s bare ass inside her jeans. “Now hurry up” she pinched her butt and then moaned when she felt the keeper’s fingers finally enter her pulsing core.

“Ooooh, so good baby” Ashlyn mumbled as she brought their lips together again.

She pumped two fingers of her left hand into her gorgeous wife and kept working up her breast with her right hand as they kissed passionately again. Ashlyn felt her brunette’s walls grabbing at her fingers and moved them faster and harder as Ali started to climb towards her release.
“Unnnnnhhhhh...yes, babe...fuck, yes...” she groaned as her whole body started to move with the strong thrusting.

Ashlyn didn’t give her much of a chance to say anything else before devouring her in another deep, probing kiss. It felt like their mouths were electric and everything was being generated from there. Ali was rocking her hips up to meet her wife’s hand with each thrust and she clawed at her ass cheek wanting more of everything. It had been 2-1/2 weeks and she had itches that needed to be scratched. She knew there was no way a quickie in the backseat was going to satisfy all of her needs, but she was going to do the best she could.

“Jesus Christ” Ashlyn gasped as they both sucked air into their burning lungs. She was better with her right hand when it came to pumping her wife’s hot pussy but that’s not how things had worked out with the spontaneous back seat tryst. She did the best she could with her left hand and tried to focus on the g-spot instead, curling her fingers up. She knew Ali was getting close by the sounds she was making and the way her body had started to quiver every once in a while. “Rub your clit baby” she husked out breathlessly, her voice impossibly low and turned on.

The sound of Ashlyn’s voice immediately made Ali’s excitement level jump up at least two notches. She kept her left hand inside her wife’s jeans and moved her right hand towards her own clit, shifting her body away from the back of the seat just a bit so she had room to move her arm more. She had barely taken a breath before her keeper’s mouth covered hers again, kissing like desperate teenagers before curfew. There was another loud bang but it sounded farther off in the distance now that they were inside the Jeep. It still made them both jump and work faster to reach their goal. Ali started rubbing her own clit while Ashlyn kept curling her fingers inside her and tugging on her nipple and kissing her hard.

“Oh fuck...unnnnnhhhh...” Ali moaned as they panted together, eyes focused on each other while they tried to breathe. “Oh...oh...”

Ashlyn felt her wife’s body start to twitch and moved her lips down her neck, sucking on her pulse point and murmuring into her flesh there.

“Come for me baby. You’re so fucking beautiful Ali. I love fucking you...I love watching you come...”

“Oh my God...yessssssssss!!!!!” the brunette yelled out when her orgasm finally crashed down on her. She bucked and shook as her arms and legs flailed inside the confined quarters of the Jeep. She felt the cool glass of the window against the bottom of her foot and held her keeper tightly to her as she came down. “Holy...shit...” she breathed out raggedly.

Ashlyn kept her fingers inside her but barely moved them. She placed gentle kisses across her forehead and cheeks and neck as they both tried to catch their breath. This had certainly not been how she thought their morning would go, but she was definitely not complaining. Another wave of spasms coursed through Ali’s body beneath her as Ashlyn let her weight rest on her chest for the first time since they had entered the Jeep. Nothing was better than that. Their two hearts pounding wildly in their chests, right next to each other. The blonde couldn’t help but yell at herself for pushing her wife away for so long. When would she ever fucking learn? When she was feeling a little lost and out of sorts was exactly the time she needed to feel close to Ali. It was easy to understand now, while she was laying with her half-naked wife still recovering from her orgasm. She had to find a way to remind herself of the simple fix while she was wrapped up in the midst of her struggle. Her train of thought was broken when another loud bang echoed through the parking lot. This was definitely not the time or place to lay around enjoying the last few minutes of ecstasy.

“You’re amazing and I love you and I’m sorry and I can’t believe you put up with me and I love
“you so much baby...”

“Shhh...” the brunette smiled up at her emotional wife and cupped her cheeks with both hands until she got the hazel eyes to meet her own. “I’m the lucky one, my love.”
April Vacation

“I’m sorry we’re missing the marathon today” Ashlyn spoke softly into her wife’s ear as they huddled together on the chilly dark beach waiting for the sun to come up.

“I’m not” Ali leaned her head back into her keeper’s shoulder while Ashlyn hugged her tightly from her spot behind her on the beach blanket. “I’m glad we’re here, even if it is freezing right now” she giggled and tried to get even closer to her wife’s warm body.

It was 6:45am and they had another seven minutes to wait for the sun to start warming them up. Monday, April 20th in Melbourne Beach, FL would eventually be the usual 75 – 80 degree day but that would take several hours. At that hour of the morning it was a cool 60 degrees with a brisk wind blowing across the dark beach.

“It’s a hell of a lot warmer down here than back at home right now” Ashlyn chuckled and kissed her wife’s chilly cheek as she wrapped the second blanket around her shoulders to shelter them both from the wind.

The Kriegers had flown down Sunday, arriving in the early afternoon with all four kids in tow, and were looking forward to a week of fun in the sun for April vacation. Tammye and Carol’s wedding was scheduled for Friday afternoon with a big family dinner the night before. The whole idea was to hang out and relax at the beach house for the week so the grandmas could spend time with the grandkids, then have the quasi-rehearsal dinner Thursday night even though there was no rehearsal, then have the casual wedding ceremony late Friday afternoon and enjoy a low-key reception and party afterwards. The newlyweds were leaving Saturday for a month-long honeymoon in Europe that they had been planning for months. As much as Ashlyn and Ali had loved their own wedding day and the pomp and circumstance surrounding it, this relaxed scenario sounded like a dream come true to them both. Maybe they were just jealous about the month in Europe.

“Thank you for arranging our sunrise again honey” Ali snuggled her forehead into her wife’s neck. “I really love that we do this.”

“Thank you for getting up so early with me. I know how much you hate being woken up early...”

“At least this time I didn’t make it so hard” the brunette chuckled. “I just followed your instructions.”

“Miracles do happen” the keeper kissed the top of her wife’s head and then they were quiet for the next few minutes just enjoying their special time together. The sun was getting closer to making an appearance and they snuggled together and waited. “Meg’s so mad at me.”

“Aw babe, she has good reason to be, but you guys had good reason to punish her too” Ali tried to be diplomatic. “She’ll be here Thursday morning and we’ll just all put it behind us. Her punishment will be over and you two can work on having fun together for three days before we all go back home on Sunday.”

“Will you at least make sure she has some fun if she’s still mad at me?” the keeper asked in a quiet voice.

“Ashlyn” Ali pulled her head back to look into her wife’s worried and sad face. “Everybody here wants Meg to have fun and I know she’s going to have a great time. Don’t worry about that, please babe. Remember what Mattie said, just work on forgiving her so you can move past what
happened. She made a mistake...”

“A fucking huge mistake...” Ashlyn corrected.

“Yes, a fucking huge mistake” the brunette repeated. “But she’s been punished for it and I really think she learned some important things about herself, and her mom, and you, and what it means to make adult decisions.”

“You’re right” the keeper sighed. “I’m still so mad at her though.”

“And that’s your challenge. That’s what you have to work on this week. That and having some fun and relaxing too. It’s vacation you know” Ali smiled and lifted her face up for a kiss.

Ashlyn met her wife’s lips with her own and then quickly pointed towards the glowing horizon.

“Here we go baby. Look how beautiful it is.”

Ali looked at her keeper’s face, slightly pink from the wind and with a few sleep wrinkles still visible from her pillow. There was nothing better than being in her arms like this and the brunette felt her heart swell. She blinked back a couple of happy tears but never took her eyes off of her wife’s beautiful face as she spoke.

“It sure is.”

When Tammye and Carol told everybody that they were getting married nobody was really surprised. They were, however, happy at how soon the wedding was going to take place. The announcement came at Christmastime, when the Kriegers had been visiting Florida, and 3-1/2 months was a lot faster than the timing of most weddings they were all familiar with. But neither bride wanted to make a big deal out of it. They had strongly considered just going to the courthouse and signing the paperwork and calling it a day. It wasn’t that they were embarrassed about marrying another woman. They had both come a long way in their journey toward self-acceptance and self-respect in terms of their late in life, lesbian love. It was more about them both being quiet people who didn’t like a lot of fuss made about them, for any reason. Carol wasn’t as shy as Tammye but she certainly wasn’t tremendously outgoing either. In an odd way, they had both been beaten down earlier in their womanhood. You couldn’t really compare the two lives they had led, but the similarity was there nonetheless. Carol had suffered through horrible physical, psychological, emotional and verbal abuse at the hands of her monstrous ex-husband. Tammye had suffered through her own version of hell, with herself as the primary abuser. Sure, she had used alcohol to do the damage, but there was no-one to blame except for herself. Now here they both were, battle-worn survivors who had somehow found each other when neither of them had even been looking for someone to fall in love with again. It was a dark and twisty love story, but it was still a love story.

“Now we mean it” Tammye had levelled a threatening stare at her two grown children and their spouses after she and Carol had told them about their wedding plans. “We don’t want any fuss. No gifts. Nothing fancy. No stress...”

“Geez mom, what do you want?” Chris complained and shook his head as he tried to take in the information.

“Chris...” Beth quietly chastised him.

“No, it’s alright Beth” Tammye smiled at her daughter-in-law. “I’m glad you asked Christopher.
What we want more than anything is to spend some time here at the house with you all and then eat a nice meal together and then have a simple ceremony where we get to stand in front of you and our friends and tell you how much we love each other.”

“That’s it?” Ashlyn asked, quirking an eyebrow at her mother.

“That’s it” Tammye smiled back at all four of them. “Think we can make that happen?”

The plans had evolved since then but not changed too much. The Thursday night dinner turned into a big beach barbeque at the beach house for family. The ceremony the next afternoon was going to be at a seaside resort in nearby Sebastian, Florida, followed by a big buffet dinner and party right there on the resort patio next to the beach. It was simple and comfortable and convenient and chill – just like Tammye and Carol were. The couple had made some friends in the community over the years and many of them were expected to attend Friday’s festivities. And the Krieger in-laws were coming too. Ken and Vicki were flying in for the whole week and doing their own vacation thing. They booked a nice room at the seaside resort where the ceremony and party were going to be held on Friday and spent the whole week relaxing and enjoying the gorgeous weather. They didn’t want to hone in on the Harris Grandparent time. Both Ken and Vicki were sensitive to the fact that they were lucky enough to live so close to the young Kriegers all year round. They didn’t want to hog them during their Florida visit too. They did want to take the kids to Disney World while they were there though. They let Ali and Ashlyn figure out how to make that happen and then planned the rest of their week around it. Kyle and Nathan stayed in NYC with Edgar and Cristina. They were both dying to take the kids to Disney World but it was too soon for any of them to take a trip like that. They sent their best regards to the brides, knowing they would understand their absence. Deb and Mike Christopher drove up from Miami for the week and stayed at a hotel near the beach house, not wanting to bother the brides with extra houseguests that busy week. In the past, they had stayed at the house with the young Krieger family, happily piling into the three bedrooms downstairs and the two pullout couches upstairs.

For the Harris half of the family, only cousins Carlin and David attended the wedding and party afterwards. Tammye was surprised that they showed up but knew it was more for Ashlyn and Chris than it was for her. She knew that their mother, Aunt Marie, blamed her for every bad thing that had ever befallen Mike Harris. Ashlyn took advantage of the plentiful family, who were all happy to watch her children, and spent time with her best friend from high school, Liz. She also reconnected with some other friends and enjoyed a mini high school reunion of sorts that week. Ali, on the other hand, wanted nothing more than some real rest and relaxation. She loved hanging out with everybody and catching up on their busy lives, but she wanted to do it right there at the beach house. Luckily, a lot of people had the same idea. The little cousins wanted to sleep over every single night and they almost managed it. Johnny and Lizzy spent most nights downstairs with the Krieger kids, still split up into the early-risers room and the late-sleepers room from the December visit.

Mike Harris did not attend the wedding or the dinner before or after. It wasn’t that he had a problem with it, he and Carol had made their peace that Christmas at the big old house, seven years ago, when she gave him the photo album and melted the heart right inside his chest. He just didn’t think it was appropriate to go to his ex-wife’s wedding. If he reversed their roles, he wouldn’t expect or want Tammye to come to his wedding either. Everyone in the immediate family understood and respected his position. He spent lots of time with the family during the rest of the week so it wasn’t as if he hid himself away or anything. Sometimes it was just him and sometimes he brought Lydia with him. The only tricky part was explaining to the kids why he wasn’t at the wedding and party afterwards. Mike Harris and Ken and Vicki were the babysitting crew for Friday night back at the beach house and that was really where Mike would rather be anyway.
Meg arrived as planned Thursday mid-morning and Ashlyn and her father went to the Melbourne International airport to pick her up. As they walked into the kitchen of the beach house through the garage door, Ali saw the look of frustration on all three faces and knew it had not gone well.

“Hi Meggie!” the brunette greeted the teen cheerfully and gave her a big hug. It still freaked her out that Meg was two inches taller than she was now. “How was the flight?”

“Good” the teen replied without looking up. “Can I go change and get in the water?” she asked no-one in particular, her voice flat and even.

Ali looked behind the girl at Ashlyn who nodded and then rolled her eyes.

“Yes you can” the brunette replied and released her, watching her trudge towards the steps down to the basement.

“Don’t forget your suitcase” Ashlyn called after her and let go of the luggage she had carried into the house for her step-daughter. “Johnny, Lizzy and Dodge are in the bunk bed room. Drew, Josie and Lily are in the other room. Or you can sleep on one of the couches up here” she explained with her own even tone.

Meg’s face went through about four different versions of annoyance and frustration before turning around and pulling her suitcase behind her.

“Mind the floors now” Mike reminded her before Ashlyn had the chance to.

“Ugh” the teen let out an aggravated sigh as she picked up her suitcase and carried it down the stairs in a huff.

“Yikes” Ali said after a couple of minutes.

“Yeah, I’m going to kill her before we even eat lunch today” the keeper clenched her jaw.

“Why don’t you just keep your distance this weekend” the brunette suggested as she finished filling up two kid thermos bottles with water like she came into the house to do in the first place. Everybody else was down at the beach having a nice, relaxing morning. It was almost time to start getting lunch ready but they had about 45 minutes before then. “I’ll handle her. I know when she’s with us you usually take point but let’s just change it up this time.”

“Do you think it’ll make a difference?” Ashlyn asked and looked at both her wife and her father.

“Don’t look at me” Mike took a step backwards trying to get as far away from the conversation as possible. “But if that car ride is how it’s going to be between you two, then yeah” he nodded at Ali. “I think you should just leave her alone.”

“Let’s try it” Ali squeezed her wife’s arm and kissed her cheek as she walked by her towards the sliding glass door to the back deck. “It can’t hurt.”

The rest of the day passed amiably enough. Meg got doted on by all seven of the grandparents and seemed to start to come out of her funk, just a little bit. She was still extremely bratty, but better than during the car ride from the airport. Chris could always get a smile out of her no matter what else was going on and he wasted no time carrying her out into the water and tossing her around like a rag doll. He was the only one who could pick her up anymore because she was becoming a tall, strong athlete right before their eyes. She was only 14 but she had the body of a 16-year old. They surfed and boogie boarded and played in the sand and the surf with the littler kids. All of the kids loved the older and infinitely cooler big sister, and cousin, Meg. Josie still stuck to her like glue, as
she had done since she could barely walk. It was more than just the red hair they shared. Something about Meg had always appealed to her young step-sister and until Josie could put words to what it was, the rest of them would never know. That afternoon, while the twins were napping and things were a little bit quieter, Meg crawled under the big beach umbrella and spent an hour building an intricate sand castle with Josie. Chris, Ashlyn, Ken, Vicki and Mike Harris were all still in the water with Johnny, Drew and Lizzy while the rest of the grandparents sat around in beach chairs taking the whole scene in.

“Can I sit with you ladies?” Ali asked as she ducked under the sun umbrella.

“Mommy!” Josie said excitedly and looked up at the brunette. “Look at what we’re making!”

“Ooooh, what an impressive castle” Ali enthused. “Is it a castle?” she asked, looking at Meg who hadn’t said anything to her yet.

“It’s Wonder Woman’s castle, right JoJo?” the teen grinned at the little redhead.

“Yeah!”

“So, can I hang out with you guys or is it a redhead only deal” Ali tried again. “Which is totally ok. I get it. Me and my dark brown hair can go somewhere else...”

“Stay mommy” Josie reached over and patted the back of her mother’s calf.

Ali grinned, bent over and kissed the top of her daughter’s head.

“Is it ok Meg?” she asked one last time.

“Sure” the older girl shrugged as she carefully placed another hard-packed bucket of sand for the castle tower.

“Are you too hot honey?” the brunette felt her daughter’s forehead and the back of her neck to make her own assessment.

Josie would often overheat and turn bright pink, even if she wasn’t in direct sunlight, so the two beach-loving moms had learned to be very careful with her.

“I’m good. Here” she moved on to more important business and handed Ali a small shovel. “You make the road.”

“Ok” Ali nodded, accepting her orders with a small smile. She loved her bossy little girl so much.

“I thought we were going to make a moat?” Meg asked the boss.

“What’s that?”

“It’s the water that goes around the castle so people can’t just drive up to the door and come in unless we want them to” Meg explained as she packed the bucket with more sand.

“We’ll need to make a drawbridge that you can lower to let your friends into the castle, so they don’t get stuck in the moat” Ali offered. “Should I start digging the moat?”

“Ah-huh” Josie nodded. “Do that.”

The three of them worked quietly for a while, even fending off an over-eager Drew who ran up to give Ali a hug and almost trampled the whole thing. After he returned to the group of grandparents
for a drink and a snack, the three castle-builders got back to work.

“Have you decided where you want to sleep yet?” Ali asked carefully, trying to reach out without setting the moody teen off.

Meg was quiet and the brunette thought she had just undone whatever progress she had made as building buddies.

“You can sleep in our room” Josie offered sweetly. “Drew is on the umm, the umm…”

“Air mattress” Ali supplied the words she was having trouble coming up with on her own.

“Yeah, that. And me and Lily are in the big bed. But there’s lotsa room.”

Ali stifled a chuckle and caught Meg doing the same thing when she glanced quickly at the teen.

“Thanks JoJo. I appreciate that. I’m not really sure what I’m doing yet” Meg smiled kindly at her step-sister.

“There’s also a free bunk down there in the other room” Ali offered. “Or, if you want more privacy, you can take one of the couches upstairs. I know GiGi and Caro would let you keep your stuff in their room. As long as you remember to knock it shouldn’t be a problem.”

They were quiet again for a few minutes and Ali started to get discouraged. Maybe Meg would be unreachable this weekend. She had read a couple of books about raising and living with teenagers and she understood that it happened sometimes. She was trying not to take it personally. She was also trying not to get upset with the girl. Why were she and Ashlyn walking on eggshells when Meg had been the one who screwed up and caused the mess and the hurt feelings in the first place? She got caught up in her thoughts and almost didn’t hear Meg when she finally spoke.

“Do you think they’d mind?” Meg asked tentatively. “Isn’t it, like, their honeymoon week or something?”

“I don’t think they’d mind at all, but I’ll ask them. That’s a good point.” Ali smiled at her, but not too big. She didn’t want to spook her. “And, worst case scenario if they do mind, you can keep your stuff in our room so the little ones don’t get into it.”

Meg physically bristled at that idea and the brunette saw it with her own eyes. The redhead realized that she had just hurt Ali’s feelings and dropped her eyes to the sand.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean anything…”

“It’s ok Meg” Ali gave her a reassuring half-smile, pushing down her simmering aggravation with the teen. “I’ll talk to GiGi and Caro and let you know what they say. And if Johnny and Lizzy go home then we can move everybody into the bunkbeds and you can have the other room all to yourself. But I don’t know if that’ll happen or not so don’t get too excited about it yet” she chuckled.

They both got back to work on the sand castle and it was quiet again for a few minutes.

“Thanks Ali.”

“Sure thing kiddo.”

Before the whole Meg runaway thing had made everything so awkward, Ashlyn had promised to
spend time with her during the April vacation working on some goalkeeping technique drills. Now
that the teen’s time was cut so short, and her attitude was so bad, Ashlyn wasn’t sure if they should
still go to the old soccer field and work out or not. The only time that could do it would be Friday
morning because the whole family was going to Disney World for the day on Saturday. Then they
were all flying home on Sunday. Meg’s mood had improved bit by bit on Thursday but she and the
keeper had barely interacted as Ashlyn took her wife’s advice and kept her distance.

“Where’s Meg?” Ashlyn asked as she came back into the kitchen after finding the couch in the
corner of the big living room empty.

It was 8am and Ali, Tammye and Carol were just finishing feeding all six of the kids. The kitchen
was loud and filled with boisterous and rambunctious children who couldn’t wait to get out to the
beach. They darted in and around all four adults in the kitchen as they were released, one at a time,
from Ali’s strong grip after having their hands and faces wiped free of sticky breakfast residue.

“Oh, she’s in our bed” Tammye answered over her shoulder as she carried kid plates and bowls to
the sink. “It got loud in here and I thought she’d be more comfortable in there instead of on the
couch.”

“Mom, she made her choice...”

“Oh I know honey” Tammye smiled at her daughter. “It’s ok. It was my idea, not hers.”

Ali knew her wife had spent the last half hour checking and inflating soccer balls in the garage and
making sure Tammye’s car was loaded with the gloves and balls and other gear she would need to
work with Meg. She didn’t say anything in front of the little kids because if they knew where
Ashlyn was going they’d all want to go too.

“Good luck” was all the brunette said as Lily squirmed in her grasp. The hopeful smile said
everything else she was feeling though.

Ashlyn gave two quick knocks to the master bedroom door at the other end of the house, on the
other side of the large, open-concept living room, and then opened it. She stood in the doorway and
saw Meg in the process of sitting up and rubbing her eyes.

“If you still want to get some practice in we’re leaving in 15 minutes. Just you and me. Make sure
you grab something to eat on the way.”

It wasn’t the warmest invitation and Ashlyn was disappointed in herself for not being able to rise
above the anger and frustration she still felt towards one of her favorite people in the whole world.
She loaded a cooler with some snacks and water and Gatorade, not knowing if Meg would join her
or not. As she killed the last few minutes of time straightening random things in her mother’s
garage, she decided that she would go anyway, with or without the teen. Maybe Liz would come
and join her. As she pulled her phone out to text her high school bestie, the door from the kitchen
swung open and Meg, her bag of soccer gear, a water bottle and a freshly toasted bagel with cream
cheese that had Carol’s name written all over it, came tumbling into the garage. Ashlyn couldn’t
help but grin at the spectacle as she slipped the phone back into her pocket.

“Ready?” she asked, still smiling, as she grabbed Meg’s gear from her.

“Yep” she nodded with a shy smile, her mouth full of bagel.

For the next three hours it was as if nothing had ever happened to cause strife or hurt feeling
between them. They drove in peaceful quiet to the soccer field while Meg inhaled her breakfast.
Then they worked out hard for two hours. Ashlyn drilled balls at the young keeper without mercy, and was impressed at the number of stops and blocks and parries Meg made. They switched it up and the redhead kicked balls as hard as she could at her mentor and trainer and coach. It was cathartic for both of them as they focused solely on soccer without any distraction. Kicking the crap out of the balls didn’t hurt either. There was no talk of trains or parties or punishments. Just the soccer ball and the grass and the training. They spent the third hour at the skate park right next to the pitch, Ashlyn pulling one of her old boards from the trunk of her mother’s car and holding it out to her step-daughter in a wordless invitation. Meg wasn’t very good at skateboarding. She had been coached by Ashlyn for years, but the lessons had been too few and far between for much of it to stick. Truthfully, Meg only did it because she knew Ashlyn loved it and she didn’t have the heart to tell her that she had never really liked skateboarding in the first place. They made it back home in time for lunch with the rest of the family and then wished Tammye and Carol well as the brides-to-be left for their relaxing afternoon at the beachside resort before the ceremony.

That evening at the party after the simple but very moving and loving ceremony, Ashlyn wrung her hands and dropped her head back dramatically as she spoke with her wife off to the side of the beautiful resort patio. She was more frustrated than ever after what she thought had been a breakthrough morning with Meg. The teen had gone back to her surly, distant, rude demeanor as soon as they had returned to the beach house.

“Hey, moms that I love with all my heart” Deb said sweetly as she put an arm around both Ashlyn and Ali and squeezed herself in between them at the same time. “Can I give you some advice?”

“Mom, now’s not a great time” Ali started to protest, wanting to let Ashlyn finish venting instead of keeping her frustration all bottled up and potentially triggering some sort of PTSD effect.

“Yeah, I know. You’re beside yourselves about what to do with Meg and don’t have time for a lesson I learned the hard way with my own teenage daughter” she chuckled and kissed Ali on the cheek. “Seriously, watching you guys is killing me. Just let me tell you one thing, ok?”

“You can tell me as many things as you’ve got if it’ll help me not strangle that kid” Ashlyn put her head on Deb’s shoulder and wrapped her arms around her waist in a side-hug. “Pleeeease help me.”

Both Deb and Ali giggled and then all three women sat down around an unoccupied patio table and huddled up to talk. It was in the middle of the party and it would be time to take the kids home and put them to bed in another hour. Currently, they were trying to decide whether or not Meg would be going back to the beach house with the little kids or not. Her sullen and snarky behavior all afternoon and evening certainly didn’t warrant the reward of staying at the party later, but both Ali and Ashlyn knew the teen would have a fit if they made her leave early. Meg was the only dark spot in an evening that had been absolutely lovely for Tammye, Carol and everybody else who had joined them to celebrate their love.

“Ok, here’s the deal with teenagers, especially the new ones like Meg” Deb looked from Ali to Ashlyn and then back again. “They get embarrassed. A lot. By everything. All the time” she sat back with a confident smile on her face and sipped her margarita.

“That’s it?” Ashlyn couldn’t keep the disappointed look from her face as she asked the question both of the young moms were thinking.

“What do you mean, ‘that’s it’?” Deb chuckled. “That’s everything. That’s the big secret to teenagers. You’re welcome” she laughed at the confused looks on their faces.

“Mom, come on. You’re saying Meg’s acting like this because she’s embarrassed?”
“I am. And I’m right too.”

“How...what do you mean, she’s embarrassed?” Ashlyn was so desperate to understand, she was questioning everything. “If she’s embarrassed about the way she’s behaving all she has to do is stop being such a brat.”

“You girls, maybe you’re too close to it, I don’t know” Deb shook her head and leaned forward again. “She’s embarrassed about running away and getting in trouble and letting everybody down. She doesn’t know how to handle any of that so she’s acting like this. She’s probably just as upset with herself as you guys are with her.”

Both young moms looked like somebody had just slapped them across the face. They sat there, stunned, for almost five full minutes, minds spinning, while Deb sipped her drink and enjoyed the warm evening air.

“So why was she so good with me this morning then?” the keeper frowned in confusion.

“Sweetheart” Deb patted Ashlyn’s hand on the patio table and smiled encouragingly at her. “She loves you and she knows you love her, even when she screws up. You told me yourself that she doesn’t visit down here very often. She’s self-conscious and nervous...”

“And embarrassed” Ali finished for her. “God, how did I miss that?” she looked with wonder at her wise mother. “It makes total sense. She’s usually such a good kid too, she doesn’t know how to screw up and forgive herself and move on.”

“Sounds like somebody else I know” the blonde winked at her wife.

“How do you think I learned this lesson?” Deb laughed and rubbed her daughter’s arm. “She was always harder on herself than her dad or I ever could be. And she didn’t get into trouble very often, but if she did” Deb raised both eyebrows all the way up to her hairline “she was miserable to be around and it had nothing to do with her punishment.”

“She’s still like that” Ashlyn grinned at her beautiful brunette. “I should have seen it in Meg too.”

“It happens to all teenagers” Deb shrugged. “Everything embarrasses them, including their parents and grandparents” she laughed again. “So buckle up kids. You’ve got four more to go. It’s gonna be a bumpy ride.”

The three women talked for several more minutes about what they might be able to do to help the situation. Ashlyn didn’t want to wait another minute to have a talk with the angsty teen. Part of that was selfish. The keeper wanted some quality time with her step-daughter that wasn’t tinged with anger and hurt feelings and awkward tension. But, mostly, Ashlyn wanted to give Meg some relief from her own twisted emotions that were telling the girl that the situation was worse than it really was. Once the plan was decided on, it was time to act on it. Ali and Beth went back to the beach house to put the kids to bed with Ken and Vicki as scheduled. They wouldn’t be back for about an hour or so. The party wasn’t sedate, but it wasn’t as lit as Ashlyn’s 40th birthday party had been either. It was a lot of fun, but pretty laid back. Most of the action was on the dance floor which, as always, was good and bad depending on who was dancing. The most important thing was that everybody seemed to be having a good time. Except for a 14-year old redhead.

“Hey beautiful girl, mind if I join you?” Deb had finally located Meg sitting by herself and eating a piece of wedding cake, one of the few traditions that Tammye and Carol had chosen to honor their day.
“Sure.”

Deb was happy to see a small smile on Meg’s face, even though it was stuffed full of cake at the moment. Deb and Meg had always gotten along well. They didn’t really see each other enough to get on each other’s nerves either. Both of Ali’s parents had gone out of their way over the years to make the girl feel like part of the family. Meg had noticed and embraced the efforts of Ken, Vicki, Deb and Mike. The grandparent she felt closest to was definitely Deb Deb.

“Quite the party” Deb commented mildly, looking out at everybody having fun on the dance floor. “Have you danced yet?”

“Nuh-uh” she shook her head no, mouth still full.

“Chris was looking for you. He says you’re the best dance partner he’s ever had” she chuckled. “I’m sure he’ll come get you soon.”

Meg looked anxiously at the older woman as she finally swallowed the mouthful of cake. She stared at Deb like a deer in headlights, fork suspended above the cake on her plate.

“I’m so glad you’re here Meggie. I just wanted to tell you that. I don’t think I’ve had a chance to do that yet.”

“Me too” she looked down at the cake and started to fidget with the fork in her fingers. “Do you want some?” she offered, belatedly remembering her manners.

“Oh no thank you. Not all of us are superstar two-sport athletes who can eat whatever they want because they’re going to run it off the next day” she chuckled. “It sure is good though, isn’t it?” she pointed at the delicious cake.

“Yeah, Caro picked it.”

“Well, I have never regretted any food decision that woman has ever made for me” Deb laughed. “And I’m pretty sure I never will.”

“Yeah” Meg laughed too and Deb thought she saw her shoulders relax just a little bit.

“Listen, can I tell you something else, since we’re talking?”

Meg’s shoulders immediately tensed back up again and Deb held her breath, afraid she had just blown her chance.

“What?” came Meg’s quiet, tentative reply.

“I just want to make sure you know how much we all love you. Everybody from yesterday and today and tomorrow, all the family... we all love you. A lot. Do you know that?”

“Umm, yeah” Meg shrugged and blushed a little bit and, for just a minute, looked like the 5-year old girl Deb had first met nine years ago.

“Good. That’s important. Sometimes we forget to say that enough, all of us, and it’s important. We should all say it more. That’s what I think anyway.” Deb paused, afraid to push forward but knowing she couldn’t stop now. “And that doesn’t change just because you make a mistake. We all make mistakes but we still love each other. Do you know that too?”

“I guess” she shrugged again and kept her eyes down.
“Well it’s the truth, baby girl. And I’m not going to sit here and try to tell you I know what you’re feeling or what you’re thinking. But I am going to tell you that I had a 14-year old daughter once upon a time and she was a lot like you.” Meg lifted her eyes slowly, still fidgeting with the fork, as Deb continued. “Ali was a pretty good kid but she made mistakes too...”

“She told me.”

“She did huh?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s good then. See, I told you it happens to all of us” Deb smiled and reached over to pat Meg’s hand with the fork in it. “But here’s the really important part. Are you ready?”

“Ok.”

“Nobody here, none of your family, thinks any less of you because you made a mistake. I wish you hadn’t gotten on that train by yourself that night but I know you learned some important lessons from that mistake. The trick is to not make the same mistake twice. You have to learn from your mistakes and I believe you’ve done that. Am I right?”

“Yeah” she nodded solemnly and looked down again.

“Good. Now you need to stop worrying about it so much honey. None of us are thinking about it anymore. We’re just glad to see you and spend time with you. I can’t wait to go to Disney World tomorrow. It’s going to be awesome. I want you to enjoy it and have fun and relax. We’ve all put your mistake behind us. Now it’s time for you to put it behind you too. Do you think you can do that?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh come on, you can do better than that” Deb encouraged with a chuckle and a smile. “Are you ready to move forward and stop worrying about what happened over a month ago or what?”

“Yeah, I am.” Meg looked into Deb’s soft brown eyes and smiled shyly at her. “I really am.”

“Well that’s the best news I’ve heard all week” Deb squeezed the girl’s hand and then patted it some more as they grinned at each other. “Alright, I’ll leave you alone now” Deb leaned over and gave the girl a quick hug, happy to feel Meg return it. “I’m sure I’m cramping your style.”

Meg watched her stand up, straighten the front of her dress and push her chair back in before starting to walk away from the table.

“Deb Deb?”

“Yes honey?” Deb turned back towards the teenager who finally looked like herself again.

“I love you too.”
Whitney and Ryan Flanagan finally felt like they were getting the hang of the parenting thing. March had been a pretty fantastic month for the little family. Becca turned one year old on the 27th and, earlier in the month, her dad had officially been named as the new head coach for the Boston Cannons, Boston’s professional men’s lacrosse team. It was his dream come true once his own playing career had come to an early end. He had been working his tail off as an assistant coach for the Cannons for the past 6 years with the head coaching job always his ultimate goal. He had known about the promotion since the team made their decision in January, but the official press release to the media and rest of the world hadn’t come until training camp started at the beginning of March. The league, MLL - Major League Lacrosse, hadn’t grown very much from the time Ryan graduated from UNC back in 2009. There had been some team relocations and sales, but it had never suffered any real setbacks. It wasn’t growing but it wasn’t failing either. There were 10 teams, the games were all shown on ESPN2 and the season went from April to August with the playoffs in September. The league was competitive and that’s why it was still around. None of the teams were really dominant over any of the others and each game was usually a fiercely contested battle between really great athletes who, frankly, deserved a bigger audience than they got. Ryan had been well-liked and well-respected as a player for both the North Carolina Hounds as well as the Rochester Rattlers out in Western New York. That had continued when he joined the coaching ranks with Rochester and only increased as he got better and more confident as a coach. The pay was still pretty crappy but head coach was the highest salary he had ever received at any point during his time with MLL and both Ryan and Whitney were thrilled with the boost to their modest income.

Whitney made good money at Knight-Harris and earned every penny of it. Having their own legal department, in-house, to review and handle all of the contracts had saved the company millions of dollars. Even after paying Whitney’s salary, as well as the other lawyers and paralegals that now worked for her, Ali had still managed to save the company a ton of money. And that was an annual savings. The investment in the in-house legal team made the company money every single year. The brunette had meant what she had told Whitney back when she was trying to recruit her to join K-H once she finished law school. She wanted Whitney to make her job at K-H fulfill her own goals at the same time. It made perfect sense to Ali that a big chunk of the extra money that the in-house legal team earned every year should be used towards that goal. Whitney and Ashlyn had both practically fallen out of their chairs when the brunette explained her idea to them.

“Wait, what?” Ashlyn squinted at her wife from her seat in Ali’s office. The three friends were eating lunch together around the coffee table as they had so many times in the past. The keeper looked over at Whitney and then back at her wife again. “Did you just say that you set up the ‘Engen Foundation’? My salad’s extra crunchy so maybe I didn’t hear you right...”

Ali chuckled at her wife’s reaction but focused her eyes on the lawyer instead. Whitney hadn’t moved a muscle and was still sitting there with a mouth full of the chicken salad sandwich she held limply in both hands.

“You heard me right” Ali smiled. “I don’t care what you call it, although I do like the sound of ‘The Engen Foundation’, and we still have to vote on it as a board but both Jared and Hilary are with me on it so it’s already a done deal” the brunette explained with a sly smile. She had kept it from both Whitney and Ashlyn because she knew her wife wouldn’t be able to keep the secret and Ali didn’t want to get either one of them too excited about the possibility of finally making Whitney’s dream come to fruition until she was absolutely positive K-H could afford it. “I’ve left you the hardest part though Whit.”
“What’s that?” the lawyer mumbled as she tried to chew and comprehend all of this at the same time.

“You have to figure out what you want the Foundation to work on. And then you have to make it happen. But you’ll have that same amount of money to spend each year, unless something awful happens” the brunette rapped her knuckles on the coffee table. “Knock on wood.”

“Wow, Ali, I don’t know what to say” Whitney breathed out, finally without food in her mouth. “I don’t even know what to think!”

“Well, it sounds like you’d better start thinking about how you want to give that money away girl” Ashlyn patted her on the back and grinned at her.

“I already know that” the lawyer replied softly and got the attention of both women. She waited for a few seconds and took a deep breath. “I want to start a legal services office to help people who can’t afford a good lawyer or who just need legal advice. You know, for the people who won’t be able to get it anywhere else.”

“That’s what you’ve always talked about doing” Ashlyn grinned even bigger and her dimple appeared along with a couple of happy tears. She thought back to a dozen different times when her best friend had told her why she wanted to go to law school in the first place. “Helping the people who needed it most.”

Life in 2026 was pretty good for the Flanagans. Becca was a big, beautiful baby girl who always seemed to have a smile on her face. She didn’t, of course, but it was pretty rare to not see it there. On the scale of fussiness of babies in the four-family group, with Josie being a high-maintenance 10 and James Dwyer being the chillest and easiest baby in the whole world 1, Becca was about a 3. She was easier than all four of the Krieger kids had been, although baby Drew came closest to matching her, with Cassius Dwyer right there at his level too. And being towards the high-maintenance end of the spectrum could be for reasons other than fussiness. All three of the Cross kids had been very active and needed a close watch, much like Dodge Krieger and Maddox Dwyer did, so it was more high-activity level than fussiness. Much to both Ali and Ashlyn’s chagrin, both of their girls were at the far end of the spectrum. If Josie was a 10, primarily because of her health issues, Lily was a 9 simply because she was the most difficult kid in the whole group to please a lot of the time. When Lily was good she was great but when she was a brat everybody suffered. But just because a baby or toddler was high-maintenance didn’t always mean they would stay that way forever. Molly always reminded the Krieger moms that she herself had been the fussiest baby in her whole family. Molly was one of the nicest, most capable, and easiest people to be with in their whole group so that was quite a relief to both Ashlyn and Ali.

The Flanagans had two more big goals for 2026 and they were running out of time to achieve them. The first was to buy a house because their condo in Arlington was just not doing it for them anymore. The 3-week holiday visit from Whitney’s parents had nearly ruined their marriage. The grandparents wanted to be near the baby but the condo was so small that it was tough to have all four adults there most of the time, plus baby Becca and all of her stuff. Man, babies had so much fucking stuff! They didn’t need a mansion but they needed a real house with a yard and a garage and at least three bedrooms if not four. They were looking in Arlington because they had really grown to love the town, but there wasn’t anything that fit their criteria there, so far. Neither Ryan nor Whitney really wanted to go too much farther into the suburbs because they both worked in the city. Whitney still went to Cambridge to the K-H offices every day, bringing Becca with her and leaving her in the company daycare that had been set up the year before. Ryan’s commute to the Cannons facility in Quincy, MA, which was on the Southern border of Boston, was not ideal. He had to drive through Boston to get there and it already took a long time. They needed to stay close
to the Arlington area if possible. The team played its games over at Harvard Stadium which was right next to where the Breakers used to play at Jordan Field before their big beautiful stadium had been built. Whitney got nostalgic for her early Breakers days whenever she went to one of Ryan’s games.

The second goal was the reason for the extra bedroom in the new house. They wanted to get Whitney pregnant this year because they were both turning 39 and wanted to have two kids before they were 40. They would be cutting it close and they knew it. They had quietly begun trying to conceive, telling only Ashlyn and Ali about it so they didn’t have to deal with any pressure from anybody else if it took a long time. 2026 was already going to be a big and busy year for the Flanagans and that was before Ryan’s big promotion and Whitney’s new charitable foundation had been added to the list. They had done their best to start looking at houses before Ryan’s season started, but January and February weren’t the most popular times to buy a new house for good reason. People often waited to put their house on the market until Spring or Summer so the young parents would just have to be patient, keep their eyes open and be ready to act if something came their way. And working on a little brother or sister for Becca had been proving difficult too. They were still pretty exhausted and Becca took up a lot of their time. It wasn’t easy to plan their romantic encounters, even though they both tried their best. Ashlyn finally told her bestie to let Ali bring Becca to the big old house with her after work sometimes so they could have an evening to themselves every once in a while. They both loved the baby girl, their goddaughter, and it was easy to have her at the house. What was one more kid when you already had four running around? At least sweet Becca wasn’t walking yet so she was easier to keep track of. They joked about it, but it was true.

It felt like everything Whitney had ever dreamt of was starting to come true for her, one right after the other. She became a lawyer, she got a great job that she believed in, she became a mom, they opened The Academy and it was a success, and now she was going to own her first home, hopefully have a second baby, and start her own foundation to help people less fortunate than she. She was lucky as hell and she knew it and that made her one of the most grateful people around.

“Can you believe this is our life now?” Whitney asked her best friend as they watched Lily and Dodge eating their lunch in the cafeteria at the Museum of Science the week after April vacation. “I mean, everything we hoped for...” she paused, wide-eyed at the thought she was about to share, “it’s all happening Ash. I just can’t believe it sometimes.”

“I know” the keeper nodded. “We worked damn hard to get here though...”

“Mama said a bad word” Dodge chirped up and then both he and Lily giggled as they munched on French fries and glanced furtively at Ashlyn.

“Ok guys, thank you. You’re right. I’m sorry” Ashlyn smiled and sighed, thankful it had been such an innocent bad word. Whitney stifled a giggle as her bestie finished her sentence. “We worked hard to get here. It’s not like we just woke up one morning and, poof!, everything we dreamed of just magically appeared. I’m just as grateful as you are, don’t get me wrong, but we busted our butts for it too.”

“You’re right. I still can’t believe it though. The foundation. What an incredible surprise. You guys are too good to me. I can never repay you...”

“Whit, it’s not a gift and there’s no repaying. And I had nothing to do with it” she shook her head as she played with Becca’s tiny hands wrapped around her long fingers. The little girl was sitting in Ashlyn’s lap trying to get her hands on the food tray in front of them. “Everybody knows how great you are and K-H wants to keep you forever and to do that we want you to be happy. Ali told
me she doesn’t ever want you to want another job. Whatever you want from that new job, she wants you to find here with us.”

“I know, she’s told me the same thing, more than once.”

“Don’t you believe her?”

“I do, I just...I don’t know” she smiled shyly at the keeper across from her. “I just feel like it’s too much, and I don’t mean to sound ungrateful...”

“Listen up” Ashlyn levelled the modest woman with a stern look. “You are amazing at what you do and we both trust you implicitly both at work and in life. I don’t think you realize how important that is to both of us. The people we’ve put together at K-H, the board members especially, are like family and Ali’s absolutely not joking when she says she never wants you to leave. We know we’ve got the best there is and we’re not letting you go. And you’re just going to have to figure out a way to deal with your own awesomeness. That’s the dirty truth.”

They finished up their meal and started the walk back to the K-H office building a few blocks away. The fact that this was the same walk that had nearly cost Ashlyn and Drew their lives never escaped anybody who made that walk again, especially not Ali who anxiously waited for the three members of her immediate family to appear safely at her door again after their morning in the museum. She was particularly nervous that day because of her wife’s recent PTSD flare-up. Ashlyn and Ali had agreed long ago not to let that one event take that street or that museum away from them. The keeper would always be more vigilant than anybody else on the sidewalk when she made that walk, but she wasn’t going to give in to her fear. Not ever. Whitney pushed Becca in front of them in the stroller while Ashlyn walked next to her, holding onto one twin’s hand in each of her own strong hands. She was hoping to get the twins back to the K-H daycare before they turned into pumpkins at naptime. They still took one big nap at 12:30pm every day and they were already past that and it had been an exciting and busy morning. The kids were tired and starting to get cranky.

“Horticultural Therapy?” Whitney frowned as she listened, trying to understand the new concept that Ashlyn’s therapist had suggested to help her beat her PTSD flare-up. “You grow things?”

“Yeah, basically” the keeper explained. “There’ve been a bunch of studies done on vets who suffer from pretty bad PTSD and it works for them” she shrugged as they walked along the busy sidewalk. “Mattie thinks it might work for me too. I’ll pretty much try anything if it helps me stay right. My regular exercises didn’t work very well this last time.”

“The Meg thing?”

“Yep. I didn’t even realize what was happening to me until it was almost really bad.”

“I didn’t get it either” Whitney finally admitted. The guilt had been eating at her for the two weeks since her bestie had confided in her. “I’m sorry Ash.”

“Hey, Ali didn’t even see it. Don’t feel bad. I mean, looking back at it now we’re all idiots for not seeing it. But now we know better. Next time something happens to one of the kids we’ll all be on the lookout. But hopefully I’ll be some kind of gardener extraordinaire or something by then and it won’t even phase me.”

“Are...gon...den...Unky...?” Lily asked in her adorable but impossible to understand mumble, only those syllables coming through.
“What honey?” Ashlyn bent down towards her daughter who repeated the same question but with the exact same unintelligible result. “Try again Lily, remember to try and finish one word before you start on the next one, ok?”

“She said, ‘Are we gonna have a garden like Unky Chris?’” Dodge translated for his sister who was still working on her mumbling and mild stuttering. She gave him a quick smile of gratitude and relief.

“Dodger” Ashlyn cocked her head at the boy who was grinning guiltily up at her. “Thank you for your help but you know we’re supposed to let Lily do it herself, right?”

“Sorry Mama.”

“Alright, just do better next time” she squeezed his little hand before turning to Lily. “And I’m not sure yet sweet pea. Maybe” she shrugged again. “Do you think we should have a garden like Uncle Chris?”

“Yeah!” both kids answered enthusiastically and at the same time.

“Ok, well I’ll let you know as soon as we get it figured out.”

“You should talk to Erin. She could hook you up or at least point you in the right direction” Whitney suggested, referencing Sarah the architect’s wife who was an actual horticulturist.

Erin Campbell-Warren, she and Sarah had opted to hyphenate when they got married, was a well-educated, fully trained and licensed, honest to goodness horticulturist that was borderline kooky about plants. She had gone to the University of Connecticut and received her Bachelor of Science degree in Horticulture Science and then gone on to get her Arboriculturist, fancy name for an arborist, certificate as well as an advanced degree in Botany. She wasn’t as into the science and research aspect of plants and trees as she was the practical use of them in various designs and applications. She held a number of jobs after college, learning many different things from each position. The field was very broad and you could find work in dozens of different types of jobs. The trick was to find the one specific area in the field of horticulture that appealed to you most. Erin worked in nurseries as a buyer as well as a grower. She spent a couple of years as an arborist for a big commercial company that took care of all of the trees in the city of Hartford, CT. She worked as a garden designer in one of the big box stores but she didn’t like that very much because she never got to go and see the actual yards and gardens she was helping homeowners design. But she knew she had found what she was looking for – garden design. She moved to the Boston area and started working for a landscape architect who specialized in big, custom homes for very wealthy people.

That was how she had met Sarah Warren in the first place. Her company had been hired to design the landscape for a private university in the Boston area. Sarah’s firm had designed the new wing of the school and Sarah was the lead architect for the project. It was a little unusual because Erin preferred working on the custom homes rather than the institutional properties. Sarah specialized in commercial architecture and if Erin hadn’t worked on that one university project they may not have met at all.

“Wow, I never thought of that” the keeper looked at her best friend in genuine amazement. “See, this is why you’re so important. One of the many reasons. That’s a great idea Whit.”

Ashlyn thought quickly about Erin and remembered Ali explaining how there were two types of architects. The super analytical ones that were very smart and highly functional and very organized. And the slightly wacky ones who were incredibly creative and also very smart but who
didn’t always seem like they knew how to tie their shoes. The keeper recognized Sarah as the first kind of architect and extrapolated the theory out to horticulturists. Erin was definitely the second kind. A long time ago, Ashlyn and Whitney had discussed how interesting it was that both Ali and Sarah had ended up with more creative and laid back wives. Erin was exactly who Ashlyn needed to talk to. She was passionate about her plants and trees and always eager to teach people about the beauty of nature all around them – sometimes whether they wanted to learn or not.

“Glad I could help” the lawyer chuckled as they approached the building and waited to cross the street at a crosswalk.

“What do we do before we cross the street guys?” Ashlyn challenged her children.

“Hold hands!” Lily yelled, and spoke clearly enough for both Ashlyn and Whitney to understand her.

“Great job Lily” Whitney praised her and gave her a warm smile.

“That’s right my girl, and what else?”

“Look both ways!” Dodge replied loudly, finally remembering the second thing. “Look both ways!”

“Bingo little D” Whitney tousled the curly hair on the top of his head because he was between the two women.

“Very good” Ashlyn added. “Alright, the walk signal says walk so let’s go” she instructed as they all looked to the left and then to the right and then set out across the pavement.

“There’s a community garden in Arlington” Whitney picked up their conversation again as they walked into the main entrance of the building. “I don’t know much about it but I’ll look into it if it’ll help. You know, if you need a space to practice or something? I don’t know” she chuckled. “My mom gardened a lot but I never did much with it. I was never home...”

“I know, me too, with Gram” Ashlyn agreed quickly and laughed. “We were always playing soccer somewhere.”

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Ali and Ashlyn loved their children fiercely. They could be fiercely protective about them and fiercely jealous of missing out on big and even small milestones any of the kids achieved when they weren’t around. They encouraged all their kids to be fiercely loyal and fiercely passionate and fiercely independent and fiercely creative with whatever they did. Their own, natural and powerful love emboldened the children and, hopefully, guided them towards self-discovery and happiness. That was what they wanted for their offspring. Figure out who you are and what you love to do and then have the courage to go and do it. What they also passed along to the next generation was their fierce competitiveness. It shouldn’t have been a surprise, not in the least. All four kids loved to win and tried hard to do so, but none more than Josie. Even at the young age of 4-3/4 she would do almost anything to win whatever it was that they were playing. She had even been known to cheat. But neither mom tolerated that from anybody. They were still young and there was much coaching to do for all of them. It was almost as if Josie got both Ashlyn’s and Ali’s competitiveness in her one tiny little body. A double dose for the half-size little girl. The twins were rapidly catching up to their older sister in height and weight.

Early in May the twins were really into hide and seek. It was easily their favorite game and they
would have played it constantly if they had been allowed to. The problem was that unless Josie
played with them it wasn’t any fun with just the two of them. They badgered any adult that entered
the big old house to go downstairs to the playroom and play hide and seek. After talking about it
for what seemed like months, Ashlyn had gone forward with the playroom idea and gave up the
front half of the enormous and over-sized gym for the new play space. When you went down the
stairs into the basement you ended up in the playroom. It took up half the length, from front to
back, of the square part of the house. The back half became the now smaller gym. They didn’t put
a dividing wall between the two spaces because part of the reason for doing this was so that
Ashlyn, or Ali, could work out and still keep an eye on the kids. They had wall to wall carpet
installed on the playroom half of the floor and put a fresh coat of paint on the three walls. They
bought a new, cheap sofa to go down there and moved the medium-sized flat screen tv from the
family room down there so the kids could put on their shows while they played if they wanted to.
There meant a new tv for the family room which was about due for an upgrade anyway. It had been
10 years since Ashlyn had bought a lot of the furniture and electronics and many of those things
were starting to wear out. They were dying to put the big L-shaped couch from the front living
room down in the basement so they could get a new one. That thing had survived 7 years of kids,
that May, as well as 10 years of dogs and had definitely seen better days. But it was too big for the
playroom and there really wasn’t anything wrong with it to rationalize buying a new one. But both
moms knew they wouldn’t be upset if something happened to that couch that made it unfit for the
front living room. If they had to bet, it would be on Dodge but you just never knew. All the kids
were careless when they were distracted or sleepy, even typically careful Drew.

There was a big closet in the playroom, under the staircase, with shelves for most of the toys and
games and puzzles and art supplies and anything else the kids played with. The playroom was
ground zero for the toys and Ali was thrilled to be able to move most of the toys from the first
floor down there. There would always be some toys and things in the front living room but she and
Ashlyn both tried very hard to limit it to the one big toybox that was in the room. And they had
emptied out one of the bookcases in the front living room and filled it with kids books for them
too. That stayed just as it was. All of the big, over-sized toys like the play kitchen and the big
dollhouse and the large kids easel all lived in the playroom. This room was almost always messy
and even when it was ‘cleaned up’ it was full of toys that were just lined up as neatly as possible.
The moms considered it a win if they could walk through the room to the gym without stepping on
or over any toys. For Ali, the playroom was the most exciting development in the big old house
since Ashlyn surprised her with the soaking tub in the master bathroom after their belated
honeymoon.

The first week of May, Ashlyn was enjoying a rousing game of hide and seek with her three
youngest children on the first floor of the house. Ali had a dinner meeting but would be home
before bedtime and would pick up Drew from baseball practice on her way. It had been one of
those evenings where the keeper left the dinner dishes for later and jumped into an impromptu
game before bathtime. As much as both moms preferred to stick to a schedule for the kids, every
once in a while they both went off-script and the kids loved it.

“One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi...” the blonde counted out loudly from her
starting spot at the foot of the front stairs by the front door. She leaned against the wall on the first
step with her eyes pressed into her forearm as she slowly counted to twenty. One of the cutest
things to watch was the three little kids bouncing around and into each other as the adrenaline
coursed through their veins while they frantically tried to find a good place to hide. It was freaking
adorable. There were about five places that they all went to first, scattering to one of the other spots
if their first choice was already occupied. They had learned the hard way not to argue about it. The
counting stopped for nobody so if you were silly enough to waste your 20 seconds arguing with
your brother or sister instead of finding another hiding place, then you were going to lose for sure.
And nobody wanted to lose. Sometimes the kids wanted to be the seeker but usually they asked the grown up to be the seeker for them. Dodge and Lily couldn’t count to 20 yet anyway so unless there was another person to help them count, which was a great way to watch all the fun without having to hide, it was easier for the adult to be the permanent seeker. But Josie liked to count and she loved to make her moms hide too. That was definitely one of her favorite things – finding her mommy or mama during hide and seek. It was a thrilling moment for the little girl.

“Eighteen Mississippi, Nineteen Mississippi, Twenty Mississippi... ready or not, here I come!” Ashlyn shouted and then opened her eyes and started to look around the front living room. “Hmmm...where could my three little babies be? Are they in here Persey?” she spoke loudly as she looked under the blanket on the couch and behind the recliner.

Persey and Fred had begrudgingly come to understand that this was not a game for them to participate in. In fact, they had been rudely ushered out of the room after giving away the hiding place of everybody who lived in the house at one point or another. Fred would stand with his head stuck into the pantry and the rest of his body wagging back and forth. Or Persey would yip and yawn and sometimes even bow down at whomever was hiding under the big dining room table. It was the worst when you had a great hiding spot and then one of the dogs gave you up like that. Even Ashlyn had to admit it. The keeper slowly made the rounds. She found Dodge, who was easily the most impatient of all their children, in the mudroom coat closet. That and the hall bathroom were the two easiest spots and most of the kids had learned to avoid them because they were always checked first.

“Oh, look who I found! A little Dodger!” she shouted out so the girls would know their brother had been caught.

“Wee took my spot” he whined as he stepped over a bunch of shoes and tumbled out of the big closet. Ashlyn made a mental note to go back in there and make sure he hadn’t crushed too many of her wife’s shoes before the brunette got home. “In the...”

“Nuh uh uh” the blonde cut him off and gave him a cautionary look. “Don’t tell me where anybody else is! That’s cheating” she pulled him into her legs for a hug. “You can sit with the doggies or you can come with me but no cheating or pointing or anything like that. You know the rules.”

“Yeah” he looked at the floor for a couple of seconds and then trailed along behind his mama as she moved into the kitchen.

“Who will I find next? Will it be the super brave Lily girl?” she poked her head around the wall and into the backstairs as she spoke dramatically. Lily still got nervous sometimes hiding by herself and the keeper wanted to encourage and praise her for being brave. “Oooh, not there. I thought for sure I’d find somebody there” she smiled to herself. “Maybe I’ll find the super sneaky JoJo first...what do you think, my trusty assistant?” she looked at Dodge who just giggled back at her.

“I don’t know Mama” he shrugged adorably.

Ashlyn had already told everyone that this would be the last game so she wasn’t surprised they had put more effort into this round. It was almost 7pm and that left them just about an hour for bathtime and then it would be right into storytime tonight. There was no time to waste.

“I think I can smell somebody” the keeper teased as she looked into the big two-sided fireplace between the kitchen and the family room. All fireplaces and the front parlor were off limits so she was very happy not to find one of her daughters there. “Somebody smells like hotdogs...can you smell that, trusty assistant?” She walked to the pantry which was rarely empty. That was the twins’ favorite place to hide and the keeper knew Lily was there because of Dodge’s earlier complaint.
Every kid, including Meg when she was little, loved that pocket door. “There she is!” she yelled as she slid the pocket door all the way open to reveal little Lily standing in the corner as if her stillness might make her invisible.

Lily screamed in surprise and a little bit of fear when Ashlyn made her loud and abrupt entrance.

“Mama!! You found me!” she yelled back and the keeper noticed how much easier it was to understand her when she spoke loudly with some air in her lungs. She made another mental note to talk to Ali about that and see if she agreed.

“You did a great job hiding in here all by yourself sweet pea” Ashlyn hugged her and kissed the top of her head. “Alright, just one little munchkin left to find” she spoke loudly again and picked up the pace a little bit with both twins following her. “Where oh where could she be?”

It took another full fifteen minutes for her to find Josie. It was one of the hardest finds the blonde could ever remember and that included the one time Josie had helped Dodge into the clothes dryer in the mudroom. That had led to a whole, serious conversation about how none of the kids were allowed to touch any of the appliances unless a grown up told them to. But that night in May Ashlyn was legitimately trying hard to find Josie and failing. She was sure the girl must have cheated and hidden in the front parlor and stepped over the gate to take a look. Neither twin knew where their sister was because they had been distracted by their own little dispute. It was a shame because as much as the keeper despised cheating she was seriously behind schedule for bathtime and really needed to find the little redhead. She looked everywhere she could think of: the closet under the backstairs, the closet under the front stairs, the bathroom, under the nook table, under the coffee table in the living room, under the dining room table, the closet next to the pantry near the door from the family room to the dining room...

“Josie if you’re hiding someplace you’re not supposed to be you need to come out now. No cheating. You know the rules” Ashlyn announced, more frustrated than she wanted to admit. She was standing in the mudroom with her hands on her hips. “Come on Jose...”

Ashlyn spun around quickly when she heard a tiny little voice in the distance.

“I’m not cheating!”

It sounded like it had come from the front parlor or maybe the dining room, but she had already checked both rooms. She waited another few seconds and heard a little giggle that told her she should definitely check the dining room again.

“Are you in here little one?” she asked in her normal tone of voice as her eyes scanned the almost dark room. The lights were off but plenty of it bled into the room from the family room as well as the hall which was where Ashlyn had come from. “How are you in here?” she asked again as she focused on the built-ins in the two corners of the room by the exterior wall of the house. They had never made those off limits because it never occurred to them that one of their kids could fit inside one of them. Ashlyn still wasn’t convinced but she couldn’t come up with a better alternative. She inspected both wooden built-ins and determined that there was no way Josie was inside either one. What the hell? she asked herself under her breath. “JoJo are you stuck? Do you need help getting out of your spot?” the blonde tried to keep the worry out of her voice as she looked at the empty floor under the long dining room table for about the fourth time. Just as Ashlyn was starting to officially get nervous, she heard another little giggle and was able to hone in on it. She dropped to her hands and knees next to the dining room table and couldn’t believe her eyes. “There you are! What a great hiding spot Jo! Great job sweetheart” she enthused as she reached over and poked her daughter’s forehead as the redhead grinned back at her.
She had crawled up onto the seats of two of the dining room chairs that were pushed in, under the table where they belonged. Ashlyn didn’t think anybody had done that before but she would have to check with Ali when she got home. Crap. She would be home soon and they hadn’t even started baths yet.

“Allright winner, come on out of there so we can go get baths done. Or do you guys want to do showers tonight?” she asked as she motioned for Josie to come out of her hiding place.

“Bath!”
“Shower!”
“Shower!”

“Ok, showers it is, sorry son. You were outvoted” Ashlyn stood up and moved one of the dining room chairs so Josie could get out from underneath the table easier. “Come on sweetie, let’s go. It’s late and we’re behind.”

She smiled at the redhead and pushed the chair back into place as Josie hugged her legs. Dodge and Lily were already on their way to the front stairs and Ashlyn picked Josie up high and kissed her cheek before putting her back down on the ground. As she did so she detected the unmistakable smell of urine but couldn’t imagine where it was coming from. She thought maybe the hall bathroom because they were kind of close to it but then she noticed a big dark spot on Josie’s pink legging pants.

“Why are your pants wet JoJo?” she asked quietly, not wanting to embarrass the little girl in front of her brother and sister if she didn’t have to.

Josie had been potty trained for almost 2-1/2 years and never ever had accidents. She had been the only one of the kids that never wet the bed, even when she was just learning.

“I had to pee” she shrugged and started to walk towards the front stairs.

“Well, do you need to go pee now?”

“No Mama” she gave the keeper a half-amused, half-disdainful look over her shoulder, as if she couldn’t believe Ashlyn didn’t understand. “I already peed. I couldn’t get out of my spot so I just went” she shrugged and kept walking.

“Oh, so you were stuck then” Ashlyn nodded, thinking she had made sense of it. “How did you finally get out then?”

“I wasn’t stuck” she stopped and turned to face Ashlyn with one hand on her tiny little hip and the other one waving in front of her as she spoke. She was explaining it like it was the most obvious thing in the whole world. For a split second the keeper felt like she was standing in front of her wife who often used the exact same mannerisms when she talked. “But I didn’t want to give up my spot and lose so I just had to go.”

“Oh, I see” Ashlyn replied and tried desperately not to laugh. Thankfully, Josie turned around again and stood with her siblings who were waiting for their mama to unlock the gate so they could go upstairs. “Alright then, up we go.”

The keeper made another mental note to check the two dining room chairs and see if they needed to be cleaned, or burned. As she followed her children up the stairs, listening to them yammer to each other about hiding places and who counted better, Mommy or Mama, she couldn’t help but be impressed by the conviction Josie had shown during that game. Neither she nor Ali had ever
suggested that anything was more important than using the bathroom when you needed to. Games, challenges, baths, showers, even meals were all put on hold if somebody needed to relieve themselves. Ashlyn wasn’t sure if even she or Ali would have been competitive enough to pee their pants rather than give up their awesome hiding spot when they were a month shy of 5 years old. But Josie had done it without even blinking an eye. She couldn’t have cared less if Dodge or Lily knew about it either. She wasn’t embarrassed and she didn’t regret her decision at all. It was as if it was just something that you did when you were trying to win the game. Like it was something she expected everybody to do if they had been in her shoes. That game of hide and seek would turn out to be one of the childhood moments Ali and Ashlyn would talk about for the rest of their lives. Anytime their diminutive but undaunted daughter achieved something remarkable as she grew up, her mothers would relive that game of hide and seek when more of Josie’s beautiful true colors had revealed themselves.
Halfway between the twins’ 3rd and Drew’s 7th birthday parties in May, Ashlyn met Erin at the jobsite she was working on in Brookline, MA. The keeper knew the area a little bit because both Bob Kraft and Tom Brady lived there and she had visited both enormous homes before. She and Ali had been guests at the Kraft home several times over the years. At Erin’s project, the house that had just been built was gigantic and looked like one of the mansions you see on a fancy estate in the French countryside. The only thing bigger than the house was the 5 acres that surrounded it, waiting for expensive sod, a mixture of Kentucky bluegrass, ryegrass, and fine fescue, to be laid the next day. The pallets of it were just being delivered as the keeper watched from the driveway she had just walked up from the street. It was a quarter mile driveway designed to insure privacy from the prying eyes of passing cars or neighbors. It was a less than warm, drizzly day and Ashlyn tugged the hood of her rain jacket out towards the tip of her nose as she scanned the property for Erin. It didn’t take long to spot her. She was the one pointing and telling everybody else what to do as strong men unloaded the sod and positioned it where Erin instructed. The better placed the pallets were now, the faster the install would go tomorrow.

“Hey, sorry about that” the horticulturist smiled into the hug she gave Ashlyn twenty minutes later. “Somehow the 1pm delivery showed up at 10am instead” she shrugged. “I don’t know why we even bother to make schedules half the time” she sighed.

“If now’s not a good time...”

“No, no, it’s great. One less thing to worry about for tomorrow and we’re in good shape. This rain really helps us out too.”

“Really?” Ashlyn tilted her head in surprise. “I’d think it would slow you down and make everything worse?”

“Nope, the cool temperature and the rain are perfect for planting sod. Couldn’t ask for better really” she smiled and it was easy to see how passionate she was about her work. “I’d rather be planting sod two weeks ago when we were supposed to, but you know” she paused and rolled her eyes with a laugh, “schedules.”

The two women walked over to the temporary outbuilding that had been built for Erin to organize all of the landscaping that was to be done over the next month or so. It was just a raw building with studded walls and a basic roof. Nothing more than a glorified shed really. There were a couple of folding chairs in different corners and a small folding table underneath the construction lamp hanging in the center of the roughly 10 foot by 12 foot room. There were blueprints nailed up on the walls and color-coded diagrams, laminated so rainy days wouldn’t affect them, stacked on the table. There was a giant flow chart calendar on another wall with tomorrow’s date circled. Erin took her Boston Red Sox cap off and ran her hand through her short pixie-style hair.

“So horticultural therapy huh?” she smiled warmly at the taller keeper and invited her to sit with her at the table.

Erin was one of those women who would be cute even after she was old and her head was covered in grey hair. She was the same age as Ali, 42, and three years younger than her architect wife. She was only about 5’ 4” tall with a petite build and a round, smiling face. She had light brown hair, straight, that had never been longer than a shaggy bob in the entire ten years that Sarah had known her. She was an interesting mix of hippy chick and scientist and could be a total flake sometimes. She wasn’t pretty but she wasn’t not pretty either – the natural curiosity about life that lit up her
deep green eyes attracted you to her even if her facial features might not have stood out. She was also the one who would surprise you at Trivia Night with some correct answers to some insanely obscure or difficult questions. Nobody trusted her answer but she never pushed too hard about it either way. She knew she was right and didn’t really care if anybody else believed her. She was the perfect, unstructured yin to Sarah’s ordered yang and it made complete sense to Ali why their seemingly opposite personalities worked together. Everybody in Ali and Ashlyn’s friend group liked Sarah. But Erin could rub people the wrong way with her loopiness or her quirkiness. At first Ashlyn thought she was annoying and fake because she was almost tirelessly cheerful. As the keeper got to know Erin better though, she realized that her positive attitude was a choice the horticulturist had made about how she wanted to live her life. It turned out that the two more creative women, Ashlyn and Erin, had more in common than the keeper first thought. Erin was a cute, sweet, little pixie of a woman with a personality a lot like Luna Lovegood from the Harry Potter books, but not quite as spacey. There was a scientist in there too along with the free-thinker.

“Yeah” Ashlyn grabbed the back of her neck nervously after they sat down in the folding chairs. “I umm...I don’t know if you know about the...PTSD symptoms I struggle with sometimes...” she glanced up quickly and saw Erin studying her curiously, almost analytically. She dropped her eyes and her hand to her lap and took a deep breath, holding it for a few seconds before letting it out. Erin never said a word, she just let Ashlyn take her moment. “My therapist says I should try...gardening...because she thinks it might help. But I don’t know the first thing about it and I was hoping you could just point me in the right direction. But I know you’re busy” she looked up quickly again and turned her head to the end of the building with the big double barn-style doors open wide to the gently falling rain, hoping to escape those penetrating green eyes.

“Well, you’ve kind of told the world about that already Ash” her reply was soft and kind and she had a little grin on her face as she spoke. Anybody paying attention knew about Ashlyn’s struggles with depression and the passion with which she helped run The Mental Health Initiative. “But I don’t know any details if that makes you feel less self-conscious.”

“Oh yeah, shit” the keeper chuckled and looked back at Erin who had an impish smile on her face. “I always forget about that, you know, in my everyday life” she rubbed her face with her hands and sighed loudly. The amused answer from Erin had cut the tension between them instantly. “I don’t know why I’m making this so weird, Erin. Sorry for being such a dork.”

“It’s a little weird because our wives used to have sex together” the horticulturist dropped the bomb with the same little grin on her face and a roll of her eyes. “And even though we’re all friends...” she squinted a little and watched Ashlyn’s face register shock at her bluntness and then turn a little pink as it changed to a small, shy smile, “we both know we’re not ever going to be best friends. But I’ve always been cool with that and I think you have too. Either way, I’m happy to help” she smiled and leaned forward with her forearms resting on the table between them. “I’m glad you called me.”

“Thanks. I really appreciate it” Ashlyn nodded and smiled a little bit bigger. “And I am cool with...that” she paused for a few seconds. “Just for the record, I’ve always really liked Sarah, always. She was good to Ali and I’ll always be grateful for that. I don’t like talking about this with you, or anybody really, but it feels like this might be our one chance to sort of...”

“Say hi to the elephant in the room that we’ve artfully avoided for, what?” she scrunched up her face to do the math, “8 or 9 years now?” both women laughed.

“Yeah, I guess” the keeper agreed. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m happy we’re all friends and especially that they’re good friends. I don’t know, it’s just hard sometimes” Ashlyn admitted and instantly regretted even having the conversation. Where was it going to go? What was there to gain
from exchanging any of these words? “Never mind, forget it.”

“It’s the dreaded ex, the person who had to be gotten over before there could be an us” Erin offered with a matter-of-fact shrug of her shoulders. “The last person my wife slept with before me was Ali and that’s always going to bug me a little. But none of us get to where we are today without going through all of that back then. So I’m just thankful that it all worked out. And, just so you know” she leaned even closer and lowered her voice a bit, “Sarah has never ever said a bad word about you. And she always gives you credit for being so great about her friendship with Ali now. She has never been interested in or able to stay friends with her exes. Ali’s the first.”

“And last” the keeper quipped and smiled.

“And last” Erin leaned back and laughed again. “Most definitely the last” she nodded slowly as they smiled at each other appreciatively and paused for a minute. “So what can I tell you about growing things?”

The two women spent the next hour talking about the basics of Horticultural Therapy and then went on to discuss what kinds of things Ashlyn thought she might want to try growing. The keeper talked about her love of flowers and her Gram’s flower garden down in Florida, but ended up spending most of the time talking about what it would take to grow a small vegetable garden that maybe even the kids could help out with. Erin explained that there was still time to plant a successful vegetable garden, as long as it went in before the end of May.

“It’s not an exact science, that’s what makes it so challenging. There are so many factors that impact the growing season...temperature, soil condition, plant health, sunlight, water, wind...”

“So what you’re saying is that there are about ten different ways for me to fuck this up” Ashlyn chuckled after putting her pen down. She had been taking copious notes as the trained horticulturist had dropped her wisdom. “Gee, thanks.”

“More like twenty” Erin laughed. “But the cool thing about a garden is that you’ll get to know it over time. Next year you’ll be able to anticipate its needs better. You’ll start to learn why the squash grows better in one area and not the other. You’ll figure out what it needs, one fuck-up at a time” she grinned. “Every garden is different. And even if you feel like you’ve finally got it just right, it’ll still be different again next year. I know I’ve only got the one, but they say it’s like your kids. You love them all and you’ve raised them all the same but they’re all different, no matter what you do. No matter how strictly you stick to the same methods that have brought you success before.”

Sarah and Erin’s daughter, Daphne, was 2-1/2 years old and cute as could be. She was 5 months older than Maddox Dwyer and 5 months younger than Dodge and Lily Krieger. She fit in pretty well with the group of kids when they got together, but sometimes got overwhelmed by the sheer number of children swirling around her. Everyone in the four-family group chalked it up to Daphne being an only child, until one of them remembered that Becca was an only child too and was already better adjusted at the age of 14 months. Daphne was also not fond of dogs, which made sense because Sarah and Erin had two cats. They lived in a large condo in Boston, over near the Fenway, which was not Fenway Park. The Fenway was an area near the Fens which was a reedy, swampy section of land that had definitely seen some disgusting and unseemly times in its past. The Gardner Museum abutted the Fenway and that’s where it got its original name, ‘Fenway Court’. These days, it was one of the tonier addresses to have in the city, especially in one of the big, old condo buildings that the Campbell-Warrens lived in.

Sarah and Erin still had season tickets to the Breakers, as well as the Pride, who were still really good but everybody missed seeing Hilary Knight on the ice, and they brought Daphne to most of
the soccer games. That’s where they most often socialized with everybody, but they had started getting invited to birthday parties since Daphne was born. Sarah and Molly Cross had become good friends too, separate from anybody else. Niki, outstanding friend that she would always be, checked with Ashlyn to make sure it would be ok with her first. There was no risk that Sarah and Erin would ever become the fifth family, nobody expected or even wanted that, not even Molly or Sarah or Ali who often got together as a threesome in the city. And once the Sam Machado situation had finally been processed completely and shared with their friends and family, Ashlyn went back to her usual, confident self when it came to Sarah being in Ali’s life. The weird shift that had upset the keeper’s balance last Fall, aging, her knee surgery, Sam, Sarah, the kids getting older, had slowly settled back into place. The meeting with Erin in the rain only seemed to solidify things for the keeper even more. As off-kilter as she felt because of the PTSD symptoms from her scare with Meg that Spring, Ashlyn finally felt like the previous ruptures that had caused her so much discomfort and unease had been sutured and glued and healed. She had never really been sure how she felt about Erin Campbell-Warren before. She honestly hadn’t spent too much time considering her at all. But after the woman had devoted so much time to helping her that morning, for no other reason than she was a good and kind person, Ashlyn felt true friendship for Erin for perhaps the first time ever.

“Thanks Erin. I mean it. I appreciate you talking with me this morning, more than you can know.”

“Growing things is good for the soul” Erin beamed as she shared something she believed with every fiber of her being. “My grandfather used to say that all the time when I was a little girl and it’s still the truest thing I know.”

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Mother’s Day was Sunday May 10th that year and the twins’ 3rd birthday party was held the following Saturday, May 16th. Deb Christopher spent Mother’s Day weekend in NYC with Kyle, Nathan and the two foster kids who were getting better all the time. Deb couldn’t believe how much progress they had made just since Easter, 5 weeks earlier. Cristina had been faced with a real challenge at preschool when a young teacher had begun her internship after April vacation. Miss Mary was a youthful, ‘mom age’ looking woman, especially compared to the older teacher who was in her 50s. It had been a challenging first week for the little girl but Kyle and Nathan had already let the school know about Cristina’s unique struggles. The older teacher and the two dads worked with the young girl before, during and after that first week and by mid-way through the second week things were going well. Cristina wasn’t running up to the sweet younger teacher for hugs and praise like the other preschoolers, but the fact that she allowed Miss Mary to talk directly to her and even answered some of the teacher’s questions was a huge win and they all knew it.

Up in Gloucester, Mother’s Day had begun with a chaotic and a little frightening start, but finished up in fine form. The plan was for the four-family moms to go to brunch together at a nice restaurant while the dads watched all the kids. Niki and Molly usually spent the day with their large, extended families but were going to be around this year for a change and Whitney and Ashlyn wanted to take advantage of the opportunity and had spearheaded the whole thing. The only flaw in the plan was that there were 6 moms and only 2 dads in the group and even though Ryan and Dom were terrific fathers and great guys, asking them to take care of 11 kids ranging in age from 14 months to 10-1/2 years was a tall order. Vicki, Ken and Sandi all offered to assist but that didn’t seem right either – Vicki and Sandi were both moms too. They deserved to come to brunch as well. Tanner and Koty and Briana had come to the rescue and agreed to help Ryan, Dom and Ken wrangle the kids for a couple of hours that Sunday morning. Vicki was torn about missing time with Tanner who was so busy travelling with the Revs that his family didn’t get to see him very often. But she had just seen him at the Revs game Saturday afternoon and he would be spending the whole of Mother’s Day with his family so she would see him after brunch too. It was
settled. Niki and Molly felt terrible passing their three children off to other people’s family members but their discomfort only lasted for about an hour. They would just have to believe their friends when they all said it was more than ok. It’s not like it happened very often and it was such a rarity to get to spend Mother’s Day with the Crosses, Whitney and Ashlyn were especially happy to get to hang with their bestie Niki. And Molly had formed great friendships with everybody, as was Molly’s way, even though she was the one who had known the fewest members of the group to begin with.

Getting everybody up and ready and out the door of the big old house on Sunday morning had been tricky. All of the grandparents, even the long-distance ones including Tammye and Carol from their European honeymoon, had called or Facetimed the kids to remind them and nudge them to make a drawing or a card for their moms and give it to them Sunday morning. Even Meg had called that morning to wish Ashlyn and Ali a good day, and then insisted on talking to Drew in private. It was cute and sweet but ill-timed because all four kids decided that they absolutely had to make a card for their moms, even if they had already done one. Drew couldn’t find the first one he had made, and the twins reacted as if it was the very first time they had ever heard about the big event. Only Josie presented both her mommy and her mama each with a beautiful hand-colored card. Both Ali and Ashlyn loved how excited the kids were about celebrating Mother’s Day with them but they just hadn’t planned on an extra 90 minutes of time spent coloring at the nook table after breakfast. They had taken turns supervising the creativity while the other ran up and showered and got ready for brunch. Ali spent an extra half hour up there and came down with outfits for all four kids to put on as soon as they were done coloring.

“That’s awesome Lily girl” Ashlyn enthused as she tried to rein in the activity by putting caps back on markers as the clock continued to tick away.

They had to leave in 45 minutes to get to the Dwyer’s house on time. There was a half-hour ‘adjustment’ period factored in so everybody could hang out together and get used to each other before the brunch moms left. They had chosen Sydney’s house for two reasons. First it was all set up for little kids with Maddox still only 2 years old. And second, it was closest to the restaurant so a mom could run home if an emergency presented itself.

“How’s it coming down here?” Ali asked, slightly out of breath, as she swooped into the family room from the backstairs. She set out each outfit on the couch as Dodge and Drew both brought over their latest creation to show her. “Wow you guys, those are both really great!” She bent over and hugged and kissed both boys who grinned back at her, pleased with her reaction. “You guys are all so talented and creative. I just love it!” she praised as she herded her sons back towards the nook table to start officially cleaning up.

“Look at these cards and drawings” Ashlyn pointed to Lily and Josie’s handiwork as her wife got closer to the nook. “Pretty amazing huh?” the keeper kissed the top of Lily’s head and then Josie’s.

“These are all fantastic. Really, they’re just beautiful you guys. Thank you so much for making us such great Mother’s Day cards...”

“And decorations” Lily added, carefully and slowly pronouncing all of the syllables in the long word.

“Wow, great job with that big word baby girl” Ali beamed and moved to hug and kiss both Lily and Josie who were still sitting at the table.

“Ok time’s up” Ashlyn announced. She had dutifully given them their countdown warnings at 10 minutes and 5 minutes but had skipped the all-important 1 minute prompt because Ali had come down just before then. “Let’s put everything away now so we can get cleaned up and dressed. “We
“Damn” Ali muttered under her breath. “I meant to bring toothbrushes down here so we could just get ready right here real quick.”

“What about one minute?” Josie complained, still coloring. “We didn’t do one minute.”

“Yeah Mama, you forgot one minute!” Dodge added to the rising hubbub about the missing one-minute warning.

But the moms weren’t listening. They were talking about the pros and cons of trying to get everybody upstairs to brush their teeth and then back downstairs without getting distracted by anything else along the way. It wasn’t likely to happen. They also had to let the dogs out one last time, make sure they had water in their bowl, and finish packing the small cooler with Capri Suns, juice boxes, chocolate milks, cheese sticks, baggies of sliced fruit, etc. By the time they had divvied up the duties the noise from all four kids’ voices clamoring for their one-minute warning was overbearing.

“Ok!” Ashlyn raised her voice above the din. “You have one more minute but before it starts here’s what’s going to happen...” she paused and looked at her wife like she had nine heads. Ali was supposed to be running upstairs to get the toothbrushing stuff while the keeper explained the plan but the brunette was just standing there with her hands on her hips smiling at her little family gathered around the nook table in different states of disarray. “Al...” Ashlyn looked at her again and then chuckled as surprise washed over her beautiful face.

“Oh yeah, right. I’ll be right back” the brunette giggled and trotted towards the backstairs again.

It took them 40 minutes to get teeth brushed, tag-teaming it with Ali taking the kitchen sink and Ashlyn the bathroom sink, bladders emptied, and outfits put on. All four kids balked at the choices Ali had made but they were just going to have to live with it because there wasn’t time to change. The brunette had chosen clothes that she knew all her kids liked so they were just beefing because they felt like they had to push back. The last few parts of the plan were being completed as Drew ran upstairs to use the toilet because he didn’t want to wait for Dodge to be done. Ashlyn let the dogs back in the side door of the family room and gave them a couple of quick, reassuring pats.

“We’ll be back later this afternoon. Be good, doggies.”

It didn’t matter what kind of melee was happening on their way out of the house, Ashlyn always took a second to talk to the dogs and tell them what was going on. As frustrated as Ali got sometimes with the extra few seconds it took, she really adored that sweet compassionate side of her wife more than almost anything.

“Did you grab the ice packs yet?” the keeper asked as she strode into the kitchen and stood next to Ali who was crouched down in front of the open refrigerator, pulling cheese sticks and Go-gurts from one of the lower shelves.

It was time to get a new refrigerator for a couple of reasons, one of which was so they could get one that had the freezer located on the bottom. The idea of putting things the kids wanted to eat and were allowed to eat on the lower shelves so they could actually reach them and start fending for themselves a little bit was important to both moms. The same thing went for the freezer. Not only did it make scientific sense, cold air sinks, but it made logistical sense too. The kids who were strong enough to pull open the freezer drawer could help themselves and their siblings to the popsicles and other things they might want from inside – after asking and receiving parental permission, of course. Ali also wanted a new fridge so the front of it could be magnetic as well as
the sides. When they were cool single people it looked nice and sleek to have the stainless fridge with the nice, clean front. But now they wanted and needed more room to stick things to the appliance that had become the center of the household. They were hoping to have the new fridge for the twins’ birthday party the following Saturday.

“No, I just need a few more things in here first” Ali replied, leaning into the fridge. “Then we’ll be all set.”

“I’ll get them” Ashlyn replied.

She was standing right there anyway. She could see the girls putting their shoes on in the mudroom as they had been asked to do. She heard Drew’s footsteps above them in the boys’ bathroom as well as the flush of the toilet from the first-floor bathroom.

“Wash your hands Dodger” she called out to her son. “And then put your shoes on and wait in the mudroom, please.”

“Ok Mama!” he called back.

Ashlyn, standing behind her squatting wife, opened the freezer door at the top of the fridge and peered inside, trying to locate the four little plastic ice blocks that went into the cooler. She spotted two blue ones in the door and grabbed them in one hand, leaning directly over her wife. Then she picked out one of the red ones on the upper shelf near the front. She bent down and put all three into the cooler, right on top, so Ali could shove them where she wanted them once she had the last few items from the fridge.

“Do we still have 2 blue ones and 2 red ones?” the keeper asked as she started to move things around on the lower shelf of the freezer to try and find the missing red ice block.

“What? Oh, yeah” Ali answered absent-mindedly. “2 of each. Ok, that’s it” she sighed as she leaned back, crouching over her heels again as she put the last couple of things into the cooler right beside her.

“Mommy when are we going?” Josie whined from the mudroom, just a couple of feet away from the open refrigerator and freezer doors.

“In just a minute little one” Ali replied as she started making things fit inside the cooler. She couldn’t back up yet because Ashlyn was still standing behind her and leaning over her. “Just stay there. You’re both doing a great job waiting.”

“There it is” Ashlyn grabbed the fourth ice block and looked down to hand it to her wife, directly below her. What she didn’t see until it was too late, was the frozen pork loin sliding out of place and falling from the freezer like the 5-pound dead weight bomb that it was. “Look out!”

But the warning didn’t come in time. Ali lifted her head up from looking into the cooler so it was about level and she was looking straight ahead when the frozen roast landed right on top of her head with a sickening sound.

“Ow! What the fuck?!?” she yelled and immediately grabbed her head as she sat back on the floor, causing Ashlyn to jump out of the way as she slammed the freezer door shut.

“Oh my God, baby, are you ok?” the keeper shut the fridge door and knelt down next to her wife who was now holding tightly to the top of her head with both hands and a painful grimace on her face. “I’m so sorry...”
“What the hell was that?” she asked with a bite.

“One of the roasts fell and I couldn’t grab it in time” Ashlyn picked up the frozen hunk of meat and showed it to the brunette who squinted at it.

“Jesus, that fucking killed” she said and fought back tears as both little girls, who could now see both their moms because the fridge and freezer doors were closed, stepped closer to inspect the scene on the kitchen floor.

“Language hon” Ashlyn reminded her softly and gladly took the glare she received from the brunette. “I’m so sorry baby. That must have killed. Are you ok?” she could see the tears starting to spill over the bottom of Ali’s eyelids as they looked at each other. The brunette hadn’t moved her hands away from the top of her head yet. She was applying pressure just as you would squeeze the toe you just stubbed. “Let me see” the keeper urged as she knelt taller and moved closer to her wife’s head.

Dodge had now appeared next to his sisters and they all stood there watching intently, somehow knowing it was time to be quiet and still. Drew was making his way down the front stairs and would soon be right there with them as well. Fred was standing near the kids and Persey was right behind Ali, her head low as she sat on her haunches.

“I can’t believe that just happened” Ali chuckled in disbelief as the tears started to fall down her face. “It’s not really funny, but, I mean, come on” she couldn’t help but grin as the blonde got ready to move her hands away from her scalp.

“Oh my God Al” Ashlyn swallowed hard and fought the urge to gag. “There’s so much blood...”

Ali brought the hand that had been pressed to her scalp down and looked at it, covered in blood.

“Well do I need stitches?”

“I don’t know” Ashlyn swallowed awkwardly again and looked up to see four frightened faces staring back at her. “She’ll be ok guys. She has a boo-boo on her head and it’s bleeding a little bit but she’s going to be just fine. I promise. It’s ok.”

She had no idea why, but Ali thought the whole thing was pretty funny. It was annoying and inconvenient and it had hurt like a motherfucker for the first couple of minutes. But now it was just amusing to her that this was the one morning that this kind of ridiculous situation decided to happen to them. It was also something she had been afraid of for years. Ashlyn was great in a lot of situations, but needles and blood were two things that she was pretty terrible with. If it was anything more than a scraped knee or elbow she was almost useless bandaging up the kids. She had gotten better over the years but even the kids knew if they were bleeding they needed to try and find mommy first. Ali could hear the fear in her wife’s voice, even as she tried to soothe their children.

“Honey, how bad is the cut? Do I need stitches or will it stop bleeding on its own?” she tried again, keeping her voice a little lower and trying to make eye contact with her anxious wife.

But Ashlyn’s eyes were darting back and forth between a spot on the front of the refrigerator and the bleeding cut on her wife’s scalp, trying to see enough to make some sort of determination without looking at it for too long.

“Here” the keeper grabbed the dish towel from the refrigerator handle and pressed it against the cut. “There’s too much blood. I can’t see anything. I’m sorry.”
“It’s ok” Ali winced under the pressure but then sat up straight, knowing it was the right thing to do to try and get the bleeding to stop. She would rather have used some paper towels, but she wasn’t going to quibble about probably ruining a silly dish towel. It wasn’t one of her favorites anyway. “Good call with the pressure. It probably started bleeding more when I took my hand away because I was pushing on it too.”

Ashly looked at the clock on the stove and groaned.

“Oh man, we’re late now. What do you want me to do?”

“Ummm...see if Julie’s home. I don’t want to go to the ER if we don’t have to, that’s for damned sure” Ali chuckled. “Then once we know that answer we can figure out what to do next.”

“Drew” the keeper looked at their oldest son who was standing there without his shoes on. Neither he nor Dodge had been able to put their shoes on before the flying pork loin incident. “I need you to run next door and get Mrs. Donaldson for me. Tell her we need her help...”

“He’s not wearing any shoes” Josie pointed out, literally pointing at her brother’s socked feet.

“Well, put your shoes on first buddy, and hurry up ok” Ashlyn’s voice had some desperation in it even though she was trying so hard to hide it.

“Ash, why don’t I just walk over there?”

“Because you have a head wound and you’ll probably get dizzy as soon as you stand up” she quirked her eyebrow at her wife who was usually much smarter than that. “Drew! Why are you just standing there?” she raised her voice and all four kids bumped into each other like those lottery balls that bounce around before they get sucked out and into the appropriate slot in the sequence of winning numbers.

“Ashlyn. You go and get Julie. I’ll stay here with the kids and keep pressure on my head. Go on” Ali reached up and switched her hands on the towel for her wife’s. “Go on Ash. I’ll be fine until you get back.”

The keeper stood up slowly, considering the plan for a few seconds before sprinting into action. She ran through the mudroom, not even closing the door behind her. Somewhere, Dodge was smart enough to know that it should be closed, especially with wandering Fred standing right there about to chase after the blonde. He ran over to it and pushed it shut with a bang, leaning into it with both arms fully outstretched in front of him.

“Don’t get blood all over their house!” Ali yelled after her wife and then looked at her children. “I’m ok guys. Mama’s right. I have a cut on my head but I’m ok. Drew and Dodge, thank you for shutting the door big boy” she nodded quickly at her youngest son. “Why don’t you two get your shoes on so we’ll be ready to go when we finally know where we’re going, ok?”

“Aren’t we going to the brunch party with all the other kids?” Josie asked, a pout ready to take over her face.

“Yes little one, we’re still going to the brunch party. Don’t worry. We might just have to drop me off someplace else first. But let’s just all get ready now.” She gave the boys one of her ‘don’t make me tell you again’ looks and then smiled as she watched them both start to find their shoes. “Drew, make sure your brother’s shoes match ok? Don’t let him put on two different ones. Thank you for helping.”

The truth was, Drew was the only one who could correctly put his own shoes on. Josie could too,
depending on what type of shoes they were and how they zipped up or laced up or velcro’d together. But the twins still needed help with their shoes. Getting a matching pair, putting them on the correct feet and they were definitely not ready for any sort of tying or zipping yet. Ali smiled as she realized that Josie must have helped her little sister with the Velcro on her little saddle shoes. The brunette scooted on her butt and turned around so she was leaning against the refrigerator. She used her least bloody hand and put the lid on the cooler and pushed it further out of the way, over near the counter next to the fridge. She was about to make sure Lily had used the potty before they left when the mudroom door burst open, making everybody jump and more than one of them scream.

“She’s coming. She’s right behind me. Get out of the way guys” Ashlyn urged the kids back towards the wall of the mudroom. “Why don’t you all just sit on the bench until we know what’s next. Drew, what are you doing in the closet?” her voice sounded annoyed.

“He’s helping Dodge with his shoes” Ali explained.

“Oh, good job buddy. Thank you. Just stay out of Mrs. Donaldson’s way...”

“Hey everybody” Julie greeted as she closed the mudroom door behind her with a big smile. “Happy Mother’s Day!”

“Oh Julie” Ali whined. “Please tell me we didn’t interrupt something the kids were doing for you for Mother’s Day...”

“Nope. Not a bit. Justin’s not even home yet” the nurse explained as she moved quickly to Ali’s side to investigate her head wound. “They’re taking me to lunch so I’ve got plenty of time.”

She took a few minutes and looked closely at Ali’s scalp and then frowned. She decided she needed to clean some of the blood away from the cut so she could see better and she and Ashlyn helped Ali up and over to the kitchen sink. Julie told the patient to bend over just a bit so the water she was going to pour down the top of her head would spill back into the sink.

“There goes my good hair day” the brunette quipped.

“I can’t believe how funny you think this all is” Ashlyn shook her head, truly appreciating her wife’s good demeanor.

After several minutes of rinsing the top of her head, Julie could finally see well enough to determine that she didn’t need stitches. It was just another case of head wounds bleeding like crazy and scaring the bejeebus out of everybody.

“So she’ll be ok? The bleeding will stop on its own?” Ashlyn clarified, not ready to stand down from the emergency status she had been in for the past half hour.

“Yes” Julie smiled as she washed and dried her hands on the clean dishtowel over by the sink. “It’s already mostly stopped. Just take it easy, obviously. You’re going to have a headache but that should be it, besides the big lump” she winked.

“Can I wash my hair?”

“Are you kidding me Al?” Ashlyn shot her an incredulous look and shook her head.

“Well I can’t go anywhere with it looking like this” the brunette laughed and turned to face the mudroom where the kids were, amazingly, still watching the drama unfold. “What do you think guys? Does my hair look ok?” she laughed again as she smoothed down the soaking wet middle
part of the top of her hair and pulled it down in front of her face so it almost looked like a tail. “I think it feels pretty good...does it look good too?”

Lily was the first to laugh.

“Mommy you’re silly” she said pretty clearly, making the other kids laugh too.

“I wouldn’t if you don’t have to. Any extra tugging on your scalp will probably open the cut up again. Why don’t you just rinse out the parts of your hair that still have blood in it. That’s the real problem right?” Julie suggested with her own chuckle.

It took another forty minutes, a phone call to Sydney to tell them to go to brunch without them but that they would be joining them late, a tense hair rinse with Ashlyn as the tense rinser in the kitchen sink, and another round of potty visits before they were finally loaded into the minivan and backing out of the driveway. Ali’s hair was still damp and she would just have to deal with it when she got to the Dwyers. Ashlyn made her drink lots of water and sit still and be quiet during the entire thirty-minute drive. As soon as the kids saw their Mommy joke with them about her hair looking good, they knew everything was really ok. They had gone right back to their normal, rambunctious and loud selves. Ashlyn barked out warnings in the minivan and reminded them of their promises to be extra well-behaved because it was Mother’s Day. It had been a hell of a morning and the keeper’s nerves were shot. She wasn’t above resorting to a little guilt to try and keep the car ride civil and quiet.

The flying pork loin incident became the story of the day and of many Mother’s Days to come. Nobody could believe the story but Ali had the half inch gash in the top of her head to prove it. The men at the Dwyer house and the women at the restaurant all laughed out loud as Ali told the story both times. She made a little fun of her skittish wife being afraid of the blood, but ultimately made her the hero of the story for handling everything after the nurse had left. The conversation quickly swung back to the incident again once they returned to Sydney’s house after their delicious brunch.

“And we’re having a big pork loin tomorrow night for dinner if anybody’s interested” Ali laughed, making a genuine invitation. “Extra tender” she joked and everybody else laughed with her.

“If you’re doing it in the crock pot with the sauerkraut then count me in” Whitney licked her lips.

“Ooooh, yeah, sounds so gross but tastes sooooooo good” Sydney agreed eagerly.

Perhaps the funniest part of the whole day was back at the Dwyers when the Krieger kids took their own turns trying to tell the story. The best was Dodge but Lily’s version would have been just as good if she had been bold enough to speak up enough. The combination of being a few days shy of 3 years old with a limited vocabulary and an adorably innocent outlook on everything life had to offer, was what made his simple statement ring so true and absurd. It wasn’t exactly wrong, but it sure wasn’t exactly right either...

“Mama dropped the cold meat on Mommy’s head and gived her an ouchie.”

“Nothing to see here folks,” Ashlyn laughed. “Just a typical Mother’s Day with the Kriegers.”
By the end of May they had celebrated, in chronological order, Kyle’s 19th year of sobriety, Sydney’s 42nd birthday, Mother’s Day, Dodge and Lily’s 3rd birthday, Memorial Day, Drew’s 7th birthday, Niki’s 41st birthday, and Mental Health Awareness month. Ali had made a big cake shaped like the number three and then another one shaped like a seven and finally felt like she was getting the hang of it. The five had been the most difficult for her to do and she was eagerly waiting for her next shot at one for Josie’s 5th birthday in June. The brunette had wanted to ask the kids if they would like different birthday cakes because a lot of their friends were getting these elaborately decorated and themed cakes that went with whatever overdone party theme they were having. But Ashlyn wouldn’t let her.

“I don’t think the kids should have to have these homemade number cakes just because I remember loving mine when I was growing up” Ali tried to explain.

“That’s exactly why they’re going to keep getting those awesome cakes that you make them every year baby. I couldn’t have said it better if I had tried” the keeper looked at her seriously, taking her eyes off of Ali’s nails that she was in the middle of painting. They were sitting together on the couch in the family room unwinding at the end of a long day. “I don’t care if they do ask for a different kind of cake someday, they’re not getting one.”

“Babe, that’s just mean” Ali tilted her head at her sweet wife who had brought her attention back to the brunette’s left pinky finger resting on the lap desk on her lap. They had found over the years that the flat work surface of the small lap desk gave the easiest and best support for painting fingernails, whether they were Ali’s or one of the kids’. “If they ask for a certain cake we’re getting them that cake.”

“No, we’re not. We have a long-standing tradition of birthday cakes in this family, going into our seventh year” she paused and gave the brunette an honest, clear-eyed look before getting back to work. “And we’re not going to throw it away because one of the kids thinks they’re going to like something else better.”

“We’re not huh” Ali couldn’t help but smile at her wife as she playfully, but seriously, defended her birthday cakes.

“No, we’re not. Because if we were to stop doing those awesome, unique, special, one-of-a-kind cakes for them, then they’ll never be able to look back on it when they’re grown up and remember how much they loved it. Or how much they love their mom who took all that time to make them a special cake every single year.”

“It’s not that unique or creative hon, it’s a number...”

“Al, seriously?” she stopped and looked right into the warm amber-colored eyes that she loved so much. “Seriously, I really want to keep going with our cakes, with your cakes. I think it’s one of the
coolest things we do for the kids and I know they love it too, even if they can’t put the words to it yet. And it is unique. When have you ever been to another kid party and seen it? I never have and we’re freaking drowning in kid parties. I think we must go to 30 of them every damned year” she chuckled and was happy to see Ali join her. “I wish I’d had homemade number cakes when I was a kid” she gave her wife a lopsided grin. “I’m telling you, they’ll appreciate it so much someday.”

Kyle had come up by himself for the twins’ actual birthday on May 13th. He was still doing that for all four of his nieces and nephews. It was a Wednesday that year so he took the train up and spent the rest of the day hanging out at the big old house with Dodge and Lily. He filmed them and took some photographs and interviewed them, just as he had done every year. He and Nathan and the kids were going to miss the twins’ party that weekend but they were definitely coming up for Drew’s birthday party at the end of the month. Kyle would make sure to come back up for Drew’s actual birthday too, another Wednesday that year, to interview, film and photograph him for a whole new year. Everybody was nervous about Cristina and Edgar seeing the group of moms again. It was going to be a big visit and Kyle and Nathan really wanted it to go well because they were planning to come up for the week of 4th of July and spend it at the beach with their families. They were trying to move slowly but definitely keep moving forward at the same time and it was difficult to know when they were pushing too hard. The case worker had been a very helpful point of reference for them. And even though she was busy with other foster children who hadn’t been lucky enough to find a long-term, maybe permanent, home yet, Yvette always made time for the Guerrero kids.

Tammye and Carol returned stateside from their month abroad. They flew right into Boston the day before Drew’s party on the Sunday of Memorial Day weekend. It was three days before his actual birthday but he didn’t really care. He had finally realized that when his actual birthday didn’t fall on a convenient party day like Saturday or Sunday, he pretty much got two days to celebrate his big day instead of just one. He was getting bigger and older and smarter all the time. Both Ashlyn and Ali had begun paying extra attention to anything they said in front of him because his little brain was just learning as much as it could, even when the boy himself wasn’t really aware of it.

“Well welcome back to the colonies” Ashlyn grinned as she picked her mother and step-mother up at the airport that Saturday afternoon. She hugged both women hello and then waited with them, and the rest of the people on their flight, for their luggage. “How was the flight?”

“Long” Tammye sighed and yawned. “But good. I’m glad to be home though. Not that it wasn’t the best trip I’ve ever been on” she smiled sweetly and Ashlyn couldn’t help but notice the shift between the two women.

The subtle signs over the past year or so that Tammye was becoming more comfortable with her lesbian relationship had continued to increase. They were never going to be big on public displays of affection or anything. Neither of them had been raised that way and it just really wasn’t in their nature. But they also weren’t going to shy away from the things they had grown comfortable with either. Carol had rubbed Tammye’s back with one hand as they stood there and when Tammye commented about their honeymoon being the best trip she’d ever been on, Carol had leaned over and kissed her cheek. That was new and sincere and sweet and long-overdue in Ashlyn’s opinion. As hesitant as the keeper had been in helping her mother and Carol find their own way and discover some resources to help them as late in life lesbians without a clue, she was proud to be able to say she had helped them out, even if just a little bit. They both just seemed so relaxed and happy that Ashlyn felt practically giddy about it. Her long-suffering mother had finally found somebody to love her and treat her well, but she was also learning to let herself enjoy it. Tammye had finally given herself permission to be happy after punishing herself for so many things over the past twenty or so years of her life. Hallelujah, the keeper thought lovingly. Hallelfreakinglujah.
“You should have just pulled up and we could have come out” Carol admonished softly.

“Nah, I know how good it feels when Ali comes in to get me” she shrugged a little self-consciously. “I wanted to welcome you home and help you with your stuff.”

“Well aren’t you just the sweetest” Carol smiled and gave her another hug. “Tell us everything we missed. How was the twins’ birthday party?”

Ashlyn spent the next ten minutes relaying some of the funny, annoying, and poignant things that had happened the previous Saturday, making both women laugh and cluck and choke up. The buzzer finally sounded for the luggage to start making its way onto the carousel and Ashlyn stood at the ready, waiting to be pointed at the right suitcases to pluck from the moving conveyor belt. There were four suitcases total and as she lifted each one up and put it down behind her, she couldn’t help but notice the names. ‘C. Lanier’ was Carol. She had been using her maiden name since her divorce was finalized 10-1/2 years earlier. Tammye’s two bags were the ones that caught the keeper’s eye. ‘T. Lanier’ was the name on each suitcase and Ashlyn tried not to make a big deal out of it. She wasn’t sure how she felt about her mother taking Carol’s name in the first place. She needed some time to think about it. As sometimes happened with things like that, Ashlyn hadn’t considered what would happen after they got married. Would Carol add Tammye’s name to the deed for the beach house? What about health insurance and life insurance and all of those things? And whose name were they going to take or would they each keep their own? It never occurred to the keeper that her mom wouldn’t stay Tammye Harris. But Harris wasn’t her name either. She had taken it when she married Ashlyn’s father and never seen any reason to change it. Her children were Harrises after all, or at least one of them still was. As the blonde stood there half-listening to other people’s conversations by the baggage carousel, she wondered for the first time in her entire life if it had hurt her mother or her father when she took Ali’s last name instead of letting the brunette become a Harris as she had wanted to. Her parents hadn’t said much of anything the afternoon before the wedding when she had told them she was going to be a Krieger. She wondered if her own feelings would be hurt when her own children got married and took the names of other people instead of keeping the proud Krieger name that Ashlyn herself had fought so hard for. Someday when her mother was ready to talk about it, Ashlyn would try and make sure she was ready too. All she really cared about was that her mom was happy. And even though she knew the greatest joy of her mother’s life had come as a Harris, the births of Chris and Ashlyn and her grandchildren, the keeper also knew almost all of the misery and regret in her mother’s troubled life had come under that name too. Maybe changing to Lanier was the best idea after all. If there was one thing Ashlyn knew, it was that her mother deserved another shot at a happy marriage.

The other thing that took up a lot of time that May was the final preparations for the second summer of The Academy. There was no last-minute, urgent deadline hanging over everybody’s head this year so it was a much more relaxed atmosphere as Cat Whitehill, Whitney Engen and Ashlyn Harris, the latter two opting to keep using their more popular and well-known maiden names to promote the soccer camp, worked closely with Jane Sheldrick to get everything ready. They had all learned so much from the first summer and were eager to tweak and correct the things that hadn’t worked well so this year’s camp would be even better. They lined up guest coaches and hired two more permanent coaches so Sydney, Niki and Cat could rotate through and have some more time off this year. They worked out the schedule so that two of those three were there at all times. They firmly believed in what they were doing and how they were doing it and they wanted to make sure those principles and ideals were still the guiding forces, every single day. Yael Averbuch and Kristie Mewis were both joining the ranks of the permanent coaches and it was harder to tell who was more excited – Yael and Kristie or the rest of the permanent coaches and board members. Ashlyn and Whitney planned to be there as much as possible too, but they were the publicity behind the camp and they needed to stay somewhat flexible with their schedules in case they needed to give a potential new investor a guided tour with only a day’s notice. The heavy
hitters from last year were all still on board and ready to work even harder this year. Luciana Damon, Mia Hamm, Gisele Bundchen, and Jonathan Kraft were still four of the seven board members making all of the decisions with Ashlyn, Whitney and Cat the other three.

The Academy had been sold out for months already, the only openings during the final two weeks that were limited to the varsity high school and then college programs in the area. This was the last year that Meg could attend the first three weeks, and then 5th and 6th weeks of camp that were for grades 4 – 9. Meg had turned 14 in March so next year she would only be allowed to come to the invitational 4th week of camp that was for the better players in grades 6 – 11. That meant Emma Donaldson, who was one year older than Meg, was already too old this year unless she got invited to week 4 or her high school soccer team went up for week 7. Meg was very disappointed because even though they were both figuring out what being 14 and 15 meant and realizing it didn’t always mean the same thing to both of them, Meg and Emma were still very good friends. Meg decided to be optimistic about it though. She would still get to see Emma every weekend when she went back to the big old house between camp sessions. Mickey Donaldson, Emma’s 12-year old younger sister, was going to go to camp for the full five or six weeks she was eligible. She had attended a couple of sessions last summer, while her mom was the nurse on duty, but had been pretty non-committal about the whole thing. She was a quirky, spunky kid who hadn’t figured out who she was or what she wanted to do just yet. And that was perfectly ok because she was still only twelve. Julie was pretty sure her youngest child had balked at it last year because she herself had been the nurse for much of the camp. Mickey was ready to explore some personal freedoms and hanging out at a camp where her mom worked all summer wasn’t doing it for her last year. This year, Julie agreed to keep her distance and let Mickey just be another kid at the camp instead of ‘the nurse’s daughter’. It would be an interesting five or six weeks for Mickey, that was for sure.

As Ashlyn made plans with Hannah and Meg for the summer, it occurred to her that she had been enjoying Meg’s summer visits, even before The Academy, and not really paying any attention to Johnny and Lizzy’s summer activities. The keeper had it in her head, even without consciously focusing on it, that her brother’s kids would come and spend some time in the summer with her at the big old house – just as she and Chris had done when they were kids. But the situations were totally different. Chris and Ashlyn started spending their summers with their grandparents when they were 8 and 7 years old, respectively. But that had been out of necessity rather than just wanting to connect with the side of their family that had been farther away and less present in their lives to that point. Johnny and Lizzy had perfectly wonderful home lives and didn’t need to get away from home for the summer for the sake of everybody’s sanity and well-being like Chris and Ashlyn had to. But it made the keeper start thinking about making summer visits, sans parents, happen again. The visits didn’t have to be for the whole summer. They could be for a week or two weeks or whatever felt right for everybody. Ashlyn certainly didn’t want to force the issue. If Chris’ kids weren’t interested in doing it then that would be that. But she wanted to make sure that Chris, Beth, Johnny and Lizzy all knew they were more than welcome.

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Ashlyn had been seeing Mattie every two weeks since she and Ali had met with the therapist before April vacation. It had been two visits, not including the third one they were presently having the day after Drew’s birthday, the last week of May. Mattie had been excited about Ashlyn’s meeting with Erin the week before and the fact that it appeared the keeper was taking her Horticultural Therapy recommendation seriously.

“So this is the weekend you’re going to plant the garden?” the therapist asked at the end of their hour.

“Yep, I may even start tomorrow morning if everybody goes to school and daycare as planned. But
Saturday afternoon for sure if that doesn’t work” Ashlyn sighed and gave Mattie a questioning look. “Are you sure about this?”

“I am” she replied evenly. “But the only thing that matters is if you are, Ashlyn. Don’t waste your time if you’re not going to try to keep an open mind about it.”

“No, I know” the keeper closed her eyes and sighed in frustration. “I’ve been listening and paying attention. I’ve read about the plant therapy theory and I get it. I mean, it makes sense when I read about it...”

“The three tenets of Horticultural Therapy maintain that quality of life is related to the relationship between people and plants; that curiosity and attraction to nature are inherent human qualities and that individuals respond positively to green plants and colorful flowers;” Mattie read from the literature they’d been working with for over a month.

“And working with plants promotes emotional, mental and physical health and well-being” Ashlyn rattled off the third belief of the program she was about to begin in earnest. “I know Mattie. It just seems...too simple to be true. I play in the dirt and, hopefully, manage to grow some things and I’m supposed to become better able to fight my PTSD symptoms?” she rolled her eyes. “Come on.”

“You certainly don’t have to try it” Mattie replied in the same even, calm tone as before. “The new exercises we’ve been implementing seem to be working well and you’re confident with them, yes?”

“Yes. I’m feeling better every week, honestly...”

“So maybe that will be enough to make sure, the next time you find yourself struggling, that you can pull yourself out of it. But...” the therapist paused, considering the words she was about to say to a woman she had come to know extremely well over the past ten years.

“But what?” Ashlyn met her gaze, seeing something unfamiliar in it. Was it anger or...no, it was...disappointment. “Just say it Mattie. I can take it.”

“I don’t understand why you would hesitate to explore another viable avenue that could help you stay in control of your symptoms. It doesn’t align with anything else you’ve ever done here, in our work together. You’re always open and willing to do whatever necessary to keep you healthy.”

They stared at each other for almost a full minute before the keeper finally spoke, her voice a resigned whisper.

“You’re right. I’ll be open-minded. I promise.”

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“So you’re all set? Have everything all planned out?” Ali asked, innocently, Friday night as she walked out of the master bathroom to get into bed.

Her wife was sitting on the bed in her pajamas with her glasses sliding halfway down her nose as she hunched over the eight different sketches spread out on the bed in front of her. Some were neat and even had colored pencil added in and others were very rough and obviously just thrown together during a brainstorming session. The sketchpad was next to her as well as an 8-1/2 x 11” notebook practically filled with notes and scribbles and ideas for the vegetable garden she had hoped, but failed, to start that day. It had been a busy day and Josie had stayed home sick so the keeper ended up spending most of the day trying to make her more comfortable while she washed her bedding and blankets and stuffed toys to try and keep the germs from spreading. She knew it
was a long shot but she and Ali both believed in giving it the old college try when it came to limiting how many of their children got whatever bug or illness was making the rounds.

“I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing. Am I just planting in the ground or should I do the raised beds like everybody recommends for beginners? Do I plant in rows like everybody has for ages or do I switch to the 3 foot squares which is supposed to be so much more efficient, plus you’re not walking all over as much of the garden so the soil stays less compacted, which is a lot better for the whole garden, over time? And don’t even get me started on where to put the fucking thing. Do I just put it in a spot that’s out of the way so the kids and dogs don’t destroy it? Or do I actually try to position it in just the right spot so it gets morning sun and afternoon sun? Do I line it up North to South and put the tall things at the back like Erin told me or does it really matter if it gets equal amounts of sun from left and right? I mean, who the fuck knows this shit? And I don’t know what kind of soil we have or what I need to amend it with which is the whole point of the raised beds – I can control exactly what soil goes in them and not have to worry about whether there’s clay or silt or sand in our soil. What do you think? You’re one of the smartest people I know, what should I do?” the keeper rattled off a breathless series of questions that were very clearly stressing her out.

“Whoa whoa whoa” Ali’s eyes went wide at the explosion of gardening facts and questions hurled her way. She had stopped at the foot of the bed in shock as Ashlyn let so much of her frustration out. The brunette very calmly knelt on the foot of Ashlyn’s side of the bed and started to pile up and collect all of the sketches and pads and notes as she worked her way up to her frazzled wife. The keeper leaned back against the headboard in a daze as she watched. By the time Ali was kneeling in front of her, the brunette had one big pile and she handed it to her keeper with a soft smile. “Put these away for the night now honey, let’s try and relax before we go to sleep” she watched Ashlyn put the pile on top of her nightstand and then lean back again. “You worked your butt off today with Josie and this is just too much stress right now” her voice was calm and soothing as she straightened the blonde’s legs out and began to massage them as she spoke.

She leaned down and kissed Ashlyn’s right knee as she continued rubbing her quads in a slow, steady pattern. It had been almost six months since her knee surgery and the recovery was complete and the clean up had been a success, but Ali still liked to give it a little extra TLC at times like this. Maybe it was because it was the last tangible place that the keeper had sustained an injury, but the brunette wasn’t really sure why she still did it. It was her tiny way of letting her wife know that she appreciated all the battles she had fought with that knee and those legs and her whole amazing body.

“I’m sorry I brought all this stress in here...”

“Shhhhh” Ali smiled up at her as she moved lower and started on her calves. “Don’t be sorry babe, it’s ok. Just try and relax and stop thinking about anything else. Just feel my hands and let your mind and your breathing start to slow down.”

The relaxing massage continued for another twenty minutes and included Ali pulling her wife down into a flat position and rolling her over so she could rub her shoulders and back as well. Neither of them spoke and Ali thought her keeper might have fallen asleep. She tried not to notice how sexy her ass looked and had skipped over one of her favorite muscles altogether, just to keep the massage clean and innocent. The brunette chastised herself a bit, but would never apologize for loving Ashlyn’s body or how wonderful it felt to touch it. Even when it had been a long, hard day for both of them.

“I don’t think I can do this garden” the keeper’s voice was barely audible, especially with her face half-pressed into the pillow as it was.
“So then don’t do it” Ali replied evenly after overcoming the surprise of hearing her wife’s voice at all.

“But I promised Mattie I’d try it.”

“And you have tried it and I’d say it’s causing you more stress than it could possibly do you good.”

“But I have to at least try it...” she turned her head a little so her mouth was clear of the pillow as she faced the center of the bed. “I promised.”

“Ok, well then can I make a suggestion?” the brunette was careful to keep her voice as calm and soothing as it had been for the past half hour. She didn’t want to undo the relaxation in her wife that she had just worked so hard for.

“Please do. I need help with this” Ashlyn reached her right hand down and wiggled her fingers towards her wife and then let out a sigh of relief when she felt Ali hold it with one her own.

The brunette moved her body up higher so she could hold Ashlyn’s hand, straddling her butt but supporting her own body weight on her knees. She continued moving her left hand across her keeper’s back and shoulders and neck and squeezed her right hand with her own.

“Just start small honey. I didn’t get a really good look at your sketches but I know you. You’re designing the Versailles gardens and expecting it to be perfect and you’re just setting yourself up for failure.”

She paused, wondering if she had said too much for the late hour and the ultimate goal of restful sleep. Ashlyn’s body was still relaxed beneath her and Ali could see the side of her face as she listened to her words. Everything seemed calm and still peaceful.

“You think?” Ashlyn questioned softly, almost shyly.

“I do think” Ali smiled and pressed a soft kiss into her wife’s shoulder before sitting back up and continuing. “This is what you do honey. You dream big, which is awesome. But then you expect perfection, you demand perfection from yourself and get upset when it doesn’t happen.”

They were both quiet for a few minutes and Ashlyn moved her hand to Ali’s knee. Ali used both hands on her wife’s back and biceps. She could practically see the wheels turning in her keeper’s head as it lay on the pillow in front of her.

“I do do that, don’t I?”

“Yes you do. Remember, you did the same thing with your Grandma’s picture? When you decided you were going to paint a masterpiece and have it framed and hung here in the house for my big birthday and the big story about Grandma Lilian and her boys?”

“And I didn’t even know much about painting yet” Ashlyn chuckled ruefully and closed her eyes in embarrassment. “I was such an idiot.”

“No, you weren’t an idiot. You had a great idea but not all the tools to make it happen yet. And you’re doing the same thing right now.”

“I am, aren’t I? Why do I keep doing the same stupid things over and over again?” she whined and rolled over onto her back so she could see her beautiful brunette.

Ali settled herself onto Ashlyn’s hips and pulled down on the keeper’s sleep t-shirt to untwist it for
her. Ashlyn put her hands on her wife’s pajama-clad thighs and stared up at her with a sad and frustrated face.

“Ashlyn, don’t talk like that. This is different in a lot of ways. When you do make a mistake you always learn from it, at least you always have” she leaned forward and sweetly kissed her wife’s forehead and then her nose and then her lips. “You’re not remembering the most important part about Grandma Lilian’s painting either.”

“What’s that? That I hosted a big party and dedicated a ton of time to talking about how awesome my Grandma was and then couldn’t even get a sketch done of her in time?”

“Hey, cut that out” Ali gave her a stern look. “That’s a shitty way to remember it and you know it. You’re just being dramatic now.”

“I’m sorry, you’re right” Ashlyn sighed and closed her eyes.

“The most important part about her painting is that you did it, eventually, and it was really good.”

“It was terrible and it was three years later and I won’t even show it to anybody...”

“Yes, but you did it. And it was not terrible. It wasn’t a masterpiece but you had to learn how to paint first. I love you to death but I will never understand why you expect yourself to do something perfectly when you’ve never ever done it before. That painting you did was really good, especially for your first time...”

“But it wasn’t my first time...”

“Now you’re just being difficult” Ali sat back, annoyed, and folded her arms across her chest. “Fine, it wasn’t your very first painting, but you had very little experience and you know exactly what I’m getting at” she snapped.

The brunette was tired and had not had a very good day herself. She started to stand up on her knees and get off of her keeper but Ashlyn held her in place with her strong hands on her hips.

“No, don’t go! I’m sorry” she pleaded. “I’ll stop being such a jerk. I know what you’re trying to say and I appreciate it.”

“What am I trying to say then?” Ali huffed with her arms still folded across her chest and her eyebrow quirked high.

Ashlyn let out a long sigh and caressed her wife’s thighs with her hands for a long minute.

“I don’t know what I’m doing with the gardening so I shouldn’t plan a huge, complicated one my first time. And just because I don’t know what I’m doing now doesn’t mean I won’t learn and get better at it” she finished and gave Ali her most apologetic pout. “I’m sorry baby.”

“See, you know this stuff Ash” she put her hands on top of her keeper’s that were still on her thighs. “Just start small, keep it simple and be nice to yourself. If you treated yourself half as kindly and encouragingly as you did the kids, even on your worst parenting day, you’d be able to save yourself so much frustration and sorrow.” They looked at each other with small smiles on their faces. “It’s so hard to watch you do that to yourself sweetheart” Ali leaned down and placed a soft kiss to her wife’s lips. “You’re fucking awesome at so many things, so so so many things, but you beat yourself up sometimes and it just doesn’t seem fair.”

“I’m a big ol’ meanie to myself huh?” the keeper grinned up at her patient and kind wife.
“You are” Ali smiled back, even though she tried not to. “And it pisses me off. You know how I get when somebody’s being mean to someone I love.”

“Oooh boy do I” Ashlyn’s dimple appeared as her grin grew. “And I love how protective you are of our family. My lion on patrol, always guarding us all.”

“Yeah, well, don’t make me take you out, meanie” she cocked her head and gave her smiling wife the most threatening duckface she could muster.

It wasn’t very threatening at all and Ashlyn started to laugh, fending off Ali’s playful swats as she did so.

“Oh yeah baby, you gonna take me out?” she giggled. “Like on a date? Cuz that’s the only way I see that happening…” the keeper laughed and kept dodging smacks and pokes and pinches from her offended wife.

“Oh you think so huh?” Ali landed a good poke and tickle to her keeper’s ribs that made Ashlyn try to twist her body towards the center of the bed to find relief.

“Hey, you and your pokey little hands better quit while you’re ahead” she warned through a chuckle as she gave up on trying to roll over. Ali’s legs were too strong and she had all the leverage up there on top of Ashlyn’s hips. “Don’t make me embarrass you now” she teased with another dimpled grin.

“Embarrass me? And just how would you even think about doing that?” Ali smirked down at her wife who she thought she had pretty well pinned in place.

They kept squirming against each other but their movements slowed a bit as speckled hazel eyes gazed up into warm whiskey-colored ones. Ali was relieved and happy to see genuine joy and peace in her wife’s gorgeous face for the first time all day. That look always got to the brunette. It made her feel so many different things, every time she was lucky enough to see it, and that night the relief and happiness that won out were wonderful rewards for the massage and talk it had cost to feel them. In her distraction, Ali allowed her keeper to grab both her wrists but bent over for a kiss anyway. She let Ashlyn hold her up, by her wrists, as she leaned down and brought their lips together in a slow, lingering kiss. As their lips moved together, the keeper let Ali’s torso come to rest on top of her own and moaned quietly at the contact. She licked the brunette’s lip and deepened the kiss, their glasses knocking into each other as their heads moved along with their lips.

Ashlyn wrapped her arms around Ali’s back, one up high near her shoulders and the other down low at the waist of her soft pajama pants with the pale purple paisley swirls all over them. The blonde had a good quip prepared in response to her wife’s challenge but, as their tongues danced and teased inside their mouths and their hands began to travel and explore, the idea of saying anything at all completely abandoned her. She gasped for air a minute later as Ali dragged her mouth across her jaw and over to her ear, nipping and licking as she went.

“Mmmmmmm…God…I love…you” she panted out as she slid her hand a little lower and cupped Ali’s ass cheek. She squeezed it gently and massaged it through the thin cotton material while the brunette traced the edge of her ear with the tip of her tongue, making Ashlyn shiver. “Damn…I love…your tongue…”

“It loves you too” Ali purred, her hot sultry breath filling the keeper’s ear as she moved her lips down to nibble the sensitive skin behind her ear – Ashlyn’s weakness.

When she finished licking and sucking a few seconds later she summoned all her self-control and pulled back. She waited for a couple of seconds until Ashlyn opened her eyes, missing the contact
and wondering what the problem was.

“What’s the matter? You ok?” the keeper frowned as she straightened her glasses and tried to focus her eyes.

Ali lifted herself up, supporting her upper body on her elbows with a look of concern on her face.

“Are you ok Ash? I know we talked about some big stuff and I know the garden’s making you anxious...”

“Honey, I’m fine” the keeper smiled sincerely at her worried wife. “I appreciate you doublechecking but I’m good, I swear” her voice was full of love as she reached up and tucked some soft brunette locks behind Ali’s ear.

“If we need to talk some more...I don’t just want to make your body feel good if that’s not what’s hurting,” she paused and studied her keeper’s slightly flushed face, “that’s all.”

“Al, you are the absolute sweetest woman in the world and I love the way you take care of me and make me feel good. My mind and my heart and my body” she winked and squeezed her wife’s body tightly against her own. “Thank you so much baby” she cupped Ali’s face and smiled when she felt the brunette nuzzle into her hand and close her eyes. “Now why don’t you bring those lips back down here so I can kiss them some more...that’d make me really feel good” she smirked and quickly tossed her glasses onto her nightstand.

“Well, only if it’ll make you feel better” Ali cooed and batted her eyelashes at the blonde with a throaty little giggle.

“So much better” Ashlyn moved her hand to the back of Ali’s head and gently pulled her down towards her grotesquely puckered lips. She started moving them like a fish’s mouth and made her wife laugh out loud.

“Stop” she laughed and slapped her keeper’s chest, pushing back against Ashlyn’s hand behind her head. “I don’t want your fish lips...no...” she giggled and squealed as she lost the battle and eventually succumbed to her keeper’s strong arm and silly lips. But she didn’t give in without a fight, getting one good nip in as she lost the battle.

“Ow!” Ashlyn laughed and rolled them over, pinning her wife on her back beneath her. “No biting, that’s not fair” she pulled her head back and licked her lip where Ali had inflicted her wound. “You made me bleed” she squinted at the brunette and stuck her injured lip out for her to see what she had done.

“Awww, poor baby” Ali teased, even though she did feel bad about biting a bit too hard. “That’s what happens when you’re a jerk” she giggled and then tried to see how bad her wife’s lip was. She put her hands on either side of Ashlyn’s head and held it still so she could get a good look. “Oh, I’m sorry honey” she gently placed a tender kiss to the injured area and stroked her cheek at the same time. “I really am. Are you ok?” she placed another sweet little kiss on her slightly bloody lip.

“I guess so, better not risk it though” the keeper teased, milking the situation for all it was worth and starting to roll back to her own side of the bed. “Let’s just go to sleep now.”

“Oh no you don’t” Ali stopped her and held her with her strong arms, hands still on either side of her face, so the keeper was still laying on top of her, supporting her torso with her arms on either side of the brunette’s head. “You have to let me fix it first” she leaned up and licked Ashlyn’s lip so slowly that the blonde had to exhale the breath she didn’t even realize she was holding. “How’s
that” Ali purred as she moved one hand all across her wife’s chest, over and around both breasts and down as far as she could reach to her stomach.

“A little better” Ashlyn smirked shamelessly, enjoying the way the brunette’s hand was making her feel and wishing there were no pajamas separating their skin. “This might help though” she sat up and pulled her t-shirt over her head and then helped Ali remove hers too. They settled back into the previous position with smiles on their faces.

“So much better babe” the brunette agreed with a low sultry voice. “Let’s see if I can do a better job too...” she continued moving her left hand around Ashlyn’s bare skin and leaned up to lick the blonde’s lip again, this time applying more pressure and sucking on it too.

“Oh yeah, that’s it” Ashlyn mumbled and moaned at the feel of her wife’s strong tongue and powerful mouth working so delicately and feeling so fucking good on her lip. “Damn baby” she breathed out as goosebumps appeared on her chest.

Ashlyn felt her whole body react to her wife’s sexy touches and kisses, aided by the hot visual of Ali’s beautiful dark nipples starting to stiffen as the keeper dragged her long fingers around them, teasing them. It was time. They had gotten to the point of no return and it had happened quickly, if you didn’t count anything before Ali checked with her wife to make sure it was ok to proceed. In Ashlyn’s mind, it all counted. There were times when she spent the whole damned day thinking about having sex with her wife and pining for her body, all because of some innocent look or touch from their chaotic morning ritual with the kids. Ashlyn had always been quick to respond to any of Ali’s advances, and the same could be said about her wife. They didn’t like quickies but they had always been able to make them work when there wasn’t a better choice. They had both talked about their fears about menopause someday changing the way their bodies responded to each other, but whenever that came up one of them always talked them down off that far-away ledge. But that was certainly not a problem tonight. Ashlyn felt the passion collecting inside her sleep shorts, as it had been way back when Ali had just been giving her a relaxing massage. She knew her eyes must be as dark as her wife’s were, staring back at her with hunger and want. She could feel the flush working its way up her chest and neck as her heartrate increased with every touch from her sexy wife’s hands or lips or hips. Ashlyn felt her brunette starting to rock her hips up just the slightest bit, just a safe amount so they could still stop if they had to.

“I want you” Ali’s voice was thick with desire as she finally began to play with the pretty pink nipples she loved so much.

“Even though I’m damaged goods?” Ashlyn teased and stuck her lip out for another healing kiss making her wife chuckle, low in her throat.

“I thought I fixed that?” her words were slow and dripping with want as she leaned up with her tongue ready again.

“Better give it one more...mmmnnnnmm...” Ashlyn couldn’t finish her tease before the brunette sucked her lip into her mouth again with her own moan.

As the kiss turned hotter and their hands got more aggressive, Ashlyn began to grind down against her wife’s still rocking mound. Their clits came together every third or fourth time, pajama bottoms and sleep shorts still frustratingly in the way. They broke apart for air, ending the sexy makeout with gasps.

“Lock the door.”
“Take them off.”
They both instructed, hurriedly, at the same time. They grinned at each other and then Ashlyn jumped off of her wife and down towards the foot of the bed. She ran to the hallway door and locked it before stopping at the foot of the bed and taking her sleep shorts off. She swallowed hard as she watched Ali push the covers down to the foot of the bed too and then lick her lips as they locked eyes. Ali knelt near the foot of the bed, topless, while her wife stood in front of her completely naked and incredibly turned on.

“You’re so fucking gorgeous Ashlyn” she exhaled as she felt her libido rising to new heights.

“And you have too many clothes on” the keeper smirked and reached her hands forward to take Ali by the hips.

“You have another door to lock” she teased and moved slowly back towards the middle of the bed.

Ashlyn watched her wife do a slow striptease with her pajama pants the whole time she shuffled to the backstairs door and locked it. The keeper had to try and keep her breathing steady as she moved back to her side of the bed and stood there, mouth agape. The show had been brief and pretty limited considering there was only so much Ali could do with a pair of cotton pajama bottoms. But she had teased Ashlyn by lowering them a few times as she faced the keeper and then, once the other door was locked, she turned around so her back was to Ashlyn. Ali winked at her over her shoulder and bit her bottom lip as she started to bend over and stick her ass up in the air, lowering her pajama pants slowly but surely as she went. But the keeper couldn’t wait. She couldn’t resist and knew her wife wouldn’t be surprised to feel her touch as she got back onto the bed and began fondling and kissing her gorgeous ass.

“Impatient much?” the brunette giggled and closed her eyes with a loud moan when she felt Ashlyn’s tongue take a long, stiff lap up her folds as she was bent over on the bed. “Oh fuck…”

“Honey, you know I have no control when it comes to this…I am a slave to your ass” Ashlyn husked out before taking another slow, strong lick and moaning again.

“Off...take them off…” Ali breathed out, eyes still closed and forehead down against the mattress.

Something about the way Ashlyn got so worked up over her ass made Ali’s body respond in kind. The more turned on and into it Ashlyn was, the wetter and hornier Ali became. As the keeper pulled the pajama pants down past her knees and helped the brunette crawl out of them, Ali felt her legs start to tremble in anticipation. She wanted this to be for Ashlyn. She intended to bring her sweet, anxious wife to orgasm first and probably second too. But she knew how much her keeper loved her ass and her silly little striptease show had derailed all her plans. What else was new? Ali had very rarely felt in control of things when they had sex. It wasn’t a good thing or a bad thing. It was just the way it was. Even if she was being bossy and in control, it was a tenuous hold that she knew could break at any moment. Maybe that’s why sex with Ashlyn had always been so good? The brunette spent so much of her daily life in control of so many things that turning everything over to her wife in the bedroom was a type of freedom for her.

“Baby, can I fuck you, like this...?” Ashlyn’s words were thick and heavy as they slipped past her tongue, her body doubled-over on top of Ali’s back with her arms reaching around to fondle her breasts and her folds and her cltit.

“Yessss, whatever you want my love” Ali paused to remind herself to breathe, her head still against the mattress with her arms bent up on either side of her head. “Anything for you.”

Ashlyn pressed more hot kisses into her wife’s back as she started the agonizing task of separating herself again so soon.
“Don’t move, sexy” she commanded as she quickly got off the bed on Ali’s side and yanked open the closet door up by the head of the bed.

She rummaged around in their box of toys and walked to the bathroom as fast as she could while stepping into the harness. She washed the strap-on and was back kneeling on the bed in less than three minutes. Ali had taken advantage of the slight delay and moved the big free-standing floor mirror over next to the bed so they could see each other while Ashlyn fucked her from behind. Just the thought of it made the brunette even wetter and she ran her hand through her own soaked folds as she climbed back onto the bed and back into position.

“Hey, no cheating now” Ashlyn chuckled and made sure the mirror was in the right place so her wife could watch her lube up the dildo with her own juices. She knew it drove her wild. “Can you see?”

“Yes babe, hurry up. I want you so bad” Ali moaned as she watched her keeper get the strap-on nice and wet. “Fuck that’s so hot...”

Ashlyn wrapped her body around Ali’s as it had been before, except this time she slowly slid the light blue dildo deep inside her blazing core. It had the knobs the brunette loved so much and that was the most important thing. She kissed across Ali’s shoulders and played with her rock-hard nipples, squeezing and pinching and tugging at them but keeping the dildo moving slowly and steadily, deeper and deeper.

“Oh my God that feels so good” the brunette groaned when Ashlyn and the strap-on had finally bottomed out. She forced her eyes open as soon as she possibly could, wanting to see her sexy keeper kneeling tall behind her, ready to fuck her brains out. Ali would never ever get over how gorgeous Ashlyn looked like that. Her still-beautiful but not six-pack anymore abs were glistening with just the first bit of sweat and her long, slightly thicker torso quivered and twitched with excitement or anticipation like a thoroughbred before a race.

Ashlyn licked her lips and slowly started to move the toy inside her wife’s eager pussy. She could feel Ali’s silken walls already starting to grab at the dildo as it picked up speed and she began to use more power with each and every thrust.

The brunette couldn’t see her wife’s v-cut anymore either, it had disappeared with her six-pack abs, but the trade-off for the spider-web stretchmarks around her belly button more than made up for it. That was a win for Ali all day, every day and she made sure her keeper knew it, often. Ashlyn’s perfect pink nipples were standing at attention, ready for action and the brunette longed to have them in her mouth.

Ashlyn bent back over her wife and put her hands back to work on her nipples and breasts, giving them all the attention they deserved and demanded. She alternated between tough tugs and pinches and soft caresses and squeezes until Ali’s pants and moans filled the room and Ashlyn straightened back up again.

Ali watched in the mirror as her keeper’s arms reached forward and took hold of her hips. She was trying hard not to get too excited and come too fast. She wanted this to last, for Ashlyn. It was the blonde’s favorite thing and she didn’t ask for it very often, so when she did, Ali was always quick to say yes. In all honesty, the brunette couldn’t imagine saying no, even if her wife asked her every other time.

Once Ashlyn had Ali’s hips, her upper thighs really, in her grips the pumping began in earnest. She pulled the strap-on almost all the way out and then plunged it back in, time after time as her wife’s body bounced along with her, unable and unwilling to do anything else. The keeper changed up her
speeds and teased Ali a bit, driving her wild with each and every touch. She could see the brunette’s face in the mirror and it was dark pink, a little sweaty, and fucking gorgeous.

So many things were slightly different as Ali gazed back at the woman of her dreams kneeling behind her. How could things not have changed in 10 years? They were both only human and they hadn’t been kids when they first got together to begin with. But none of that mattered to Ali as she knelt there, full of her love and about to be even fuller.

Ashlyn felt her wife’s walls clench even tighter as she climbed towards her release. She heard the dizzying sounds their bodies made as they slid and slammed against each other, slick from sweat and their own sweet juices. She felt her own desire soaring as the back of the strap-on pressed back against her own sensitive clit with each and every deep thrust. God this was amazing. What in the world could ever be better than this? Ashlyn felt Ali’s legs start to quiver as they slowly started to drop lower once the brunette began to lose control. She reached around her wife’s hip and brought her fingers to her aching clit, making Ali shout out her approval.

“‘Yes!! Fuck, yes, babe, oh my God...’”

As Ali watched through the mirror, her orgasm getting closer and closer with every passing second, she saw the things that hadn’t changed a bit, like the way Ashlyn’s beautiful hazel eyes kept getting darker and darker and her lids became heavier and heavier as she got more and more turned on. Or the smirk on her keeper’s gorgeous face as she pounded and rubbed her until she screamed in pleasure.

“‘Oh my God...Ashlyn...fuck...yessssssssssss!!!’”

That face. Those eyes. The smirk. They were absolutely everything to Ali and they filled her senses as she shook and jerked through her orgasm. They had never changed, not after all the times they’d fucked each other and she knew they never would. She knew it deep in her bones and way down inside her truest soul. Ali knew because she knew how her own feelings about having sex with her wife had never changed. Not even a little bit. She was convinced it was the key to their successful relationship. They had always felt the same powerful, unending tug towards each other and they both knew they always would. It was just like the tide and the shore, destined forever to meet one another without fail. It sounded like such a cliché but both Ali and Ashlyn knew it was so much more to them. They didn’t care how it sounded or what it looked like to other people. They knew it was true and real and honest for them and that was the only thing that mattered.

Spiderwebs for v-cuts, yes please. All day, every day, thank you very much, amen.

Chapter End Notes

Hey can you guys please let me know if you see the same 'Fuck you Jill Ellis' note at the end of every chapter? It shows up on each of my chapters here like a taunt and I can't get it to go away. So I deleted it off of the actual only chapter I posted it...and it still shows up at the end of each chapter in my view. lol. That'll teach me. No big deal, but if you could let me know I'd appreciate it. Also, I'm sorry if it's showing up every chapter for you too. I swear I'm not doing it on purpose. I don't even like to use her name if I don't have to.
School's Out!

When the school year ended on Thursday in the third week of June, Ashlyn and Ali picked Josie up and then Drew and took them to the Dairy Castle to celebrate the last day of school with ice cream. It had been a half-day and the twins were at home with Deb and Mike Christopher so the moms and their two oldest kids took advantage and drove to the closest electronic arcade and spent a couple of hours playing every game the kids wanted. It was fun and spontaneous and they decided that it was going to be the new ‘last day of school celebration’ tradition. Deb had been up in their Manchester condo since she had spent Mother’s Day in NYC, and Mike had just arrived this week. Josie’s 5th birthday party was that Saturday, June 20th, the day after her actual birthday, and one day before The Academy’s first session began on Sunday the 21st. Despite the busy week, June itself felt a little quiet compared to previous years when Ashlyn had travelled for the EUROs, the Olympics or the WWC. It was the quiet year for women’s soccer, with the 2027 WWC coming up next year, followed by the 2028 Olympics and the 2029 EUROs. Ali made a note to plan something fun for her family for the next quiet year in 2030.

It was hard to believe the school year was already over. It felt like only yesterday that Ali was getting upset about Josie starting preschool and Ashlyn was crying over Drew’s first lost tooth. There was no rest for the weary or the heartbroken when it came to the four young Krieger kids. They were a force to be reckoned with and they were constantly in motion, almost always moving forward in leaps and bounds. Occasionally they slowed down or even moved backwards a little bit, but those delays didn’t last long. Lily’s speech struggle was a perfect example. She was definitely not speaking as well or as clearly as her twin brother but developmentally she was keeping right up with him in most other regards. She mumbled. Ashlyn blamed her wife, although it was only playfully.

“I think you’re right, she speaks so much better when she puts her voice behind it” Ali whispered to her wife as they watched their little 3-year olds performing in the end of school year festival that the Lynnfield daycare put on every year.

They were a year-round facility but at least one third of their students left for the summer and didn’t come back until the Fall when the next school year started so they celebrated when the elementary schools did. It was a great way to start to get the youngsters used to that sort of seasonal schedule. Maddox Dwyer, almost 2-1/2, was there too, standing a few toddlers away from the Krieger twins as they all held up a drawing they had colored and wanted to explain to the audience. Sydney, Dom and Sandi, as well as Ken and Vicki, were sitting with Ashlyn and Ali that June afternoon. Knight-Harris had its own daycare now and Becca Flanagan went there every single day. Ali and Ashlyn both preferred keeping the twins in the same daycare both Drew and Josie had gone to because they all really loved it, parents and kids alike. It was bigger and it also had the benefit of having Maddox there too. It just felt right for the Kriegers. That’s not to say Ali didn’t occasionally use the K-H daycare. She did but the twins usually went to the daycare in Lynnfield. And the year-end performance was a great example of something the bigger, more established daycare offered that K-H did not. Not yet anyway.

“Remember how loud she always was when she cried or wanted something?” the keeper whispered back. “We have to get her to use that voice when she’s trying to talk.”

“She’s still that loud when she cries or wants something” Ali chuckled. “I wonder where this all came from?”

Ashlyn gave her wife the side-eye and tried to focus on the kids who were describing their
drawings up on the stage, they were in the G’s so there was a bit of a lull for the Kriegers between the D’s and the K’s. Maddox had gone a few minutes earlier and hammed it up good. He was a natural showman and he took after his mother in almost every way. Cassius had always been more middle of the road in his demeanor. He got excited when something exciting happened but he was perfectly capable of being a nice, quiet boy too. He was thoughtful and energetic at different times. James was king of the mellow kids and very little ever got him riled up. For a little while the Dwyers were worried that he might have something wrong because he was just always so chill and sedate. But Dr. Comello had reassured them that some people, and kids, just had very laid back personalities. There was nothing about 4-1/2 year old James that wasn’t up to snuff in terms of milestones, achievements or development. The only thing that was different about him was his demeanor. But Maddox was all Sydney Rae Leroux. Sandi called it before he had even been out of the womb for a month. He was charming and bossy and funny and demanding. He’d put you through your paces and then sweet-talk you afterwards so you’d be happy to do it all over again next time. There was nothing deceitful or devious about him, he was just one of those kids who was always at the center of things, good or bad.

“Doesn’t really matter much now” Ashlyn replied. “We’ve just got to work with her so she can overcome it.”

“Do you think it’s because we have so many kids?” the brunette asked anxiously, casting a nervous look at her keeper.

“That doesn’t matter either honey” the blonde squeezed her wife’s hand as they sat in the folding chairs in the middle of the large rec room that had been set up for the show. “They’re all going to have challenges from where they were born...you know, the oldest or the youngest or, technically, Josie might have some middle child issues to figure out.”

Ali’s face looked even more nervous as she turned her head to stare at her wife.

“Not a helpful answer.”

“No, I mean...ugh...” the keeper sighed and closed her eyes as the kids moved into the J’s in front of them. “You figured it out. You mumble a lot but you also know how to use your voice better than almost anybody I’ve ever met, both literally and figuratively.”

“Oh, so it’s my fault Lily mumbles?” she glared at Ashlyn and spoke in a harsh whisper. “Nice. Very nice. Let’s just watch the show.”

And that was the end of that conversation because thirty seconds later it was Dodge’s turn to hold up his picture and talk about the bright blue sports car he had drawn and colored, just like his big boy bed he loved so much. When his minute was up, everybody clapped and cheered for him, as they had done for all of the other kids. He grinned from ear to ear and rocked forward on his toes and then back on his heels for a few seconds as he took in all of the adulation. Miss Jeri had to remind him to step back so Lily could take her turn.

“Oh, yeah, forgot” he smacked himself lightly in his forehead and quickly jumped back as everybody laughed at how cute his reaction was.

Lily laughed along with everybody else, enjoying her brother’s antics as usual. Her face changed quickly though, when her name was called out and it was her turn to step forward. She had clearly forgotten that she came next because she reacted as if she was completely unprepared and shocked by the turn of events. She took a couple of breaths and looked nervously to the audience. The kids all knew, roughly, where their parents were sitting because the lights were all on and they could see everybody’s faces if they looked out and paid attention for a minute. Both Dodge and Lily had
waved back to their moms and other family and friends, as had Maddox, when they first took their places. Now, as Lily turned a little bit pink and paused for a few seconds too long, Ali and Ashlyn wanted nothing more than to call out to her and encourage her. But they knew that would only make her more self-conscious. They both said silent prayers that their little girl would snap out of her daze.

“Your turn Wee” Dodge’s voice sounded out, helpfully, and made everybody laugh again.

Lily turned to look behind her at her twin brother and, though nobody could see what the exchange actually was, when she turned back to face the smiling audience she wore her own little grin and began to speak.

“Thank God” Ali muttered under her breath and felt Ashlyn squeeze her hand in agreement.

Her picture was of a big dog that had been colored in many different colors. Part of the big dog was white, part was caramel colored, part was brindled, part was black...she had taken the colors of all of the dogs in her daily life and given them to a body part of the dog in her picture. She pointed to the front legs, and the tail, and the face, and the ears, and the back legs and the belly and said the name of each dog.


Her voice was soft and hard to hear but her moms made out every word even though most people could only understand ‘Bandit’ and ‘Ziggy’, losing the other words to the mumble. It was easy to tell when she was finished because she let out a nervous giggle and her face filled with relief as she quickly stepped back into place with a cute look at her brother. There was work to do for sure but they had a whole year left before preschool and neither mom doubted that they could help their baby girl overcome her challenge before that time.

And Josie had continued to blossom during her first official year in school. Her preschool teacher gave her a glowing report in every way. She cautioned the little redhead to keep her temper under control but made sure both parents knew her losing it wasn’t a common occurrence in the classroom. And Josie never lost her temper without ample provocation. She loved her music lessons and she loved the piano and sge loved just hearing music in general. All four kids enjoyed the music lessons that they went to up in Rockport once a week, but Josie got an extra lesson, all on her own. There was a woman who taught piano in your own home, as long as it was tuned to her requirements. Ms. Clinton was in her 60s and was a pretty severe and serious teacher. The music instructor in Rockport had recommended her for Josie and warned both Ali and Ashlyn that the woman was not for everybody. They had Ms. Clinton come to the big old house on a trial basis to see if Josie liked her, and, honestly, to see if the piano teacher could survive the environment there. Neither mom liked the woman very much but Josie loved her. It was completely strange, but Ali and Ashlyn had asked their daughter several times to make sure they got the truth about it. But it was easy enough for either of them to see when the woman was in the front parlor with Josie. They sat side by side on the piano bench and taught and learned and played. The little girl was mesmerized and her mothers were sure that she would agree to piano lessons from the scariest ogre they could find because she was so engrossed in the music itself that everything else just dulled in comparison. So one afternoon a week Ms. Clinton came to the house for Josie’s lesson and the girl had begged her moms to keep the lessons going even during the summer.

Josie had also joined the ranks of athletes in her home. As soon as she turned 4 last summer she had started playing soccer that Fall. Ali coached her little 4 & 5 year old co-ed team and would do
so again this Fall too. Josie wanted to play basketball as well, but that didn’t start until the kids were 5 years old so she’d have to wait this coming January for that. But softball started at 4 so she had been able to begin playing that in April this year, with Ashlyn as her team’s coach. Josie was so small that it was tough to watch her play either game sometimes. She just didn’t stand a chance size-wise with some of the other girls. Some of the girls weren’t too much bigger than she was, but some were almost twice her size. But she never gave up and never shied away from anything. She was a tough little kid and both her moms were incredibly proud of her for not being afraid and for not using her size as an excuse for anything. All in all, it had been a pretty incredible year for the little girl. She made a couple of friends at school but nothing too serious yet. And she had learned that she loved being there and was pretty good at it every day. She was far from perfect, but she was a pretty cool kid.

It had been a year of growth for Drew as well with one minor setback. He started first grade and did well in school. He made friends easily and followed the rules and most of his teacher’s instructions, better than many of his classmates. Drew turned out to be really good at baseball and was one of the best players on his little league team. Ethan was also good, but not nearly as coordinated. For all the time the Kriegers spent playing soccer, it turned out that Drew was really good with the baseball in his hands. Swinging the bat and connecting it with a travelling baseball would always be challenging for almost everybody, and that included Drew, but handling it once it had left somebody else’s bat? Drew was fast, nimble, agile and always seemed to have his head up, trying to see what his next move should be. That was part instinct, thank you Ali Krieger’s genes, and part coaching. Sam Machado was still coaching his son’s little league team and he had told both Ali and Ashlyn that Drew had a lot of natural talent. The moms had long ago decided that they wanted all of their children to play many different sports, as they had done when they were growing up. They didn’t want to push them towards one or make them concentrate on only one. They felt guilty enough about the way soccer ruled their hearts and minds – they tried not to let their own bias influence any of the kids. But they were a soccer family. Ali had grown up in a soccer family, her father was a professional soccer player back in his heyday and his love of the beautiful game had seeped into every part of his own family at very early ages. Even Kyle, for all his dramatic flair, still loved soccer more than every other sport combined. It had been the first thing he and his father had bonded over, that he could remember anyway. It would always be near and dear to his heart and he fully intended to pass that along to Edgar and Cristina once they felt more comfortable.

The other thing Ashlyn and Ali had promised themselves was that they weren’t going to let their kids be quitters. It was very important to both women that their children understand what it meant to make a commitment to a team. A lot of kids those days would sign up for something and then, if they didn’t pick it up easily or enjoy it tremendously right off the bat, they would give up and quit the team. It drove both moms nuts when they were the coach, but it also frustrated them as fellow parents. What were you teaching your kid if you let him or her quit everything as soon as it got difficult? Luckily for the Kriegers, they hadn’t run up against that yet but they knew they would. They both assumed it would be Lily, the flightiest and most indecisive of all of their children by far, and they were surprised when it turned out to be Drew instead.

Drew was good at soccer, honestly, all of Ashlyn and Ali’s kids were good at soccer, but he was really good at baseball. And most importantly, he seemed to really enjoy playing it. His moms begrudgingly agreed to start watching more baseball with him on tv over the summer and take him to his first Red Sox game at Fenway Park. That year Drew played soccer, coached again by his mom, in the fall, basketball in the winter, coached by his mama, and then baseball in the spring. Ethan and some of their other friends had decided back in September that they wanted to play
football. Boys had to be 6 years old to play and Drew met that requirement and joined in along with his friends. Little league flag football was incredibly popular in Gloucester. With everybody in New England at least somewhat knowledgeable about football from following or cheering for the incredibly successful New England Patriots over the past 25 years, youth football of all kinds was the hottest kids’ sport around. Both moms were nervous about all of the scientific data that had proven how damaging concussions and head trauma could be, especially for still-developing kids. But when they met and talked with the coach he said all the right things about the way the game itself had changed over the past ten years to make it safer for everybody from the professionals in the NFL all the way down to the 6-year olds just starting out. The game was played differently and, most importantly, coached and taught differently so it was a lot safer. They were getting ahead of themselves anyway, contact football with pads wasn’t available until Drew was 8-years old anyway so they had two years of low contact flag football to ease into first.

The problem was, Drew hated it. Ali was more of a football fan than Ashlyn and she knew more about the game itself. She had dominated Marcy’s fantasy football league since joining it two years earlier and knew her stuff. She went and stood there with mostly dads but a few other moms to watch the first practice the Thursday before Labor Day weekend. Practices were one evening a week and then Saturday afternoons, after all the kids were done with their soccer games. The football games were Sunday mornings and rotated among three different fields in town depending on which teams were playing. The coaches handed out a list of things the players would need like a mouthguard and cleats and a cup, as well as the uniform pants and the t-shirts the kids would wear for their team jerseys, just like all the other little league sports. Ali smiled as she held on to her son’s red t-shirt with the name ‘Krieger’ on the back in big white letters. He had signed up too late to have much choice for numbers and had opted for #13 because he didn’t want a big high number and it was the only one left in the teens. The soccer and basketball t-shirts they used as uniforms never had his name on the back and for the first time in a long time the brunette was reminded of why Ashlyn had fought so hard to take her name at their wedding. Something about seeing that ‘Krieger’ name on the back of that t-shirt really got to her that evening at Drew’s first ever football practice. The practice itself was a hot mess full of 6 and some 7-year old boys banging into each other, full of nervous energy as their coaches tried to teach them one play. It did not go well. The coaches confidently assured all the parents that it would get better and not to worry. There was no practice that holiday weekend and absolutely no improvement at the second practice the following Thursday evening. The coaches had asked the parents to take the playbook home and help teach their sons the one and only play they were trying to learn. The kids had no experience ‘running plays’ so there was a lot to take in and learn for everyone. Ali worked with Drew all week on how to read the play in the playbook, first of all, and then how to do his part when he was back together with the team. Ashlyn had helped her and they used different toys and dolls to make it three-dimensional for Drew so he could see and understand it better. Ali came home from work one day with the new Madden NFL video game so they could teach Drew in a medium that he truly loved. A couple of the coaches knew Drew from basketball and baseball and knew he was a good athlete who had parents who were invested and coached in little league too. That’s who they wanted on their team, if they were being honest. They had Drew play the tight-end position for the one play because he was good with the ball in his hands, which was a real rarity sometimes at that age, and because he wasn’t tiny. He wasn’t big either, but he was big enough to block a little bit if they wanted him to.

The play was a running play with the tight-end blocking next to the left tackle so the fullback and running back could follow behind him or go around the edge. It was as basic a play as football offered, which was why a lot of coaches started with it. By the end of the third practice on Saturday afternoon, the team had been able to run the play, on both the left and the right side, pretty successfully. And by successfully, that just meant most of the kids on the team understood what they were supposed to do and had nothing to do with whether or not the play actually gained
any yards or not. There was no tackling allowed in flag football. Each kid had a flag attached to his belt on the left and the right and if you grabbed the opposing team’s flag you were supposed to hold it up high in the air so the refs could see it and that would end the play. It was low-contact so you weren’t supposed to be pushing anybody around too hard or too much. If you were on the line and blocking you were really just supposed to get in the other team’s way more than anything. If you tackled somebody, either on offense or defense, you would get called for a penalty.

During the game, the head coach stood right in the huddle on the field with the four or five players who might handle the ball: the Quarterback, Running Back, Full Back and Tight End. Another coach huddled up with the kids on the line and reminded them what they were supposed to do when the ball was hiked. As she sat there in the stands with the rest of the family watching this adorable mini-football game, Ashlyn couldn’t imagine anything more frustrating as a coach. She could also tell that her son was not having a good time on the field. The keeper assumed it was because he was nervous about making a mistake and still uptight because everything about this sport was so foreign to him. She honestly believed that he would like it more and more as he became more comfortable with it, all the parents felt that same way. Ali sat a few seats away with the younger kids and Vicki between them, and her dad next to her on the edge of their group. The stands were pretty full and both moms were happy to see what great support the teams had. It seemed like all the players had several members of their family there and, she noted with a smile, there were a lot of proud grandpas filling the seats. It was a different crowd than they were used to for soccer. A lot of the parents and even some grandparents were familiar from basketball or baseball, but there were a lot of new faces and voices that none of the Kriegers knew.

Drew’s team did ok but neither team moved the ball very far. It was the type of thing where if one team’s running back could get around the edge, he was gone for a touchdown. It was totally all or nothing. You either scored a touchdown or didn’t move an inch. The coach flipped the same play from side to side sporadically, just to keep the other team guessing a little bit. Sometimes he fooled his own kids who had been unable to remember that they were running it to the right side even though the coach had just explained it to them thirty seconds earlier. Ah, the 6-year old brain at work. Drew played ok. He made some mistakes but no more than anybody else, and significantly fewer than several of his less-coordinated or less-intelligent teammates. His job was to block next to the tackle and then look and see if the play was progressing downfield. If it was, then he was supposed to move with the play and try to block anybody else who was coming to try and get the running back’s flag. He got pretty good at the initial block, on the line, so the other team changed it up and moved a bigger and better player to play opposite Drew instead of the little pipsqueak who had originally started there. This was common practice, even at this level. If somebody was dominating one of your players you had to put one of your other kids there to try and handle it. The kid they moved to Drew’s side to make it more difficult for Drew to block and the running back to run around, was a big kid. He knocked Drew back on his ass the first three plays he was over there and Drew’s team had to turn the ball over on downs because they couldn’t move the ball.

This continued on the next series too and then the next and Drew looked like he was going to cry. His moms knew it was mostly from anger and frustration and maybe embarrassment, but not from being physically hurt. They both watched him get back up with a scowl on his face. He didn’t end up on his butt every single time but easily every other time for sure. Ashlyn gritted her teeth and wondered why Drew’s coach couldn’t make a fucking change like the other coach had. Maybe try running the other way, away from the big huge kid for once. Vicki could feel the tension coming off of the blonde’s body and patted her leg soothingly. Vicki had been there and done that with her two boys growing up. She knew exactly what Ashlyn was thinking and feeling in that moment. The little kids were starting to get antsy and had moved onto grown-up laps. Josie sat on Ken’s lap, Dodge on Ali’s and Lily on Vicki’s. Ashlyn was the only one with a free lap at the moment but knew it would change shortly. The kids never sat very still for long and she fully expected Dodge
to make his way down to her for a change of venue any minute.

“For crying out loud, why don’t they take that poor kid out?” A voice from behind them in the stands asked loudly. “He’s getting pancaked every time. Has he never played football before?”

The hair on the back of Ali’s neck stood up and she had to will herself to stay calm and not turn around and tell the guy to shut up about her kid. It took her a few seconds to get herself under control and when she did she immediately thought about Ashlyn’s reaction. The brunette leaned back and looked to her right, past Vicki’s back, but she couldn’t see her wife’s face. She leaned forward instead, taking an elbow to the chest from Dodge for her troubles, but still couldn’t see Ashlyn’s face. The team ran another play and Drew got crushed again.

“Get that kid out of there! C’mon coach” another voice said from nearby. “Run the other way or something, he can’t block him!”

That one wasn’t so bad because nothing about it was untrue. Both Drew’s moms wanted the coach to run the ball the other way too.

“That’s the kid with the two moms, that’s what the problem is” a third voice chimed in, a little bit quieter but not nearly quiet enough. Several voices laughed along.

“Are you kidding me? That’s definitely the problem” the first voice spoke again. “Nobody at home to teach him how to play football.” There was more laughter, a lot more and from many different voices in the stands.

Ali reached in front of Vicki, behind Lily’s back, and grabbed Ashlyn’s arm. The keeper leaned forward and they shared a moment of eye contact, each woman trying to will the other to be strong and patient and smart. Before either of them could say or do anything else, the first voice called out again.

“He needs to go back to his mommies and learn how to be a cheerleader or something because this is just embarrassing!”

There were several families in the stands that the Kriegers knew from Drew’s school and from the other sports they spent time together in. A couple of the moms and one dad all turned around to look at Ali or Ashlyn apologetically over the next several minutes as the laughter and jokes continued. Nobody said anything though. The little Kriegers could feel the stress and tension from their people and started to squirm in response. Dodge stood up between Ali’s legs and started looking around the stands instead of watching his big brother on the field. The brunette took advantage of the shift to look over her shoulder at the first voice – the one that had taken the information that Drew had two moms and run with it, getting bolder each time he opened his mouth. She was astonished to see that it was one of the proud grandpas she had thought so sweetly of at the start of the game. She clenched her jaw and tried to think of something to say that wouldn’t embarrass her entire family and make life more difficult for all four of her kids for the rest of their school lives.

“Oh, he stayed on his feet! It’s a miracle! Wonder which one of his mommies taught him that turnstile move? What a joke!”

Ashlyn had had more than enough. The only reason she was still sitting in her seat was because she was having a hard time figuring out what to say without using every four-letter word she had ever heard in her entire life. She wondered if Drew could hear the man too but stopped thinking as soon as she saw her son go down again and this time he didn’t get right back up. The ref blew his whistle and the two coaches jogged over to check on Drew who was holding his left arm funny.
They stood him up and brushed off his back, clearing some turf away from the ‘Krieger’ and the ‘13’ there. The crowd clapped as he went to the sideline to take a break and have his arm looked at but then, as soon as the huddle broke and a new tight-end was in place the old man chirped up again.

“Good. Now we’ve got a real football player in there. Not some mommy’s boy with no man in the house to teach him how to be tough.”

All four adult Kriegers stiffened but it was Ken who stood up. He quickly put Josie down, nudged her towards Ali, and then turned around so his back was still slightly to his family. He was trying to shield them as much as he could.

“Hey, tough guy with the big mouth” he jutted his chin out and up as he scanned the stands behind them, trying to find the offender. “Where are you?”

A hush spread through the stands as all the brave assholes who had laughed along with the offensive old man were suddenly quiet and timid as mice.

“Dad, it’s ok” Ali grabbed his hand. “He’s not worth it.”

“No, it’s not ok Alex” Ken kept his eyes on the crowd.

“Yeah? What’s your problem?” the old man said gruffly, barely looking at Ken who stood about 6 bleacher rows below him but was still somehow a much bigger man in every way.

“My problem is you and your big mouth and the stupid things it keeps saying” Ken’s voice was loud and clear and he stood with his arms at his side, slightly swinging, as he tried to control his temper.

“Mommy, Grandpa said a bad word” Josie said as Ali shushed her.

“Aw sit down and shut up why don’t ya?” the old man waved his arm at Ken dismissively and brought his attention back to the field.

“Listen pal, I’m here with my family and we’re trying to enjoy this game, along with a whole bunch of other nice people here, and you’re making that impossible. That’s my grandson out there you’re talking about and this is his very first football game and I’d like to watch it in peace and quiet. Do you think we can do that?”

There was an interminable pause as the two men stared at each other.

“Yeah, why don’t you keep your mouth shut?” somebody else added, emboldened by Ken’s request.

“They’re only kids – why don’t you relax?” came another voice, aimed at the old man.

One of the dads who had turned around and looked apologetically at Ali a few minutes earlier stood up, a row below Ken, and turned around to look at the old man too. A few other guys stood as well while several more female voices urged everybody to stay cool and remember there were kids present. Ken, with no intentions of making anything physical, waited for a break in the supportive voices and then spoke again.

“I’ll take that as a yes then. Thank you” he said in the same voice he had used all along and then turned and sat back down next to his daughter.
The halftime whistle blew after another ten peaceful and quiet minutes. Ken and Vicki took the three kids to the concession stand – which was their favorite part of going to one of their brother’s games – as they usually did. A couple of people quietly thanked Ken along the way. Several people came up to Ali or Ashlyn during the halftime break and apologized for what had happened, and by the time Drew came back out to his position to start the second half, the whole thing seemed to have been forgotten. The coach had the tackle start helping Drew, or whomever was playing tight-end, so they double-teamed the big kid and kept him blocked for most of the rest of the game. Drew’s team won 7-6 because they had scored on their extra point play and the other team had not. The family went to brunch after the game to celebrate and then back to the big old house for a quiet afternoon in what had been a very busy week. Different conversations were had that afternoon, each with different goals and results. The little kids seemed nonplussed by everything that had gone on, but the moms sat all four children down and explained to them, vaguely, what had happened and why it was wrong. They talked about the cowards who had joined in with the bully and the brave people who had stood up to him.

“Grandpa was the bravest though, right?” Josie asked, as she tilted her head to the side and tried to understand the lesson.

“Yes, sweetheart” Ashlyn smiled at her adoringly, “Grandpa was the bravest. It’s always hard to be the first one to speak up and defend somebody who’s being bullied, but if you can do it, there’s usually somebody else who will join in and help you.”

Another conversation took place that night when it was bedtime.

“Mama?” Drew called out as Ashlyn was about to close the door behind her after tucking him in.

“Yeah bud?”

“Do I have to keep playing football?”

His little voice sounded so defeated. He had already had a talk with his moms and Ken and Vicki at brunch about what a tough game that was and how hard it had been to keep getting knocked down again and again and again. They had talked about the pluses and the minuses of it and what lessons he could learn from his experience during the game that day. He had asked to quit playing football then, at brunch, but had been told no and reminded of the no quitting rule the family adhered to.

“Yeah bud” Ashlyn crossed back to the bed and sat on the edge of it, resting her hand on her son’s stomach under the blankets, “I think you do.”

They studied each other’s face for a couple of minutes and Ashlyn watched as her son’s lip started to tremble and his face scrunched up and turned red when he started to cry. They weren’t manufactured, ‘trying to get my way’ tears. They were big, honest, boo boo tears that told the keeper just how upset her little boy really was. She pulled him into a sitting position and held him in her arms as he sobbed. She kissed the top of his head, still smelling fresh and clean from his shower, and rubbed his back and rocked gently back and forth as she held him and he let his sadness and disappointment out. It only took a minute for Ali to appear in the open doorway, moving across the hall after closing Josie’s door behind her.

“Hey” she called softly. “What’s going on?”

“He doesn’t want to play football anymore” the keeper explained quietly, turning her head towards her wife and giving her a sad, pathetic look of her own.

The brunette came over and knelt next to the bed to help soothe their son, urging him not to worry
about anything and to just go to sleep. It took a few minutes but his crying slowed down and finally stopped.

“Mama and I will talk about it and we’ll figure out what the best thing is to do, ok?” Ali kissed his forehead and stood up. “Sleep well sweet boy.”

Ashlyn laid him down and tucked him in again, kissing his cheek as she stood back up.

“Have sweet dreams little man” she cooed. “We love you and we’ll see you in the morning.”

They talked for almost two hours that night, trying to figure out what to do. Neither of them wanted to let Drew quit but it was obvious he wasn’t having any fun. They were definitely not going to let him quit after having one bad game. He had to at least play another game or two so they weren’t teaching him that it was ok to quit something just because you got your ass handed to you one day. The football and child-rearing aspects of the situation aside, there were other things at play in this scenario that bothered both women.

“I don’t want that fucker, or any of those fuckers who laughed along with him, to think we quit because of him” Ashlyn spit out angrily. “No way in hell is that happening.”

“I know, I know” Ali agreed with a groan as she flopped back against the back of the couch in the front living room. They had turned the tv on to try and watch the Patriots playing Sunday Night Football but their attention had been focused solely on the problem at hand. “I want to know who that other guy was who told the fucker that Drew had two mommies” the brunette squinted and folded her arms across her chest. “He’s just as big of a problem, if not bigger, because he’s that guy in the background pushing the buttons and making things happen without getting any of the blame.”

“You’re right” the keeper shook her head and got up to pace the room, waking Persey and making her stretch and yawn in her place at the end of the couch. “Fucking asshole. And I still can’t believe how nobody stood up for us...”

“Yeah, not until my dad finally did. Don’t turn around and look at me like you know what it feels like and then not do anything about it” she fumed, remembering the few ‘friends’ who had given her sad faces in the stands. “God that made me mad. I’m going to have a hard time looking at Gina and not rolling my eyes next time I see her at school” Ali rubbed her face with both hands, tired and stressed and still unsure what to do about her son.

“I was just about to stand up and I’m so glad I didn’t have to” the keeper sighed, suddenly exhausted as all of her emotions caught up to her now that all the kids were in bed and it was just she and her wife.

“I know babe, me too. I wasn’t sure what I was going to say but it definitely wouldn’t have been as nice as what my dad said.”

“I promise I’ll stand up faster, first, next time Al. I promise” Ashlyn’s voice broke as it filled with emotion. “Our kids shouldn’t have to hear that kind of crap.”

“It’s ok honey” Ali opened her arms and scooted back into the elbow of the L shaped couch, inviting her upset wife to come and cuddle with her. “Come here.”

Ashlyn, tears starting to fall down her face, crawled on top of the couch and up her wife’s body until her head was nestled against Ali’s stomach. The rest of her was stretched out between Ali’s legs while her arms wrapped around the brunette’s shoulders from below. Both dogs lifted their
heads at the movement but settled back down once the blonde had snuggled into place. Ali stroked her short hair with one hand and rubbed her back with the other as they lay quietly for fifteen minutes. They were both deep in thought and still pissed off about the events of the morning.

“It’s the first time it’s happened to us like that” Ali spoke softly. “And I agree. Next time we’ll put a stop to it right away. No more being nice and waiting for someone else to do the right thing. I promise too, love.”

Ashlyn pressed a kiss into her wife’s t-shirt covered stomach and moved her hands down to squeeze her sides and let them rest on her hips.

“We both knew this would probably happen at some point” the keeper’s voice was a little raspy from crying. “I’m kind of surprised it took this long. I’ve been trying to prepare myself for it but boy does it still suck.”

“It sure does. Fucking ignorant assholes. God, I have to stop thinking about that jackass or I’m going to get all worked up again” Ali exhaled and closed her eyes, her hands still moving slowly on her wife’s head and back. “Ok, so what’s the plan with Drew then? Aside from the fact that he can’t just quit right now.”

They talked and debated different options for the next hour, both still too tense for sleep. By the time it was 12:30am and they dragged themselves upstairs and went to bed, their decision had been made. They wanted to sleep on it just to be sure, and make sure neither of them changed their minds. At the end of breakfast, which Drew ate like a champ because he was trying to be on his best behavior in hopes that his mothers would grant him his wish, they told their oldest son what they had decided.

“You can’t quit football Drew” Ashlyn delivered the first blow and then softened it just a little, “not until you’ve tried it for a month.”

“Aw Mama” he whined and dropped his chin down into his hands. “But I haaaaaate it.”

“We know that’s how you feel now Drew” Ali took the next part. “But you can’t quit after just one game and three practices. That’s not enough for you to even know whether you really like it or not.”

“No, I hate it. I just said that” he moped and his face darkened in anger.

“Did you listen to what I said?” Ali quirked her eyebrow at the boy. “We understand that’s how you feel now. But we’re telling you, because we’ve been in your shoes before honey,” her voice softened, “sometimes it’s hard at first and then after a little bit of time it gets easier and turns out to be a lot of fun.”

“And sometimes it doesn’t” the keeper added in her own quiet and comforting voice. “And if you try your hardest for the rest of the month at the practices and at all three games that are left, if you still hate it after that...then you can quit.”

“A whole month?” he whined some more.

“No, fine” he dropped his hand down onto the table and leaned back against the back of the nook
with a huff. “I’ll do it for a month.”

“Not just do it Drew” Ashlyn clarified and put her hand on his shoulder from her seat next to him on the banquette. “You have to try your hardest and do your best. That’s the only way this deal works. Do you understand?” He didn’t say anything right away and the normally bustling breakfast table was eerily quiet, not even the other kids made much noise as they watched the drama unfolding right in front of them. “This is important for all you guys to understand” the keeper looked at all of their children. “When you’re out there on the football field or the soccer pitch or in your classroom at school, you’re representing our whole family...all of us. Your mom and I expect all of you to be good kids and to do the right thing and to always try your hardest at everything you do because that’s how you become a good person and that’s how you succeed in life and whatever you want to do with that life as you grow up. Part of that is not letting the rest of us down. If you try your hardest and you still lose the game that’s ok. Everybody wants to win, but somebody always has to lose, right?”

She looked at the four little faces paying rapt attention to her serious voice and saw them nod in agreement. “If you tried your very best and your team still lost that’s ok and that doesn’t mean you let us down. But if you don’t try your hardest and you don’t give it your best shot – that’s letting the rest of us down. Do you understand the difference?”

“Try hard!” Dodge offered enthusiastically.

“That’s right Dodger” Ashlyn grinned at the boy and ruffled the curly hair on top of his head. “All of us, Mommy and myself too, we always have to do our best and try our hardest. If you do that we’ll always be proud of you, no matter what else happens. Ok?”

“Ok Mama” Lily waved at the keeper and Ali leaned over and kissed the little girl’s cheek.

Yes, it had probably been too much for the 2-1/2 year old twins to understand back in September at the beginning of the school year, but the kids were never too young to start hearing the important messages that the family foundation was built upon. They were their own little Krieger team and they had to learn to rely on each other as they would any other teammates. The big difference was that this was their team for life. Both Ashlyn and Ali wanted their kids to be able to count on each other and be there for each other as they grew and went through life together. Both Deb and Tammye had told them over the years that one of the things that gave them the most happiness was that their children not only loved each other, but enjoyed each other’s company as adults. Ali and Ashlyn wanted that for their kids as well and the lesson about letting each other down and making each other proud had been a good one to start with. The fact that Drew did eventually quit his football team at the end of September didn’t both either of his mothers because while he was a member of the team he gave them all he had. He practiced hard with the team and spent time learning the plays in the playbook with his Mommy, getting quizzed on them randomly. They couldn’t have asked more of him so they were both at peace when Ali took him to the coach before the start of the first October practice. He turned in his uniform pants and flags and even tried to return his t-shirt jersey.

“No, you keep that Krieger” he smiled at the boy. “You keep that and you remember how hard football was but how much better you got at it the more you did it. And if you ever want to come back and try it again you just tell your mom to call me. But” he paused, and cocked his head, “you can’t play again unless you’re going to stick it out and play the whole season. Ok?”

“Ok coach” Drew shook the man’s outstretched hand with a shy smile.

He never went back to football, but Ali was proud of her shy boy that day for the way he had answered the coach without any prompting from her at all. He had only played for the man for a
month but she was reminded, again, of how impactful sports and coaches could be for kids and thanked God for the millionth time for everything she had learned from her experiences playing soccer and other sports. She knew that Drew had learned something from his first football coach and was grateful for the outcome, even if it hadn’t been what she or her wife had originally wanted.

All four kids had learned so many different things about themselves and each other that school year and, even though they were starting to go by so quickly, both moms looked forward to what the next year would bring. They knew there would be highs and lows and even a fair number of average middles along the way. Every day seemed to give them way too many opportunities to teach their children and coach up each other on their parenting skills. But that June, as they celebrated the end of school with their kids, both Ashlyn and Ali were ready for what they hoped would be a quiet and slower-paced summer. They wanted to relax a little bit and just hang out with their family doing boring things like going to the beach and roasting marshmallows and playing with the dogs and watching Ashlyn’s tiny garden grow. All of that sounded like heaven to the two moms. They were ready for time to stand still for a few months.
Important Steps

Year Two of The Academy began in a much more relaxed way than Year One had. There were no last-minute paint jobs or curtains to hang or lightbulbs to be installed. The camp itself was readier than it had ever been and that made the whole experience even more fun and exciting for Ashlyn and everybody else involved. Mia Hamm was one of the guest coaches for the first session and had convinced her old WWC 99er teammate Julie Foudy to join her this time. Foudy was still one of the most famous women’s soccer commentators in the world and she and Ashlyn shared a bunch of funny stories and memories of the times they had worked together over the years. Many of the younger soccer campers had to be reminded that Julie used to play and was a teammate of Mia Hamm’s as well as the captain of the USWNT for over a decade. They all knew her from seeing her on tv or social media their whole lives and their minds were blown when they finally made the connection.

Everything ran more smoothly in Year 2 for no other reason than it wasn’t Year 1. The benefit of having done it all once already made everything seem so much easier, and not just for the soccer camp part of things either. The whole camp itself had been running for a full year now and Jane Sheldrick had them firing on all pistons. The camp hadn’t turned a profit yet so it hadn’t been able to host any of the underprivileged kids that was part of its mission statement yet either. Year 2 was when that was going to happen, for sure. If Ashlyn had to pay for it herself it was going to happen. But the 8 weeks of soccer camp had been sold out for months and with the additional rentals from last year and the ones so far this year, besides the soccer camp, they fully expected to have enough money to bring in two or three groups of underprivileged kids for a week each at the end of August. If non-soccer camp rentals stayed strong throughout the rest of the Fall they would be able to bring up some more kids for weekends once they were back in school as well. For the first time, Ashlyn, Whitney and Cat could see that this was really going to work as they had hoped. It was an exhilarating feeling and it spurred them all on to work harder and make The Academy better and better so more campers would want to come and help fund the non-profit programs that were so important to everybody too.

The addition of Yael Averbuch and Kristie Mewis, who was four-months pregnant that June but still more than willing and able to fulfill her coaching obligations, to the all-important group of permanent coaches had been life-altering for Sydney and Niki and Cat who had literally dedicated and donated their entire summer last year to The Academy. Yes, they had been able to bring their families with them if they chose and yes, the camp was a pretty cool place to hang out with your kids while you coached the soccer campers, but it had still been a helluva request to make of those three women. The good news was that this year Ashlyn didn’t have to go to Germany for three weeks during camp and Whitney was not taking care of a newborn baby so they both had a lot more time to spend up in Greenfield, NH. Whitney had a heart to heart with Ali in early May about how much time she could spend at The Academy without completely abandoning her 9 to 5 job at Knight-Harris that summer.

“Did you need me?” Ali poked her head into Whitney’s office fifteen minutes after the lawyer had done the same to the brunette and found her on the phone with a prospective client.

“Oh, um, yeah, sorry about that” she smiled nervously as she put down the contract she had been reviewing. “I don’t know what to do and I just thought I’d ask what you want me to do so I’ll at least know what the boundaries are...”

“Am I supposed to know what the hell you’re talking about?” the brunette chuckled as she leaned against the door frame. “Because if I am I’m officially afraid I’m losing my marbles.”
“No, I guess not” Whitney sighed and shook her head as she looked down at her lap for a second. She took a deep breath and turned back to her boss and friend. “I don’t know how much time I can spend at The Academy this summer and it’s messing up my scheduling.”

“Whit, listen” Ali closed the door, walked into the lawyer’s office and sat down in one of the two chairs in front of the desk. “Off the record, I don’t care how much time you’re up there. I took Thursday afternoons off last summer just so I could take the kids up there for the cookout at the end of each session and I’ll probably do the same thing again this summer.” She paused as she thought about how to say the next part without sounding like a bitch. “You know what work needs to get done around here as well as I do. And I don’t care how you make it happen, as long as it happens. If you trust Rita enough to handle things while you’re out of the office then I’m good with that. If you don’t, then we’ll have to figure something out.”

“No, I don’t want to take too much time off or anything. I mean, I don’t plan on going up there every day. Or maybe I’ll do mornings here and then go up there for the afternoons, or, maybe...”

“Whit, come on” Ali laughed and leaned forward so she could put her hand down on top of her desk for emphasis. “Relax and figure it out” she said slowly and calmly, making sure the lawyer heard every word clearly. “I don’t care what you decide to do with your schedule but you have to figure out what’s going to work best for you so you can communicate it to Rita or whomever. If we’re all on the same page we’ll be ok. And for the record, The Academy’s success has a very direct impact on our bottom line here. Don’t forget that when you’re feeling like you’re playing hooky or not doing your job.” She squinted at the blonde. “You do get that, right?”

“Yeah, I do. It just...feels weird because it’s kind of my baby and I feel like I should be here instead of there. That’s what my problem is” she exhaled and closed her eyes, relieved that she had finally gotten the words out.

“Well, I can’t help you if your problem is that you have an awesome job that allows you to pursue some other cool things while still making your company bigger and better” she chuckled again. “That’s all on you for being smart enough to say yes” she winked as she got up and moved towards the door. “Lunch is on you today.”

“Deal” Whitney grinned as she picked up the contract again and heard Ali laugh as she walked down the hall.

The list of guest coaches was impressive again in Year 2. After Mia and Julie for session 1, Whitney and Ashlyn’s former Breaker’s teammate Tasha Dowie and her wife Becky Easton hopped across the pond from England to spend Session 2 at The Academy. Tasha had retired a few years previously and Easton had also been an accomplished player back in her day. The campers loved their English accents too. There was a mini-Tarheel reunion planned for Session 3 with Allie Long, Meghan Klingenburg and Kealia Ohai joining the camp. Crystal Dunn had hoped to make a trip back up to NH again but she was busting her 34 year old ass to try and make the USWNT for what would be her third WWC next year and couldn’t get her schedule to work out. The same was true for Sammy Mewis, also 34 but with plenty of game left to play. She was still one of the captains of the USWNT but her spot wasn’t guaranteed anymore as younger players continued to crowd out seasoned veterans in their early 30’s. Mewis’ chances of making the team were better than Dunn’s but neither was a lock.

Session 4 was the advanced week of camp that was invitation-only for girls in grades 6 – 11. The rest of the first six weeks was still for girls in grades 4 – 9; and the final two weeks, 7 and 8, were for the high school and college teams. The set up was just as it had been the year before. The invitation-only session 4 would have guest coaches Heather O’Reilly, Becky Sauerbrunn and
Lauren Holiday. Getting Sauerbrunn was a coup in and of itself because she didn’t do a lot of those
kind of things very often, but to get Holiday too was a minor miracle. She only agreed when Tobin
Heath was able to coordinate her schedule for session 5 so the old and dear friends could spend
time together between the sessions. Lauren brought her two daughters with her for the 10-day trip,
9-year old Jrue and 5-year old Nicole. Tobin and Christen Press were the guest coaches for session
5 and the women’s soccer world was still a flutter from their recent news. Tobin and Christen had
gotten married in December and, as if that wasn’t enough for all the romantic fans, they had just
gone public with their baby news – Press was about 4 months pregnant that July. The pregnancy
had been going well and the former soccer superstar was feeling, and looking, wonderful so she
was eager to stick to their plans and coach at The Academy. It had been a pretty great little get-
together between sessions for Cheney, Tobs and Pressy as they relived so many great memories of
their times together on the USWNT.

The Breakers’ Pillars of Excellence contingent, Leslie Osborne and Angela Hucles, coached session 6. And Heather O’Reilly came back for more, just as she had done last year, and coached the high school teams in session 7 with more soccer superstars Alex Morgan and Megan Rapinoe. Finishing out with the college teams in week 8 were guest coaches Mia Hamm, Kristine Lilly and Brianna Scurry, 3 more 99ers who still got everybody excited. Ken Krieger also coached the three more advanced weeks, bringing more clout and respect to the camp in the process.

To say the camp was star-studded this year would be a gross understatement. Word had spread
about what a great job Ashlyn and her gang had done with the camp and the guest coaches from
last year had told their friends and former teammates that it was a great camp to coach at. Ashlyn
and Whitney were flabbergasted at the response they received from the famous soccer players.
Alex Morgan and Megan Rapinoe had even reached out to Ashlyn unsolicited after hearing such
rave reviews from Tobin Heath, Heather O’Reilly and others. If the Academy could even pull half
of the big names in to coach again next year they’d be doing very well. In addition, US Soccer was
sending one of their trainers and a couple of youth level coaches out to take a look and appraise
The Academy in July. It was all very exciting and The Academy’s popularity skyrocketed
accordingly.

Meg came up again and stayed for the first six weeks, just as she had done last year. She came
home every weekend and hung out with Emma Donaldson and her friends and got back to
behaving like her normal self. She was still an angsty 14-1/2 year old teenager going through
puberty, but she wasn’t nearly as difficult or bratty as she had been in the Spring that year. She
would be a freshman in high school in September and the reality of that seemed to have settled her
down some. The whole house breathed a sigh of relief. Mickey Donaldson, Emma’s younger sister,
was 12 years old that summer and would be attending all six weeks she was eligible for. Nobody
knew if she would get invited for the more advanced week 4 or not yet, not even Ashlyn who had
watched her play soccer for years. Mickey had never taken it very seriously before and the keeper
wasn’t sure just how good she could be if she applied herself. It would be interesting to see.

“I can’t believe it’s happening again” Whitney whispered as she and Ashlyn stood off to the side
while Jane Sheldrick and Cat Whitehill went through the official welcome to The Academy and
instructions.

It was Sunday, June 21st and Year 2 had just begun 15 minutes earlier when the last of the campers
had assembled next to the parking lot and information building at the top of the slow, winding road
up to the camp.

“I guess this means last year wasn’t a dream after all” Ashlyn whispered back and gently bumped
her shoulder into her best friend’s as they grinned at each other and giggled.

“Are we paying attention ladies?” Mia Hamm’s low, quiet, teasing voice came from the other side
of Whitney as Julie Foudy chuckled next to her.

“Foudy’s the one who should be paying attention so she doesn’t end up in the lake when she’s looking for the bathroom in the middle of the night” Ashlyn teased back.

“Hey, I thought you said our cabin had plumbing?” Julie elbowed Mia in the ribs. “I’m outta here...” she joked back and started to step out of her place in line, drawing Cat’s attention.

“Did you want to add something Jules?” Cat smirked playfully at her former USWNT team captain.

She had played with both Mia and Julie on the USWNT for four years and was part of the gold-medal winning team at the 2004 Athens Olympic games that had been the two older players’ swan song. Her 134 caps paled in comparison to Mia’s 276 and Julie’s 274 but all three women had been lucky enough, and good enough, to play for at least a decade with the USWNT. Cat played for 10 years, Julie for 16 years and Mia for 17 years. What an incredible group of women to have coaching at the first session of camp this year.

“No, I’m good. It all sounds great Cat!” she grinned and gave her a thumbs up.

“Oh it’s gonna be such a good summer” Ashlyn whispered to her bestie as her face turned into a dimpled grin.

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“Well, now, that’s grown into quite a garden” Carol offered encouragingly as she stood next to Ashlyn and took in the small, square, 3’ x 3’, raised bed in the back, right corner of the backyard, behind the garage.

She was just being kind. There wasn’t much progress to report yet. The frustrated keeper had taken her wife’s advice and started small and kept it simple. It wasn’t anywhere close to the garden of Versailles, in any way. But it was the garden she and the kids had planted and she decided it was going to be perfect for them, however it turned out.

“I wish I’d been here to help you Ashlyn” Carol continued. “I’m sorry I wasn’t.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t get my act together soon enough to even ask you about it” the blonde shook her head. “But I’ll take any advice you’ve got because I have no idea what I’m doing.”

“Part of the fun is figuring out how things grow in your own dirt because gardens are all so different. But there are definitely some tips that are pretty universal that I’ve learned over the years” the older woman smiled and put her arm around Ashlyn’s shoulders. “We’ll get in the dirt together this weekend for sure, don’t you worry.”

Tammye and Carol had done more travelling in three months than Tammye had done in her entire life up to that point. After their month-long honeymoon they spent about a week in Gloucester for Drew’s birthday before flying home to Melbourne Beach for three weeks. Then they flew back up to Gloucester for Josie’s birthday party weekend and now they were back, 2 weekends later, for the 4th of July celebration. They both joked that if you needed them after that, they’d be at home for the rest of the damned year. They both knew it wasn’t true though. They couldn’t resist the pull of the Krieger kids for that long and they didn’t really want to.

True to her word, Carol joined Ashlyn Saturday morning in the garden as the keeper weeded and watered her growing work in process. She had finally planted it the weekend after she had planned to. Everybody said planting in May was the best for most of the vegetables she had chosen to grow,
but she hoped Sunday, June 7th would be an ok time too. She wanted to do it Saturday but Ali and the kids had been talking about Mama’s garden all week and she knew she needed to wait for all of them to be there or she’d regret it. Buoyed by the excellent advice from her wife, Ashlyn decided that her first vegetable garden was going to pretty much be a big experiment. She would hope for the best and do the work necessary to achieve the best results, but not get too disappointed if it was a bust. Her attitude had been tested almost immediately as all four kids, and both dogs, crowded around her trying to help her with every single step she tried to take. Ali finally had to tell them to wait until Mama asked them for help when she saw what was going on.

The deal with the garden was that each kid could pick one thing to plant but they had to help Ashlyn water it and weed it or they wouldn’t get to enjoy it when it grew and they harvested it. All four children eagerly agreed and then spent two days fighting over who wanted to plant what. All three of the littlest ones wanted to plant carrots because they all actually ate those, as long as there was ‘sauce’ which was ranch dip. So the negotiating and bargaining began. It had been surprisingly easy for Ali to convince Lily to choose cucumbers. The little blonde girl loved dill pickles and would eat one whenever she could get one, no matter the time of day or what else she was eating. Once Ali explained that dill pickles came from cucumbers she was all in. Josie loved vegetables and would happily eat a lot of different ones. She was famous for plucking the cherry tomatoes and olives and sliced cucumbers and peppers out of either of her mothers’ salads and popping them into her mouth with a grin. If there was ‘sauce’ out she would dip them first but she would even eat them without the ranch dip if it came right down to it. Dodge on the other hand, didn’t like vegetables much at all. He was their biggest eater but just wasn’t fond of veggies. He preferred fruit if he had a choice. It didn’t seem fair to let Dodge choose the carrots when everybody knew he didn’t love them nearly as much as Josie did. Once the redhead was allowed to grow the carrots, Dodge randomly chose corn but couldn’t be shaken from it when Ashlyn read about it and learned it was very difficult to grow. He did like to eat corn on the cob but both Ali and Ashlyn knew it was mostly just because it was messy and he could pretend he was a wild animal devouring his prey. Corn it would be then.

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Drew was just old enough to think a little outside the box and even though his selection technically wasn’t what they had asked him for, Ashlyn let it slide and gave him points for creativity. He chose watermelon which was not a vegetable at all. But everybody liked watermelon so it was a win-win. The keeper had divided the raised bed into 6 different sections so she and Ali could choose something too. It was a 3 foot by 3 foot square wooden box that was raised up on feet. Imagine a horse’s trough but square instead. She placed it kitty corner behind the garage, in the corner of the fence so it was lined up North to South. She had read that you should line up your garden from North to South if possible so that the plants got sun all day long, if you planted the tall things in the back, facing South, and the shorter ones in the front, facing South. It was the same theory she had used when she chose which one of the large, extra rooms on the third floor to use as her studio. She picked the one in the North corner for the very same reason. Ashlyn had perked up when she read that and made the connection with her other love and hobby. She made sure there were two feet on all sides of the garden so they could walk around it and access everything easily.

That Sunday afternoon after they had fertilized the soil and gotten everything spread out nice and evenly it was time to plant. Ashlyn teased the kids and rattled off what they would be planting as they stood there expectantly, eager to get their item planted.

“Allright, so down here we have Drew’s rutabegas, then Lily’s lima beans, then Josie’s brussel sprouts” she stifled a giggle as she saw the kids looking at each other in confusion as they each heard their own item called out incorrectly. They hadn’t realized that they were all wrong yet.

“Then, in the back we have Dodger’s kale, my onions, and mommy’s cabbage.”
“Mama! Mine’s carrots!” Josie corrected her with alarm.

“And mine’s corn!” Dodge chimed in.

“Where my pickles?” Lily asked loudly, referring to the cucumbers by the only name she would use for them all summer long.

“What’s a rue-baga?” Drew asked, scrunching up his face in confusion.

Ashlyn kept a remarkably straight face but the jig was up when Ali started giggling.

“Oh come on hon” the keeper groaned and rolled her eyes. “I had them so good!” she laughed and winked at her children who were, one by one, figuring out the joke.

“Mama!” Drew laughed, stepped closer to her and smacked her hip. “That wasn’t funny” he laughed some more as the other three joined him and tried to tackle hug Ashlyn.

“It definitely was funny” she countered, bracing herself for impact and tickling her attackers as they made contact. “You should have seen your faces!”

It had turned out to be one of the best afternoons they spent during the whole month of June. Ashlyn wasn’t sure if the kid love and family bonding time had been part of the plan for the horticultural therapy or not, but it had sure worked that day.

“So walk me through what we’ve got here” Carol prompted as she bent over and peered at the well-laid out garden.

It had been 27 days since they planted the seeds and everything had come up and was growing. Each of the 6 sections contained something small, green and leafy. Ashlyn started with the front row and went from left to right.

“We have Drew’s watermelons, Lily’s cucumbers, and Josie’s carrots here in the front.” She pointed to the rear left corner of the raised bed next. “And then in the back we’ve got Ali’s cherry tomatoes, my sugar snap peas, and Dodger’s corn” she couldn’t help but smile as she thought of the obstinate boy who didn’t care if it was hard to grow or not.

“Oh my, he’s ambitious isn’t he?” she chuckled.

“The carrots and the tomatoes took the longest to come up, er...germinate, I think” Ashlyn struggled with some of the terminology and feared she always would. There was so much to know. “Especially the carrots. Poor Jojo. They finally came up just this last week.”

“That’s carrots for you” Carol smiled as she inspected the watermelon vine and the cucumber vine next to it. “This melon vine looks like it’s about ready to branch. And the cucumber flowers are in good shape. Should have some baby cukes soon.”

“I got the vine kind so I was hoping you could help me with the trellis today, if you don’t mind” the keeper held her breath because she had been putting off the trellis for the peas because she was afraid of messing it up.

“Of course I don’t mind. I’d love to show you what I know. You’ll need one for the peas and the cherry tomatoes too.”

“Yep, I bought three. I just haven’t been brave enough to give them a whirl yet” she laughed nervously.
It took them a couple of hours but they weeded, watered and trellised the garden. They had been joined by the kids as soon as they realized their mama and Caro were out there. All four kids watched the trellis installation with curious eyes and asked lots of questions. Carol had been wonderful and offered more advice and some helpful tips, like growing basil next to the tomatoes to naturally repel pests. That was the kind of stuff that was beginning to fascinate the keeper. As nervous as she had been about the garden all along, she really was getting more and more interested every step of the way.

“And the next step is to put up the fence around it to keep the critters away” Carol grinned as the kids all looked at her for further explanation. “Rabbits are cute and all, but they’ll eat up everything in this garden and ruin all your hard work. So get a wire fence with them in mind, sooner rather than later” she winked at Ashlyn. “And hopefully the deer will stay on the other side of it too.”

“And the dogs” Drew added. “Fred tried to dig in it!”

Ali and Ashlyn had talked at length with the kids about keeping the dogs away from the garden and it wasn’t just to stop Fred from digging. Everything in the garden, this year anyway, was safe for dogs except for the tomato plant. It would make them very sick if they ate it. And seeds in general were bad for dogs so the watermelon and cucumber should be avoided unless you removed the seeds. Both dogs loved carrots but they were safely hidden under the dirt so they couldn’t get at them. Ali herself was looking forward to giving the dogs a homegrown carrot treat when they were ready. If they were ever ready. The cucumbers, Lily’s pickles, should be the first thing ready to harvest in the first week of August. Then, the next week, Ashlyn’s sugar snap peas would start to be ready and maybe Dodge’s corn. But it wasn’t looking promising yet so they thought, if it produced anything at all, that it might be later than expected. Ali’s cherry tomatoes would be ripe and edible and delicious the third week of August, hopefully. Josie’s carrots would be next, the very last week of August. Followed, finally, by Drew’s watermelon the first week of September. Next year they would start the garden a few weeks earlier, in the middle of May as the books instructed. That would help. The best part of that thought was that Ashlyn knew without a doubt that she would absolutely be planting another garden next year, a bigger and better one too.

The 4th of July fell on Saturday that year and the Horribles Parade and fireworks were on Sunday the 5th. It wasn’t ideal to have them so close together but what could you do? Tammye and Carol arrived on Thursday morning so they could go up to The Academy and get a look at the end of the 2nd session. They were staying at the big old house and flying home Monday afternoon. Kyle and Nathan had planned a week’s summer vacation around the 4th of July holiday as well. They drove up, with the kids and Luna, Friday morning and stayed at Deb & Mike’s condo in Manchester until Sunday of the following week. The idea was for them to have the condo to themselves but Mike threw a wrench into that plan when he flew up Friday night to surprise Deb for her upcoming birthday for the weekend. Deb had been in Manchester since Josie’s birthday party 2 weeks earlier and had planned to stay with Ali for the week of Kyle’s vacation. She wanted to spend time with her son and his family too, but she was trying to give them some space and privacy at the same time. The compromise was that Kyle and his family went to stay with Nathan’s parents for the first weekend and then moved into Deb’s condo once Mike flew home to Miami on Monday. It all worked out and everybody was taken care of and loved up during the busy holiday weekend.

The mission for that vacation week was for Kyle and Nathan to get Edgar and Cristina comfortable in the big old house. They knew they couldn’t keep asking Ali and Ashlyn and Sydney and all the other mothers to stay out of sight whenever Cristina and Edgar were around. Both kids had made great strides since Easter and were doing better at school and with life in general. They were
excited for their beach vacation. Honestly, they had never been on a vacation before so they had no idea what to expect. Kyle and Nathan could have brought them to a Motel 6 on the interstate just outside of NYC and those kids would have thought it was the best vacation ever. The foster dads had spoken at length with the kids’ therapist as well as their case worker about their integration plan and both women had approved it. It was time to push the kids just a little bit to help them come all the way out of their shells.

The plan wouldn’t go all the way into effect until the Monday when the weekend visitors went home and Kyle and Nathan moved the kids into Deb’s condo for the next six days. But starting on Tuesday, Kyle would bring his family up to the big old house every day and go to the beach or hang out in the yard and just relax and have fun. He knew, and had seen firsthand, that kids loved running around and exploring in that big old house. And the empty lot next door was ground zero for imaginary adventures. Plus, there would be three friendly and loveable dogs for Cristina to cling to if she needed or wanted that sort of time and love.

But first there were The Horribles Parade and fireworks to enjoy. Niki and Molly had taken their kids down to spend the holiday weekend with their families in Rhode Island but the Flanagans and the Dwyers all came up to Gloucester for the day on Sunday. It was the usual summer gathering at the big old house that everybody knew and loved. Deb and Mike and Sandi Leroux were all there. Ken and Vicki and Koty and Brianna joined them as well as the Kimball family too. Bill and Iris Kimball had never participated in The Horribles parade or fireworks before but were looking forward to spending the day with Edgar and Cristina. Ali had gone out of her way at Easter to make sure that both of Nathan’s parents knew how welcome they always were in her home. The brunette knew how important grandparents were in any family and she wanted to ensure that the Kimballs and the Kriegers maintained a good relationship now that there were shared grandchildren involved. Up to that point, the Kimballs had come and gone as they chose and nobody minded. But Ali knew that whenever Edgar and Cristina were going to be in Massachusetts for a visit, Grandpa Bill and Abuela were sure to be around.

The only people missing that Sunday were Meg and Mickey Donaldson who had to report to week three of The Academy. Julie Donaldson was working that week as the nurse and she drove the girls up so Ashlyn could enjoy the rest of the family gathering. The Donaldsons continued to be the nicest neighbors as well as good friends. They would be forever grateful for Ashlyn’s help pulling Emma out of her shell and helping her develop some much-needed self-confidence as she embarked on her high school years. It was hard to put a price tag on things like that. Ashlyn felt guilty about not taking Meg up to the camp herself that morning but the teenager had told her to stay with everybody else in a surprisingly mature and unselfish gesture. Ali reminded her wife that if Meg wanted to play competitive soccer at a very high level she was going to have to get used to making a lot of sacrifices. The keeper bemoaned the fact that it was Meg’s last year at the 14-year old cutoff and that next year she could only come up for the invitational 4th week of camp. By the time Ashlyn had pondered the decision, she realized that she would be missing 90 minutes with Meg and that the teen would probably have her headphones in her ears and her face buried in her phone the whole time anyway. She decided to stay and spend the day with her four little kids and the rest of the extended family. Tammye and Carol were leaving the next day and she was feeling particularly close to them both after their wedding and all of Carol’s help with the garden.

For the first time anyone could remember, everybody went downtown to watch the parade that Sunday. They wandered around the shops and ate way too many things they probably shouldn’t have. The kids all had their faces painted and festive temporary tattoos applied to their arms and hands and were generally treated like royalty for three hours. Edgar and Cristina fit right in and didn’t seem bothered by much of the commotion at all. They appeared to be enjoying everything just as much as, if not more than, the Krieger, Dwyer and Flanagan kids were. Ali had been worried about freaking them out but Kyle assured her that they had both been making good
progress with ‘mom’ aged women over the past three months. It had never been too much of an issue when they were out and about. The real stress and fear had always been when they were in homes or other enclosed spaces where their own mother had abused them. The busy, bustling sidewalks along the parade route didn’t phase either of the Guerrero children one bit.

It turned out to be a pretty special day for them both, full of firsts that had excited and thrilled them. They had never had their faces painted before. And they had never seen fireworks before, other than a stray one off in the distance somewhere for no real reason as they rode the bus in the Bronx. The pretty pink and green, sparkly faerie and the fearsome Wolverine took everything in stride that day and night. It was easy to see that they took a lot of comfort and strength from Nathan and Kyle. Kyle held Edgar in his strong arms as they sat next to Nathan, with Cristina in his, and watched the dark sky explode into brilliant colors, time after time after time after time. Nathan had prepared them both for it by watching fireworks videos with them online during the previous few weeks. It was hard to know what might upset the children, especially when they didn’t know exactly what they had suffered before escaping their abused lives. But the only reaction from either Guerrero had been excitement and wonder. Kyle told his sister the next day that he had never heard either one of the kids laugh that gleefully or freely before.

The vacation week at the beach by the big old house had gone well too. They all celebrated Deb’s birthday that Thursday and to say that Grandma was emotional having both of her kids, their spouses and all seven grandchildren there together would have been an understatement. They all made the drive up to The Academy for the Thursday afternoon end of session gathering that had become customary for Ali and the kids. Edgar and Cristina were amazed by the lake and the camp and the two Krieger families started making plans to spend a week, or at least a weekend, of vacation there together next summer. Every day that week got a little bit better and Edgar and Cristina got more and more comfortable there. Edgar’s comfort had come sooner than his sister’s had. By Wednesday he was already ok being in the same room with Ali and Ashlyn as they interacted with their own children. By Friday, Cristina had progressed to watching a movie with everybody all piled up together on the big couch in the front living room. She sat in Kyle’s lap with Persey curled up next to them, even though there wasn’t that much room for a dog with four adults and six little kids trying to fit there. Meg even joined them, home from The Academy. She took the recliner and Josie soon jumped in her lap with a shy smile. They watched ‘Finding Nemo’ because Cristina and Edgar loved the ocean and the beach so much. Ashlyn and Kyle had dubbed them dolphin-girl and dolphin-boy, so, naturally, the little girl had chosen the most appropriate Disney movie to watch. It had gone really well. Ali sat at the opposite end of the L-bend couch and tried to act normally, even though her heart was pounding in her chest. She was desperate for this vacation week experiment to go well. She hadn’t wanted anything that badly in a long time.

The next day, Saturday, was the last day of their vacation. Kyle and his family were driving back home to NYC on Sunday, so the local grandparents were all coming back over to the big old house for one last beach day and backyard grilled dinner. But before any of them arrived for the afternoon, Ali was painting Lily’s nails in the front living room. Josie’s nails were already done and drying as the redhead tried to sit still. Deb, who was staying at the big old house for the week, sat in the recliner with Josie on her lap, the girl telling her who the characters were on the show they were watching on tv. Dodge was next, he loved having his nails painted blue, especially his toes if he was going to the beach or a pool later. He loved the way they looked under the water, all painted blue. It was 10:30am and Ashlyn, Meg and Drew were playing video games in the family room with Dodge moving back and forth from room to room checking on both activities.

“We’re hoooome” Kyle called out loudly as he opened the mudroom door and let Luna run inside between his legs. He dropped two big beach bags on the floor while Nathan and the kids came in behind him and shut the door. “Ready or not, here we are.”
Dodge and Josie ran to the mudroom to greet everybody, as did Fred and Persey.

“Oh no you don’t” Ali chuckled and held Lily in place on the edge of the coffee table, one foot still in her mommy’s lap. “We’re almost done sweet pea. Just sit still and they’ll come say hi to you, I promise.”

“Oh, is it nails day?” Kyle smiled as he came over, bent down and kissed his goddaughter on her head. “Can I be next?”

“No!” Dodge yelled and ran over. “I’m next!”

“Here’s a newsflash for you all” Ali teased. “I’m not the only one in this house who does nails. In fact, I’m not even the best one at painting nails” she quirked her eyebrow and got back to work on Lily’s final two toes.

She saw Cristina’s little face peeking into the room from where she stood in the doorway to the mudroom, arm wrapped around Nathan’s leg. Edgar had gone in to check out the video game and taken Ashlyn’s place. The keeper walked through the dining room and front hall to get to the front living room instead of taking the shorter route through the mudroom, conscious of making Cristina uncomfortable in the smaller space.

“Who else?” Lily cocked her head and asked for the answer to the question nobody seemed to know.

“Well, Mama of course. Who do you think does such a good job with my nails?” Ali grinned and flashed her hand dramatically.

“Mama of course what now?” Ashlyn asked from the doorway by the front door.

“Right on cue” Kyle laughed.

“Mommy says you are the best at nails” Josie walked over to the keeper and looked up at her for the final say on the matter.

“Mommy’s right” Ashlyn winked at her daughter. “But look at what a good job she did on yours” she made a big fuss over Josie’s light green fingernails that had been painted, at the 5-year old’s request, to match her bathing suit.

The kids were ready for the beach even though they weren’t going down for another 2 hours. “And look at miss Lily’s pretty pink nails...”

Both Ali and Ashlyn noticed Cristina push her way past Nathan so she was all the way inside the front living room. She looked cautiously from one woman to the other and then from one little girl’s painted nails to the other. Ali kept her attention on the task at hand and waited to see what would happen next. During the vacation week Cristina had definitely seemed more comfortable with Ashlyn than Ali. Something about her less-feminine appearance was behind it, they all knew. Maybe it was the tattoos or the tomboyish clothes as well. Nobody was sure exactly why. Ali thought it was because her wife had always had a way with kids and animals that no-one else could come close to. She had always been able to make a connection with them somehow. Ashlyn and Edgar had played soccer in the backyard earlier in the week with Drew and Nathan, for example. And Cristina had let the keeper help her at the beach on two different days, one time even allowing her to wrap her wet body up in a beach towel and rub her arms while she warmed up. It had been good progress for sure. As Kyle stood there not sure what to do, Ashlyn smiled warmly at the girl and spun the snapback on her head around so it was backwards and wouldn’t get in the way.

“Would you like me to paint your nails, dolphin-girl?”
Ali never lifted her eyes or her head, afraid of spooking the brave girl who nodded at Ashlyn and took a cautious step forward.

“But I’m next!!” Dodge said even louder than before and stomped his foot where he stood next to the couch.

“I’ll do yours next honey” Ali gave him a look and a slight nod of the head that told him to calm down. “Lily’s almost done. One teeny tiny toe left” she poked her impatient son in his bare belly and grinned at him. “Ok?”

“Well who’s going to do my nails then?” Kyle asked with fake disappointment.

“I will Unky Ky!” Josie announced and sat down next to Ali on the couch. She looked at her uncle expectantly as all of the adults chuckled. “You sit here” she nodded at the coffee table.

“Oh princess I think we should switch” he picked her up, took her seat and plopped the little girl down on the coffee table next to her sister. “I’m too big and heavy to sit on the coffee table” he winked. “Let’s see what color should we do?” he picked up the four bottles of nail polish and held them between he and Josie so she could help him pick.

“Go ahead honey” Nathan gently encouraged Cristina.

Ashlyn had moved to the end of the L-shaped couch nearest the mudroom door while Kyle and Ali were dealing with Dodge and determining who was next in line. She smiled again at the little girl who looked like she might be regretting her bold move into the room. The keeper leaned forward and patted the end of the coffee table while Ali pronounced Lily done. The brunette screwed the pink nail polish closed and handed it to her wife.

“Alright little man, up you go” she said after reminding Lily to sit still, in her new seat on the couch next to her mommy, and let her fresh new polish dry. She fished around the other bottles and found the bright blue one she knew her son wanted. “Fingers and toes or just toes?”

“Ummm, toes first!”

“Is this the color you want?” Ashlyn asked Cristina, holding the pink nail polish that had gotten her attention a few minutes earlier out to her. “Or do you want to look at the other colors?”

“Pink” Cristina answered in a soft voice. She was shy but the small smile on her face let everybody know she really wanted to have her nails painted pink.

“Oh great” Kyle rolled his eyes. “Well it looks like my first two choices are already taken” he huffed.

“Do green, like me!” Josie suggested with wide eyes.

“Ooooooh, we could match” he enthused. “Yes please, let’s do that.”

Nathan picked Cristina up and put her down on the end of the coffee table, keeping his hand on her back to make sure she was ok. After a minute he sat on the floor next to her, leaning against the couch, and let Persey come and curl up next to him for pats. Nathan would have killed to get up and take a picture of the adorable scene that had taken over the room, but he didn’t want to disturb it. He was afraid he might spook Cristina and decided the photo wasn’t worth it. Nothing was worth risking the little girl letting Ashlyn hold her hands and feet and paint her nails. Deb looked like she was snapping some pics from her spot in the recliner anyway. It was a special half hour and the keeper admitted to her wife later that night that she had been terrified of messing it up.
because she knew exactly what a big deal it really was. Kyle had the best view in the room from his seat on the other end of the couch. He could see his husband’s emotional face as well as Ashlyn’s careful and thoughtful one. She was concentrating hard and trying to make Cristina feel safe and secure at the same time not messing up her nails. Kyle could see Josie and Dodge’s beautiful faces, side by side on the coffee table in front of him. Dodge was making goofy faces at Lily on the couch across from him while Josie was completely focused on trying to get the green nail polish on her uncle’s big fingernails. Kyle turned to look at his sister, sitting next to him on the couch, and after just a few seconds she turned to meet his gaze. They smiled at each other with their whole beings and he reached over with his free hand to rub her back. This was a huge moment for their two little families. It was a big step towards Ali and Kyle’s ultimate goal of having Thanksgiving and Christmas together with the Guerrero kids feeling comfortable and safe in the big old house, even around the brunette mom. They were getting closer to achieving it and they were both thrilled.
The month of July went by quickly and smoothly. Ashlyn got back to her old schedule from last summer, spending Sunday and Tuesday nights sleeping at The Academy. On Wednesday morning, July 28th the keeper drove back down from New Hampshire and surprised her wife in the waiting room for her third ultrasound of the year.

“What are you doing here?” the brunette smiled when she walked in and saw her wife sitting there in one of the chairs looking adorable, colorful bouquet of flowers in her hand.

“Happy Birthday baby” Ashlyn grinned and stood up to give her wife a hug and a kiss. She felt Ali hold on in the hug for a minute longer than usual and squeezed her tight in response. “Thought I’d keep you company here and then kidnap you for the rest of the day. As long as that’s ok with you?” she winked and grinned again.

“What? Are you kidding me? That sounds awesome” she paused and Ashlyn could see the wheels turning in her head as they stood there in the middle of the waiting room.

The keeper led Ali off to the side of the room for a tiny bit of privacy.

“I already checked with Marcy and Whit and Jared at the office and they said it would be ok” Ashlyn rubbed her free hand up and down her wife’s arm as she spoke. “Your mom’s picking Drew and Josie up from science camp this afternoon and all we have to do is bring the twins home with us from daycare for your birthday dinner.”

“So we have the whole afternoon to ourselves?” Ali’s eyes brightened at the thought. “Really?”

“Really. We can do whatever you want, it’s your birthday” the blonde brought their lips together in another sweet kiss. “I didn’t make any plans for us because I want you to pick something you really want to do, just for you. But I packed a bag for you yesterday, before I left for camp, with some clothes in case you want to change. You know, depending on what you decide we’re doing.”

“God, I love you so much” Ali hugged her wife again and only let go when her name was called by the nurse.

“And, you know...” Ashlyn took a beat, letting Ali wave to the nurse and start to step out of the hug, “if you want a day off all to yourself that’s ok too. I don’t have to be there...”

There was no guile or manipulation or sad face accompanying the words. The blonde meant the offer sincerely and seriously. She was fully prepared to give Ali the bag of extra clothes and send her on her way if that’s what her beautiful brunette wanted.

“Ashlyn” Ali exhaled, her face full of love and appreciation as she tugged the keeper along by the hand towards the nurse. She waited until they were inside the procedure room and the nurse had left them alone so the brunette could get ready. “Of course I want you with me” she smiled as she stepped out of her low heels, took her slacks and panties off, and set them neatly on the chair with her purse. “I always want you with me, especially on my birthday” she took a step closer to her wife and hugged her again, pressing a quick kiss to her lips.

It amazed Ashlyn how calm and nonplussed the brunette was about these ultrasounds now. Here she was half-naked, about to get up on the examination table, and she was still completely focused on her surprise and her wife and nothing else. The keeper didn’t think she’d be able to do it if she were in Ali’s place. She’d be all in her head about...everything else – the stirrups, the cancer itself,
the wand in its holder waiting for its protective plastic wrap, the sound of strange voices just outside the door. Ashlyn would be a wreck and she knew it. She suddenly thought she had made a terrible mistake telling Ali about the surprise here at the hospital.

“I’m sorry if this was a bad idea...surprising you here, like this” she apologized quickly and pulled her head back so she could read her wife’s face.

“What?” Ali frowned in confusion. “I love that you’re here and I love my surprise” she cocked her head, trying to figure out what was going on with her suddenly nervous wife. The confident, flower-bearing charmer from the lobby had disappeared now that they were in the exam room. She pecked her lips again and then hustled up onto the table and covered herself from the waist down with the sheet the nurse had provided. The voices outside the door were getting louder and she knew the technician would be walking into the small room any second. She reached for Ashlyn’s hand and smiled up at her again as she lay back on the table, putting her feet into the stirrups.

“This’ll just take a few minutes and then we’ll be done” she squeezed her keeper’s hand. “I’m so glad you’re here sweetheart. Thank you.”

The day was wonderful. Ali decided on mani/pedis at her old nail salon in Stoneham, which was very close to where the hospital was. Then lunch at The Mandarin, their favorite Chinese restaurant which was also nearby. Then they went to the town center in Reading, MA, one town up from Stoneham, and walked around the shops there like they used to do before Ali moved into the big old house. One of the brunette’s favorite independent bookstores was there and Ashlyn knew that had been the major draw. They finished their simple, relaxing, peaceful afternoon at the café they both loved, drinking iced coffee and eating birthday cupcakes. It had been something Ali had thought about doing a million times. Every time she drove past the exit on the highway on her way to work she told herself she’d leave a little early and stop on her way home. But she never did. She never left as early as she had hoped and the pull of picking up the twins was always greater than her desire to lose herself in her favorite bookstore for an hour. Ali didn’t think she had talked about it with her wife but wasn’t surprised that her incredibly thoughtful keeper had known just what to do for her on her special day. The brunette would have loved an afternoon of surprises planned out by Ashlyn – those could never disappoint her. But walking around the quaint town center, holding hands or arm-in-arm with the woman she loved more than life itself, turned out to be everything she could dream of wanting that day.

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The first two weeks of August flew by as well and before they knew it, The Academy had finished the eighth and final session and the four families were heading up to the big house on the lake again for vacation. There were changes afoot with all four couples and they took the time to share all the details of each new development with each other while sleeping under the same roof. Dom had been promoted and was now one of the senior trainers for the NE Revs and the Boston Breakers. The trainers all still worked on a rotating schedule so the travel duties were evenly distributed. But as one of the four senior trainers, Dom was now in charge of supervising the newest men and women that joined their ranks as they learned how to do their jobs. He also got an increase in his salary which the Dwyers very much appreciated because they had three growing boys to take care of and neither he nor Sydney made a lot of money. Sydney was a well-respected high school soccer coach and physical education teacher at a public school. There were days when the couple wondered if it would be better for them financially if she stayed home and took care of the kids instead of paying for daycare. But they both knew Sydney would lose her mind in that scenario.

Of the four families, the Kriegers were the wealthiest but most of their money was tied up in Knight-Harris. Ashlyn had made loans to both The Academy and The Mental Health Initiative
hoping and praying and believing that her investment in those two entities would pay off and she would be able to recoup her money before her kids needed it for college. This year, for the first time ever, Ali was receiving a nice paycheck every month from K-H. She and Ashlyn had both been receiving their very modest shareholder payments over the years but most of that money had been put back into the business to help it grow. Jared, Hilary and Whitney had done the same thing, except they were receiving salaries too. But 2026 was the year Ali finally started getting paid for all of her blood, sweat and tears making K-H one of the best sports and entertainment agencies in the country. They had been operating in the black for years and had never suffered a year where they didn’t turn a little bit of a profit. But that had largely been because neither Ali or Ashlyn had been taking a paycheck yet. Ashlyn still wasn’t. If everything went well this year and next, they were hopeful that the keeper could begin to get paid in 2028. Ashlyn was making her money from endorsements and from her broadcasting gigs covering women’s soccer. She still worked as an ambassador for the Breakers and made her appearances in the area. She actually loved doing that. It got her face to face with the fans, both hers and the Breakers’, and nothing was better than that. That connection with everyday people was what had gotten the blonde started in the first place. She wasn’t old news at Nike but she wasn’t the fresh young face anymore either. She was a very popular public sports figure nationwide, not just in New England, and she was paid accordingly. Subaru was still using her minivan commercials and she got paid every year because of it. The company had never had a more successful ad campaign in its history, and that was saying a lot because they had a lot of adorable dog commercials that everybody loved. There were tentative plans to shoot a new one now that she had four kids to stuff into the vehicle. They might even use Persey and Fred too.

The biggest change in her sponsorship world was that Betty Sue’s had gone out of business just last year. It wasn’t that they had failed. They had been so successful that Dunkin Donuts had finally gotten tired of losing so much business to them and bought them out. The huge coffee and donut company had been trying to buy Betty Sue’s out for years but the owners wouldn’t sell. By the end of 2025 the owners were getting older and none of their grown children wanted to come back and run the business. So they finally, as a family, agreed to sell to Dunkin Donuts. Ashlyn and Hilary had been in the big commercial with all the employees as they said goodbye and thank you to their loyal patrons. It was a sweet and sad tearjerker of an ad that ran through the holidays and into January of this year. The executives at Dunkin weren’t idiots though. They knew very well how effective Hilary and Ashlyn had been for Betty Sue’s over the years and they wanted them to continue that success with Dunkin. Hilary, who lived in Idaho and wasn’t part of the New England scene much anymore, declined to take the gig. She had talked it over with Ashlyn first, of course, because she didn’t want to hurt the keeper’s chance of keeping the sponsor on her own. Dunkin was fine with letting Hilary go which was a huge indication of how highly they thought of Ashlyn and how far her star had risen over the years. Instead of using the keeper and the hockey star, they switched it up and used Ashlyn and Kamala Pierce, the local Boston Beacons WNBA superstar. It was one of the proudest moments of Ashlyn’s career and she freely admitted it to Kamala and anybody else who asked her why she was so emotional about shooting the two commercials with her client and sort of protégé. Kamala Pierce was still a very happy client of K-H and a good friend of both Ashlyn and Ali. It was a big deal for the blonde and for Ali who both remembered all too well just what kind of hard work it had taken to survive that scandal.

The Kriegers weren’t rich yet, but if K-H kept doing as well as it had been and if The Academy started turning a profit in the future, and if Ashlyn kept getting hired to commentate on women’s soccer games and tournaments, and to star in commercials, they would be in the future. They hard-working couple was on the path. The Flanagans were probably the next in line in terms of financial success and that was solely because of Whitney’s paycheck as an incredible contract attorney and lawyer in general. Once she finished paying off the last of her student loans this year their finances would improve even more. She had turned out to be even better at the job than Ali thought she
could be. The one thing that had made K-H more profitable than anything else over the years had been hiring Whitney Flanagan and bringing all the contract work in-house. Whitney was smart and efficient and easy to work with. The lawyers that worked for her all respected and liked her and that was quite an accomplishment. Ali wasn’t even sure she could say that about the people who reported to her. Ryan made ok money as the head coach of the Boston Cannons but it wasn’t like he was making millions of dollars coaching the Red Sox or Celtics or anything like that. He wasn’t making as much as some higher-profile college football coaches in the area but it was decent. They were about to spend a whole bunch of money on the new house they had found in Winchester, MA. They had closed on it the week before the four-family vacation and they hoped to be all moved in before the end of the month. They really wanted to stay in Arlington but nothing there had worked out for them so they went one town East, towards Ali’s old town of Stoneham, and found a beautiful big old house of their own in Winchester. It wasn’t as big as Grandma Lilian’s house in Gloucester, but, unless Whitney had triplets once she managed to get pregnant again, they weren’t going to need a huge 5-bedroom, 4-bathroom house with two enormous ‘bonus’ rooms on the third floor anyway. Four bedrooms and three bathrooms would do just fine. It was exciting and terrifying and both Ryan and Whitney asked their friends a million questions about homeownership all week long.

Niki and Molly Cross were better off than the Dwyers but a little behind the Flanagans. Molly was the major breadwinner in the family with her commission-based salary for the LGBTQ+ travel company that had been growing every year. But Niki was about to start her new assistant coaching position at Boston College next month and bring her salary up closer to her go-getter wife’s. The coach had been perfectly happy with her head coaching job for Buckingham Brown and Nichols, a private high school just west of Boston proper. She had received coaching accolades and awards and her team was a perennial powerhouse. One of her players had even made it to the starting lineup of the U-20 USWNT last year. Niki could have moved up the ranks of the coaching world years ago but that was sort of her curse in life. She was often more than happy to stay where she was because it was good and she appreciated it. She was possibly the least ambitious person any of their group had ever known. It wasn’t that she lacked motivation or drive. It was more that she truly appreciated a good thing when she found it and didn’t see a reason to upset the applecart. It drove Molly crazy because she could see the virtually unlimited potential in her wife. As far as she was concerned, Niki could be coaching the USWNT and winning Olympic medals and World Cup championships. She was that good at what she did. She combined her easy-going, quiet personality with her die-hard work ethic and unyielding competitiveness and out came a really great coach. Her international experience, playing in Australia, Sweden, Norway, and Germany over the years, meshed with her years playing in the WPS, and the NWSL in the USA gave her some pretty unique insight into the professional game of women’s soccer. But Niki was happy coaching the hell out of her high school girls, believing she was helping prepare them for their own greatness. It had taken an old teammate of Niki’s who had ended up as head trainer at Boston College a couple of years earlier to get the ball rolling. The old teammate had been telling the coaching staff at BC for two years how great Niki was and they slowly started paying attention. They reached out after another BB&N undefeated season last year and made Niki an offer she would have been an idiot to refuse. There weren’t a lot of teams that Niki would risk upsetting her family life for, but BC was the biggest team in the Boston area playing division 1 women’s soccer. The only other team Niki would have considered would have been her alma mater, UConn. But they didn’t come looking for her like BC had.

The four families didn’t talk about money very much and none of them lived much better or worse than the others. They were truly contemporaries in almost every way. Everyone knew Ashlyn was the famous one in the group and no-one begrudged her the success or notoriety when it came up. They loved her and were happy for her. And sometimes they benefitted from their proximity to her star, however brightly it happened to be shining at any given moment. Ashlyn and Ali had the
biggest house with the beach right there so they ended up hosting a lot of their get-togethers and that was just fine with them. Everybody always contributed something and things were always very equitable. There were too many proud people involved to let anything else happen. When they could, Ali and Ashlyn did little things for their friends. Like when Ali had gotten Sydney and Dom a room at the Beauport hotel for their wedding. Sydney was 8-months pregnant with Cassius and uncomfortable as hell and the brunette didn’t want her schlepping all over the place after a long afternoon and evening at the Hammond Castle. Sydney had accepted the generous gift even though she knew she couldn’t reciprocate. But she and Ali had grown up with that sort of dynamic and had become pros at giving and taking without hurting each other’s feelings. Ashlyn had grown up poor and now that she had more than she needed, sometimes, she tried to help her friends. She had lobbied hard to get Dom hired by the Revs and Breakers in the first place. She knew he was excellent at his job and had no qualms about fighting for him. She had referred dozens of clients to Ryan for strength training and fitness during his off-seasons over the years. Whitney knew about it but Ryan didn’t always make the connection. And it wasn’t just Ali and Ashlyn. Molly was forever hooking all of them up with great places to stay, for example. And Whitney had given out more free legal advice than any of them cared to admit. Dom did the same with new training and recovery techniques that he learned about at work and shared with the former-athletes and coaches in their group. They all looked out for each other like that. It was part of what made their bond so strong. It didn’t matter who made what money. They all knew that if any of them needed anything, the other seven members of their group would move heaven and earth to get it for them.

“I can’t believe it finally happened” Ashlyn complained quietly the first night of vacation as she and Ali were about to fall asleep in the big rental house up on Squam Lake.

“What happened, babe?” Ali kissed her wife’s shoulder as she spooned the blonde from behind.

“Meg. She’s not here and she didn’t even want to come this year” the keeper’s voice was soft and sad.

“Aw, you don’t know that honey” the brunette tried to counter. “I’m sure she wanted to come, but she’s a freshman now and her high school team had workouts they wanted her to participate in. You remember how that was. Soccer season really starts in August whether you want it to or not.”

“Yeah, but...I could tell by the sound of her voice that she just wasn’t interested in joining us this year. It just makes me sad. That’s all.”

Ali let a couple of minutes pass by, wondering how best to handle the situation. She knew Ashlyn was making more out of it than it deserved, but it didn’t matter. The keeper was feeling what she was feeling. Ali tried to get her tired brain to work out what she was missing. There had to be another piece to explain why Ashlyn was so upset by something that wasn’t even definite yet. For all they knew, Meg was already planning to join them next year for the 4-family vacation.

“I’m sorry sweetheart” the brunette pressed another kiss into her wife’s shoulder and held her close.

“It’s my own fault” Ashlyn finally offered, voice still quiet and sorrowful. “I practically talked her out of coming with us last year. And now she doesn’t want to anymore. It serves me right.”

“Ashlyn, honey, you didn’t talk her into or out of anything” Ali got up on her elbow and leaned over her wife’s shoulder so she could kiss her cheek. “I’m sure it feels that way, but I think you’re giving yourself way too much credit for anything Meg did or didn’t do last year or this year” she chuckled softly and stroked her keeper’s cheek.
“You think?” Ashlyn turned her head and closed her eyes when Ali brought their lips together in a gentle kiss.

“I do” the brunette kissed her lips again. “She’s a teenager and she barely knows what she’s going to do from one minute to the next half the time. You can’t take it personally babe. You know that.”

“Yeah, you’re right. It just feels...” she struggled to find the right word, staring into her favorite cinnamon eyes as she tried. “Shitty.”

“I miss her too. But thanks to your big soft heart we get to spend Christmas with her and Hannah and Dev this year so we have that to look forward to” Ali managed to say with a straight face. “You’ll see her in no time at all.”

“You’re going to torture me for that for the rest of the year aren’t you?” the keeper grinned up at her beautiful wife.

“Every chance I get” Ali chuckled and settled back into place as the big spoon. “But I love you and I love Meg and we’ll figure it out.”

“Do you think she misses us too?” the keeper’s voice drifted up a few minutes later when they were both even closer to sleep.

“Ash, you’re the most fun person this lake has ever seen” Ali’s words were a little slower and a little sleepier than before. “Of course she misses you. She’s probably regretting her decision to stay in DC already. I’ll bet you two wake-ups that she calls you tomorrow to say hi.”

That was their currency those days. One of them had to get up with whichever kid needed something in the middle of the night. They bet and bartered in wake-ups.

“Two wake-ups, wow, that’s steep” Ashlyn considered for a few seconds. “But I’ll take that bet. You’re on.”

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The week went by quickly and was full of the usual fun and games on the lake and off of it. Some of the kids were old enough now to play older and more fun games that involved some strategy. Noah and Cash, the big boys at 10-1/2 and 8-3/4 respectively, had both cleared the vaunted 8-year old age cut-off for so many games. Drew would hit it next year but he tried his best to learn the games as he watched them play. Most of the kids could play games that were a year or sometimes two years above their age. Sydney always joked about which idiot kids they tested the games on. A big part of it was having an older sibling or friend who knew what they were doing and then the younger kid could just follow along. As long as they could read what they needed to read, most of the kids played up when it came to board games. Niki had taught Noah how to play cribbage a couple of years ago when he was maybe 8-1/2 or so. Cash was almost 9 this vacation and the coach took it upon herself to teach him one of her favorite games too.

“Listen, everybody plays cribbage” Niki explained to a skeptical Sydney one rainy afternoon. “I played it in every country I ever visited or lived. It’s universal. And it’s great for developing math and counting skills.”

“Well, you’d better teach me then too while you’re at it” she laughed. Sydney had been successfully avoiding cribbage for years.

“Just think of it as another game I can beat you at my darling” Dom added from the back of the room with a smirk.
“You see?” the coach motioned in frustration at her cocky husband. “This is why I hate this game. He’s tried to teach me before but he’s such a…”

“Hey Nik, do you mind if Drew listens in too?” Ashlyn cut off Sydney just in time.

“No, that’d be awesome” Niki grinned at Drew as he and his Mama walked over to the coffee table in the living room of the lake house. “The more the merrier.”

“Niki taught me how to play cribbage” Ashlyn told her son as they sat together on the floor, ready to watch and listen.

“When you were little?” Drew asked, his eyes wide at the thought.

“No” Ashlyn chuckled. “When I was just out of college and starting to play professional soccer. She always had a deck of cards with her, wherever she went. She probably still does” the keeper laughed. “And she used to have a cribbage board in her gear bag so if we ever had a rain delay or some time to kill between practices or something, we could always play a game of cribbage.”

They were both quiet as Niki dealt the cards out to Ashlyn and Drew, then Sydney and Cash and finally herself.

“We’ll play 3-person, I brought the big board” Niki grinned again.

“She’s the best person at teaching cribbage I’ve ever met” Ashlyn continued as she picked up her cards and fanned them out in her big hand in front of her son.

“Oooh cribbage” Whitney enthused as she walked into the room. “I’ve got next!”

“Here, why don’t you play my hand and I’ll help Syd and Cash” Niki suggested and the lawyer quickly agreed.

Neither little boy, nor Sydney, picked up very much of it that first lesson. But when they saw Noah playing against his mom later on that afternoon they all felt like trying again. By the end of the week they had all learned most of the rules. Niki and Whitney and Ashlyn, and anybody else who was playing with the newbies, had agreed not to take any points that the learners had missed when they were counting their hands. But all three women swore that was the best way to learn because you got so mad when your opponent got to count the points you had missed that you made sure not to miss any the next time. But they didn’t want to demoralize the youngsters, or Sydney for that matter. Those two hours they had spent that rainy afternoon as the little kids napped had been one of the best the keeper could remember. It really touched her heart that one of her best friends was taking the time to teach her own son how to play one of her favorite games. There was just something so right about it and it made Ashlyn very happy.

Meg called Ashlyn late the night after the keeper and Ali had made their 2 wake-up bet. Ashlyn had just started to gloat as the grown-ups gathered around the big kitchen table to play Cards Against Humanity. She was sad about winning the bet, but, in an effort to make herself feel better about missing Meg in the first place, she made a big deal out of her win. But no sooner had she gotten one obnoxious boast out of her mouth, her phone rang and Meg’s face popped up for everybody to see on the caller ID. The blonde looked across the table at her wife, fully expecting to see a satisfied smirk on her beautiful face. Ashlyn certainly deserved whatever Ali would be dishing out. But when the keeper met her wife’s eyes all she saw was happiness, relief and love shining back at her. The happiness had nothing to do with winning the bet and everything to do
with Ashlyn’s soft heart getting the phone call it needed.

“You owe me two wake-ups, babe” Ali winked and grinned as the keeper got up and left the table to take the call. She called after Ashlyn. “And tell her I said hi!”

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One morning towards the end of vacation Ali, Ashlyn, Penny Cross (4-1/2), Josie (5), Lily (3), Whitney and Becca (1-1/2) had decided to take a girls-only hike. The hike was really just a glorified walk to the country store a little over a mile up the road. Most of the walk was along two small winding roads like the one their rental house was located on, but the store itself was on a busier street that they really had to be careful crossing. Josie and Penny did most of the talking as they made the leisurely 30-minute stroll. Lily listened and laughed along, just behind them and holding her mommy’s hand while Ashlyn and Whitney brought up the rear with the keeper carrying her goddaughter, Becca, in the little backpack carrier. It was a pretty adorable conversation between the two little girls and it focused mostly on the story behind what they thought the two little squirrels that they saw at the end of their first winding road were doing.

“They’re playing” Penny suggested, laughing at the antics of the two grey squirrels who were racing circles around each other and the tree they had just jumped onto. Their little claws made scratching sounds as they tore around the smooth bark of the maple tree.

“No” Josie shook her head. “They’re dancing.”

Lily laughed along with Ali at the lengthy discussion as they left the squirrels behind and turned onto the next road. Josie and Penny didn’t stop their friendly debate until they reached their destination and were distracted by more important things, like what kind of candy to buy. They spent about thirty minutes in the store getting one sweet treat each and then hung out on the picnic benches behind the store for almost an hour talking and playing while they enjoyed them. Becca had only been walking for a couple of months and was still not great at it so she provided lots of entertainment as she veered and careened around the little group with a goofy, excited grin on her face. When Josie had finished her ring pop and Penny had eaten her box of Nerds and Lily had polished off her big tootsie roll they all drank some water and then started their walk back to the lake house. Becca went back up on Ashlyn’s back even though Ali was supposed to get her turn with the cutie-pie. The brunette pinched her wife’s butt, making her jump, and promised she would get even with her later.

When they were about halfway home they turned onto the small, winding road where they had seen the two squirrels before and Ali saw her wife’s shoulders slump as she walked in front of her. Josie and Penny were leading the way again but this time Ashlyn was walking behind them and holding Lily’s hand with Ali and Whitney trailing slightly behind. Nothing else seemed amiss and the brunette wasn’t sure what was bothering her keeper. The girls kept yammering away about the best flavor combination of Nerds and hadn’t changed their demeanor at all.

“You ok babe?” Ali asked quietly.

“Yeah, fine” the blonde replied a little abruptly.

Whitney looked at Ali and then at Ashlyn’s back and squinted in concern.

“If you want me to take her just let me know” the lawyer reached forward and touched her best friend’s arm, but Ashlyn just shook her head no and kept walking.

They passed the tree the squirrels had been running around and kept moving down the road as
Ashlyn looked over her shoulder at the non-existent traffic and started to move like she was going to cross to the other side of the road.

“Ashlyn, what’s going on?” Ali tried again, keeping her voice low so the girls didn’t have to be interrupted by or bothered with whatever trouble the keeper was experiencing.

“Nothing... I just... we should cross...” she started to say and as she looked behind her again Lily peered up at her face.

“Mama, why you crying?” her little voice asked with a good amount of mumble in it.

“There’s only one squirrel” Josie’s voice called out at the same time as she pointed about 20 feet in front of them. “Where’s the other one?”

Ali’s brain processed all three comments at the same time and she scanned up the road and finally saw what the problem was. There, on their side of the road, was one of the squirrels circling around in agitated, sharp movements and squeaking loudly as it stood up on its back legs and then bent over before running around in a tight loop and repeating it all over again.

“Oh no” Whitney had seen it too.

“Mama, why is there only one squirrel now?” Josie asked again and then stopped in her tracks when she saw the second squirrel laying lifeless right in front of where the other squirrel was making such a commotion.

They all stopped and Ali reached forward to take Lily’s hand from Ashlyn’s. She gave her wife’s arm a gentle squeeze with her other hand and saw the silent tears streaming down her face.

“Mommy, why is Mama crying?” Lily asked again.

“Oh Lily girl, Mama’s sad” Ali tried to keep the explanation simple.

“Is that squirrel dead?” Penny’s little voice asked as she turned around to face the rest of the hiking group.

They were close enough for the grown-ups to see that the squirrel had been run over and that half of its little body had been flattened. It looked pretty gory from where they were with some of its insides spilling out onto the road. That’s why Ashlyn had tried to cross to the other side.

“Yes honey, I’m sorry. It looks like the squirrel got hit by a car and died” Ali said as evenly as she could, looking sweet Penny right in the eye as she answered.

“Fatty died” the girl said, referencing the Cross family’s guinea pig that had passed away earlier that summer. “But he didn’t get squished like that. He died from old age” she turned back to look at the two squirrels.

“I’m sorry about Fatty” Whitney finally found her voice and moved up to take Penny and Josie’s hands. “Let’s cross the street girls.”

The group slowly made its way to the other side of the road, never taking their eyes off of the poor squirrel who was left to grieve for his friend or spouse. That’s what always got to Ashlyn the most and her wife knew it. The poor, confused, grieving squirrel that got left behind waiting for his buddy to get back up again. The keeper hadn’t said a word and was having a hard time getting her emotions under control. Two of the people that knew her better than most picked up the slack for her though. Josie had taken a couple of minutes to process what she was seeing and then turned
around and hugged Ali’s legs as she cried. Between Ashlyn and Josie crying, it wasn’t long before Lily was in tears too. Whitney and Ali exchanged looks and then urged everybody forward so they could make it back to the house, or at least get away from the half-squished squirrel.

“Why did he have to die?” Josie wailed.

Ali walked with one of her daughters’ hands in each of her own and tried to explain again that sometimes animals died like plants died and like people died. They had only ever been touched by death obliquely, thank God, so there wasn’t a real concrete example to refer back to other than Mrs. Riley’s passing almost a year ago.

“It’ll be ok girls” Ali explained after answering five or six basic questions about heaven and how long the squirrel’s body was going to be there and why didn’t the car move to the other side of the road to avoid the squirrel in the first place. “The squirrel will go up to heaven and get to be with his friends and family who died before he did. And the other squirrel will go back to his other friends and family and tell them what happened and they’ll all help each other feel better while they miss their friend.”

Whitney helped out with a couple of questions too and held Penny’s hand until they finally made it back to the rental house. The little girl ran into Molly’s arms as soon as they all piled into the kitchen after walking up the steps to the back deck. Ali and Whitney filled Molly in while the lawyer helped get her daughter off of Ashlyn’s back. It was almost time for lunch but they had about thirty minutes before they had to start getting things ready. Molly gave the keeper a quizzical look but then focused on the three upset girls again. They all sat down and talked for a few more minutes about what had happened and Molly encouraged them all to remember how happy both squirrels had been just a short time before the accident and how happy they had made the hiking group too. That really helped the girls as well as the grown women and in another few minutes they all seemed to be getting back to normal. Lily crawled up onto Ashlyn’s lap and sat facing her. She put her pudgy little hands on either side of the keeper’s sad, tear-stained face and patted lightly.

“It’s ok Mama.”

“Oh thank you for making me feel better sweetpea” Ashlyn leaned forward and kissed her little girl’s lips. “You’re such a good and kind girl. I love you Lily.”

“Is she ok?” Molly asked Ali as they moved to the other side of the kitchen to get lunch started, leaving Whitney and a much improved Ashlyn with the girls.

“Yeah, she just feels things hard sometimes” Ali shrugged. “It’s that big heart of hers. She told me once that one of the things that always made her cry was seeing some poor animal on the side of the road...”

“Oh it’s just awful to see the poor dead things just laying there” Molly shook her head.

“What gets Ash is the other one, the one who can’t figure out why their husband or wife isn’t getting up” Ali explained. “The other squirrel was really upset. It was running around in circles and moving all around the dead one. It was really sad.”

“Jesus, I never really thought about it like that before” Molly’s eyebrows went up. “That is sad.”

“Welcome to the world of my tender-hearted wife.”

Ashlyn stayed up later than usual that night watching the NE Revs west coast game with Whitney,
Ryan and Dom. When she finally crawled into bed she was surprised to find a hand-made card folded in half on her pillow. She picked it up, glancing at Ali sleeping peacefully on the other side of the bed, and couldn’t help but smile at her thoughtful wife. It was typical of the little things she had always done for Ashlyn if the keeper was feeling down or bothered by something. Ashlyn thought back to the letters Ali had written to her and tucked into her suitcase or her messenger bag when the blonde had been spending time with Gram down in Florida before she lost her battle with cancer. Whatever letter or card or note she found had never failed to lift her spirits and remind her just how much Ali loved her. Even during her darker times. Ashlyn used her phone to cast enough light on the hand-made card to be able to read her wife’s slightly messy writing. The outside of the simple folded card, made from a piece of yellow construction paper from one of the kids’ art supply books, simply said ‘My Sweet Ashlyn’. When opened the card up and read the words written inside she was overcome with emotion.

‘Your Soft Heart

You are still the child who gently places
fallen baby birds back in their nests.
You are still the soft soul that gets
your heart broken over cruel words
and awful acts when you watch the news.
You are still the gentle heart who once
tried to heal a flower by trying to stick
its petals back when ignorant feet trampled it.

This is why you are important.
This is why you will always be needed.

Kindness is the greatest endangered thing,
And here you are, existing, with your heart so full with it.

-Nikita Gill’

Ali had added her own words after quoting the poem.

‘I love you and your big heart so much, babe! I know this morning was tough and you probably felt embarrassed being so vulnerable in front of the girls. But I’m glad it happened, in a way, because it’s so important for all the kids to see how beautiful it is to be kind and compassionate and soft. I hope all our kids turn out just like you. You and your big soft heart are incredible. I love you - Ali’
“There she is” Ashlyn smiled when Ali walked into the kitchen after a long day of work. It was the Monday after their 4-family vacation and it had definitely been a long day for all of them. Mostly, the keeper was just happy to see her wife because she had gotten used to seeing her all day every day for a whole week and the rude separation that day had been hard for them both. “Hiya Sugarplum, how was your day?” they met in the middle of the kitchen for a hug and quick kiss before they were surrounded by four kids who had also missed their mommy that day.

“Hi honey” the brunette smiled into the kiss and melted into the hug.

“Mommy!!” four little voices rang out as the children hugged Ali’s legs and patted her bum and her back and wherever their small hands and short arms could reach.

“Hi guys” Ali pulled away from the hug and got down on her knees to greet her children.

They all held pictures in their hands and were waving them around and talking to her about them in loud, excited voices while both dogs made wide, wagging circles around the whole group.

“Whoa whoa beasties” Ashlyn chuckled, not referring to the dogs, as she stepped back to give them all room. “Take it easy, she’ll look at all your pictures but you have to go one at a time.”

As Ali patiently listened to each kid explain what their picture was about, Deb walked into the kitchen from the front living room where the art work had been taking place. She crossed the kitchen and bent over to kiss her own daughter on the top of her head.

“Hi baby girl” she smiled and then continued with an armful of sippy cups and bigger kid ‘activity cups’ which was just what they called bigger sippy cups so the bigger kids didn’t feel like little babies, and put them in the sink.

Deb and Mike had spent the last week enjoying time alone together and were staying in their Manchester condo for two more weeks so Deb could experience the first day of school for her very first time. She had been so sweet when she asked her daughter if it would be ok, that Ali had cried.

“Mom, you don’t have to ask that” she shook her head and hugged Deb hard, “not ever, for anything.”

“Oh baby girl, sometimes you guys need your special time with your babies. I know that. I’ve been there” she chuckled softly and rubbed her daughter’s back as they hugged. “Next year will be the twins very first day of preschool and I don’t want to take that away from you...”

“Mom” Ali tried to chastise her mother but she still didn’t have control of her tears yet so it just sounded like a whimpering groan.
“Oh hush” Deb kissed the side of her head. “You know I’m right. It’s ok Alex” she tried to pull back a bit but Ali wouldn’t let go. “What’s going on with you honey?”

“I always want you here Mom” she finally released Deb and wiped the tears off of her own face with a sniffle. “You’re just the best mom in the whole world and I really didn’t think I could appreciate you more than I already did. But having my own kids...well, you know. It makes me understand so much more. And that makes me appreciate you a thousand times more than I ever did before.”

“I know the feeling” Deb smiled and brushed some of the hair away from her daughter’s face for her. “And I appreciate you telling me that. Thank you for always making me feel welcome in your home, and in your lives...”

“Mom” Ali sat up straight and fixed her mother with the most serious look she could muster. “You know you’re welcome here any time, all the time. I don’t want to hear about being invited or anything like that...”

“Alright, alright” Deb laughed and squeezed her daughter’s hand. “I got it. And that’s not what I’m saying. It’s just that this year will be a good time for me to take in the first day of school because it’s not a huge milestone for anybody. Josie will be starting kindergarten, which is kind of a big step actually” she started pursing her lips and re-thinking her plan.

“No, get that look off your face” Ali reached over and squeezed her mother’s cheeks with one hand, making them both giggle. “This year is perfect. Any year is perfect” she quirked an eyebrow at Deb. “I’d love for you to be here that day or that week or however long you want.” She smiled lovingly at her mother. “Thank you for being such a wonderful Grandma. The kids just adore you and it’s something I had no idea how much it would mean to me. It just makes me so happy.”

“Me too honey” Deb grinned. “Me too.”

The first day of school was a week away but Deb wanted to spend this last week of summer with the grandkids at the beach just having the best old time. Ali and Ashlyn thought it was a great idea. They would keep all four kids home from daycare and camps and let everybody enjoy one last week of summer together. Ashlyn and Ali worked out their schedules so one of them was home each day that week and they were going to try and keep things easy and simple. Mike was in Manchester too but he was working from the Boston office so he was only around in the evenings. He had become more and more flexible over the years about spending time up North with his wife and the people she loved so much.

“Ok, let’s let Mommy go get changed and then we can eat dinner” Ashlyn announced as she helped her wife back up to her feet. “Everybody go wash hands, and take turns!” she had to yell as the kids all raced to be first in the small downstairs half-bathroom. “One person on the stool at a time!”

Deb chuckled as she walked back past the two mothers towards the ruckus in the bathroom.

“Two of you can wash hands with me in the kitchen if you want” she called out and then laughed again as Josie and Lily came running back out of the bathroom towards her. “Good girls” she smiled, knowing that Drew and Dodge had been the pushiest in the bathroom, as usual.

Ashlyn walked Ali to the backstairs with her hand on the small of her back. The brunette paused about three steps up and turned to look at her sweet wife still standing at the foot of the stairs and watching her. She could tell by the look on her keeper’s face that she had other things on her mind and other words on the tip of her tongue that had gone unsaid in the G-rated world of the family
kitchen. Ali climbed two more steps and motioned for her wife to join her, which Ashlyn quickly did.

“What’s going on?” the brunette whispered when her wife was one step below her, looking up at her with hungry eyes.

Deb and the girls were at the kitchen sink, just a few feet away from the foot of the backstairs so the moms kept their voices as quiet as possible, thankful that washing hands was a pretty noisy task.

“Nothing, I just...God, you look incredible” Ashlyn exhaled as she put her hands on Ali’s hips and squeezed them.

Seeing her beautiful brunette in her business outfits had been one of the greatest perks of starting and running Knight-Harris for the keeper. Ali wore some version of a suit almost every day, changing it up between skirts and dress slacks several times a week. Her suits were more feminine and traditional than the ones Ashlyn wore when she got dressed up. Sometimes, especially in the summer, she skipped the suit jacket altogether and just wore a pretty blouse or a striking collared shirt with a belt instead. Whatever it was, she always looked good. She took care of her clothes and always looked professional and attractive in them. For Ashlyn, the combination of the gorgeous aesthetic of her wife along with the power of the position she held and the authority she wielded every day at the office, was a powderkeg of titillating sensuality that sometimes brought her to her knees with want.

Ali felt the jolt of electricity from the touch and closed her eyes as she stifled a quiet moan in her throat. Four-family vacation was great for a lot of things, but having sex with your wife was not one of them. There were ways to make it happen but if you were shy about it like Ali typically was, then it became even more difficult to get your friends to assist you in finding some alone time together. The brunette swallowed the moan and whispered again.

“You just haven’t seen me in work clothes for a week” she closed her eyes as Ashlyn’s hands moved slowly up her sides. “Stop babe” she breathed out, pulling her wife’s hands off of her body, carefully, so neither of them fell down the stairs in their current lust-drunk state. “Just wait.”

Deb left after dinner and the two eager moms found a way to make it through bath or showertime, storytime and finally bedtime. Drew took extra time that night because he was still getting over an ear infection he had gotten at the end of vacation last week. But all four kids were exhausted after their busy day with Grandma and Mama at the beach. They hadn’t been smart enough to plan it like that on purpose, but Ashlyn was very pleased with the result anyway. Ali was downstairs tidying up the front living room when her keeper finally found her, wrapping her arms around her from behind and lifting her off of her feet. Ali squealed from surprise and dropped the books and puzzle board she had been holding. They both winced at the loud noise it made and listened cautiously for any signs of awake children upstairs, praying the sound machines would work their magic. Drew’s room was right above them and Ali smacked her wife’s arm, still tightly around her waist.

“He took so long to get comfortable and settled down and if you wake him up I’m going to kill you” the brunette threatened, glancing up at the ceiling above their heads.

“I know, I’m sorry” Ashlyn kissed her wife’s neck as she mumbled her apology. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

But Ali didn’t care anymore. Her keeper’s arms were around her body and her lips were on her skin and nothing else mattered. It was 9pm and they knew better than to start sexy times too early. It
never worked. Right when things started to get good, somebody needed a drink of water or Lily decided she really did have to pee or somebody’s sore throat woke them up. It was some kind of sexual Murphy’s Law. But that night neither one of them had the power to go slow or wait an hour just to be safe. That night, it was all they could do to make it up to their bedroom and lock the doors.

“Oh Jesus” Ali gasped when they finally fell back onto the mattress together, spent and temporarily sated from round one. It had been a fast and furious session that had scratched the long-overdue itch for them both. “Fuck that felt good.”

“MmmmmHmmmmm” the keeper agreed, humming happily into her wife’s neck as she nibbled up towards her ear. “Why do we ever leave the bedroom again?” she giggled against Ali’s soft skin.

The brunette chuckled and wrapped her arms around her wife, holding her close against her chest as they both tried to steady their breathing. It wasn’t even 10pm yet and they were trying to decide what to do next when they heard a door open in the hallway. They knew, from experience, that it was one of the two farthest away doors so either Drew or Josie was up.

“I’ve got it” Ashlyn rolled quickly off the bed and grabbed her robe from the back of the bathroom door. She was at the bedroom door before the knock even came. “Pretty sure your legs aren’t working yet anyway” she winked and whisper-yelled on her way to the door.

“Nobody likes a bragger” Ali teased.

Twenty minutes later the blonde was back, locking the door behind her again with a questioning quirk of her eyebrow as she moved through the narrow entrance to the room so she could see her wife’s face. Ali was sitting in bed with her glasses on and a mischievous grin on her face which was all the answer the keeper needed.

“Yes!” she pumped her fist as she stood at the foot of the bed, grinning like an idiot.

“You’re a dork” Ali laughed and put her book down on the nightstand. “But you’re my dork so get your sexy butt back in this bed” she patted the mattress invitingly. “Was it Drew? Did you give him Tylenol?” she leaned over to take her glasses off and set them on the nightstand too.

“No, wait” Ashlyn knelt on the foot of the bed on her wife’s side. “Leave them on” she instructed shyly. She was torn between having a mom conversation with her wife or pretending they didn’t have kid and dog and house responsibilities right at that moment. “Ummm, yeah, he said his ear was hurting him so I gave him the Tylenol and he’s all tucked in again. Out like a light.”

“Aw, poor guy. At least now he’ll sleep so he can fight it” Ali replied as she slid the glasses back onto her face. She let the covers that had been up to her armpits drop down to her waist, exposing her naked upper body with a little pout. “Why are you still way down there?”

Ashlyn swallowed hard and made herself do the right thing, as difficult as it was.

“I need to go down and let the dogs out and...”

“Already done, All-star” Ali let the words drip from her mouth slowly and seductively as she trailed one hand across her own chest and down to her stomach. “The only thing that needs to happen is for you to get your gorgeous self back into my bed” she arched her eyebrow up, threw the covers down towards the foot of the bed, patted the mattress again and tantalizingly cupped her own breast.

“Oh, so it’s your bed now, is it?” Ashlyn replied, feeling her whole body respond to her sexy wife.
She shed her robe as she walked on her knees up the bed towards the woman who made her so crazy with desire. “Are you the boss of this bed?”

Ali saw how dark her keeper’s eyes were getting and it made her core twitch. After their earlier conversation in the backstairs and Ashlyn’s request for her to keep her glasses on, Ali knew just what her wife wanted. She didn’t ask for much but this was becoming something more common when she did ask.

“That’s right” Ali grabbed a hair tie off the nightstand and used both hands to put her hair up into a tight bun on top of her head as she spoke beguilingly to her wife. “I’m the boss and you’d better get your ass up here before I lose my patience.”

“Oooooh” Ashlyn loved her wife’s sass. “Just because you’re the boss of this bed doesn’t mean you’re the boss of me” she challenged with a wicked smirk as she made her way towards the head of the bed, trailing a hand up Ali’s bare, right leg as she did so.

The brunette finished with her bun, which wasn’t perfect but would have to do, and reached out to put her hands on her wife’s hips as they finally got close enough. Her skin was warm and soft and Ali felt a rush of excitement and anticipation course through her veins as she gazed into dark, smoky hazel eyes.

“What do you want me to do?” the brunette asked, her voice already starting to get husky with desire.

“Put on the blue suit, just the jacket” Ashlyn directed as her hand stopped at the top of her wife’s leg, her fingers softly raking Ali’s mound and driving her crazy. “With the French blue, collared shirt. Leave them both unbuttoned” she paused, enjoying the feel of Ali’s hands on her hips as she teased her with her thumbs. “Go on now” she said more softly, nodding towards the closet and patting the brunette’s thigh.

They had learned the hard way that having the whole suit on was just not very functional. As much as Ashlyn loved the way her wife’s ass looked in both the skirt and the pants that went with her favorite navy blue suit, she didn’t want anything in her way down there. Ali bit her bottom lip, incredibly turned on, and quickly got out of bed. While she looked for the requested garments, praying they weren’t at the dry cleaner’s, Ashlyn got herself into a slouched sitting position, leaning against pillows in the middle of the headboard.

“Bring your strap-on back with you, and don’t take too long” the keeper called out, her voice urgent but not demanding or harsh.

The brunette felt another gush of passion between her legs as her brain processed the new request. She was back in five minutes, wearing the crisp dress shirt beneath the suit jacket, both alluringly hanging open with the longer shirt tails covering part of her dark curls as she stood next to the bed. Ali’s favorite light blue dildo with the knobs was in one hand, the smooth nylon harness in the other. Her entire body was tingling with excitement as she watched Ashlyn’s eyes get even darker at the sight of her.

“What do you want me?” the brunette bit her bottom lip again as she finished her question.

“Fuck Ali...” Ashlyn exhaled as she took in her gorgeous wife looking smoking hot in the sexy power suit. “On top of me” she reached for the strap-on and harness and slipped into it as she watched Ali slowly climb onto the bed. “You’re so fucking beautiful...” she whispered as she settled back into position with the toy and harness in place, her eyes never leaving Ali’s already flushed face.
“So are you” the brunette raked her eyes down Ashlyn’s sexy body and then back up to her hungry eyes. “God damn I want you so bad...” she groaned.

“Come and get me, baby” the keeper smirked again, spreading her arms out wide in invitation and lifting her hips, and toy, provocatively.

Ali moved next to her wife and bent over to kiss her lips. It was a soft, sensual kiss at first but it quickly turned into much more. Ashlyn’s hungry tongue deepened it and the brunette matched her intensity and then some. As she was bent over on all fours kissing her wife, Ali moved her left hand between her own legs and collected a handful of her own juices, moaning at the touch. She moved her soaked hand over to the dildo and spread her passion all over it. Ashlyn’s eyes flew open when she felt the pressure against her own clit, surprised but pleased with the progress.

“Yes, that’s nice, are you all wet for me, sexy?” she mumbled against Ali’s lips, keeping their faces close as they caught their breath.

“So wet Ash...you make me so fucking wet...” Ali closed her eyes and tried to concentrate on her breathing because she was getting too worked up too fast.

Ashlyn’s left hand was ghosting touches up and down Ali’s bare stomach as they kissed and breathed and got ready for the next step. After another handful of passion, the brunette thought the dildo was lubed enough and she gave her wife a searing kiss as she got into place, hovering over her body. They were both dying for contact but trying not to rush anything either. They both knew they were bad at playing these things out. It was always fun and satisfying but neither of them had any self-control when it came to the other so it never went on for very long. They were already so horny for each other that there was no way this time was going to be any different. But they tried anyway. The keeper cupped her wife’s breasts through the opening in the dress shirt and suit jacket as they kissed, and moaned at the soft sensation beneath her fingertips. The brunette absolutely rocked her world like this...her hair up and her glasses on with her boss lady suit doing amazing things to Ashlyn’s entire mind and body. She obviously preferred Ali with no clothes on at all, but something about this fantasy had always gotten to the blonde. One of the best days of her life was the first time she asked her wife to do this and discovered how willing Ali was to participate. Ali moaned right back when she felt her keeper pinch her nipples at the same time, making her arch her back and then suck in a quick breath.

“Come on Al, let me fuck you. Let me watch you come all over me” she husked out.

The brunette couldn’t wait any longer. She reached down between her legs and guided the head of the strap-on into her eager pussy, gently lowering herself down. She tried to keep her eyes open so she could watch Ashlyn’s face light up and eyes darken at the same time as she enjoyed the view above her. But she couldn’t do it. Ali closed her eyes and moaned in pleasure as she finally felt her drenched folds come to rest against her wife’s warm skin and the base of the dildo. She was sitting on top of Ashlyn with her hands resting against the bed on either side of her keeper’s stomach.

“Oh Christ that’s good” Ali licked her lips and moaned as she got used to the dildo and the knobs and the wonderful feeling of fullness that was making her head spin. “Shit, yeah babe. Mmmmmmm...” she moaned again.

Ashlyn waited as patiently as she could for her wife to start moving but it was killing her not to be thrusting up into that ravenous pussy. She moved her hands up and down Ali’s sides and around to her gorgeous ass and then back up to her breasts, over and over again in a slow, sensual routine. She squeezed and rubbed and scratched and stroked the brunette’s skin as she waited for Ali to move. Please move. Please God, please fucking move.
“Al, I’m dying...please baby” the impatient keeper begged, pinching both of Ali’s nipples between her thumbs and forefingers and making her squirm and moan again as they locked eyes.

“Fuck me Ashlyn. Fuck me like only you can. Jesus, you’re so beautiful...”

That was all she needed to hear. The keeper started to rock her hips up into her sultry wife, loving the wet sound they made as they moved together.

“Oh yeah...mhm...you feel so good on top of me. I love this so much. Fuck, you’re sexy as hell up there.”

“Are you gonna tell me what to do?” Ali managed to keep playing the game, but only just barely. She was so far gone it was hard to focus on anything other than the pumps from her wife filling her and thrilling her. “You gonna boss me around?” she practically slurred.

“You know it” Ashlyn responded with a harder thrust that made her wife groan deeply. “You better grind down on me, right now” she commanded in a low, turned on voice. “And play with my boobs, I need to feel your hands on me baby.”

“Oh fuck” Ali whispered as she started to grind against the strap-on in wide circles. She bent over just enough so she could reach Ashlyn’s perfect pink nipples and rub and flick and pinch them with her nimble fingers. “Oh my...fuck...” she gasped as she felt the pressure against her aching clit for the first time. “Yes, babe...yes!”

They moved together, soft but firm hands and fingers dancing across skin. Ali’s shirt tails tickled her keeper’s skin as she bent over further and brought her mouth down onto those perfect pink nipples. The brunette groaned and panted against the skin of Ashlyn’s breast when she felt the dildo inside her in a new, faster pattern. Ali nibbled and sucked on her wife’s nipples, bringing them to stiff points in only a minute. Her hands travelled up and down Ashlyn’s sides, ghosting touches one second and then grabbing hard or scratching the next.

“God...damn...” Ashlyn grunted as she picked up the pace of her pumping. She had one hand on Ali’s ass, holding her tight against her own body. Her other hand was near Ali’s clit, moving in slow circles around the bundle of nerves without actually touching it yet.

“Unnnhhhh...” Ali moaned as she sat up and started to bounce on top of her wife. She used her thighs to lift her body up and down in time with Ashlyn’s thrusts. “Fuck...ohhhh...Mmmmmm...Unnnhhhhhh...” was all she could get out of her mouth.

Ashlyn knew she was getting close. She could see the bead of sweat running down between Ali’s breasts as they bounced along with the rest of her body. She couldn’t help but grin for a second as the brunette absent-mindedly pushed her glasses back up higher on her nose, getting to them just before they slid all the way off.

“Are you ready to come for me?” she asked in a breathless, hoarse voice as she continued pumping up into her beautiful brunette.

“Yessssssss...please babe...unnnhhhhhh...” she gasped and groaned and grunted as her legs started to give out on her.

Ashlyn moved her thumb to Ali’s clit and started rubbing it hard and fast. She held onto the brunette’s ass with her other hand, trying to keep her steady as she made her final climb. The keeper sat up, surprising Ali, and nudged her shirt and suit out of the way with her nose so she could get her hot mouth around one of her bouncing breasts.
“Mmmmmmmmm...” Ashlyn moaned loudly as she sucked hard on Ali’s nipple, enjoying the surprised gasp from her wife.

“Oh my God...Oh my God...” Ali chanted as she got closer and closer. She wrapped her arms around Ashlyn’s shoulders and held her close while the keeper devoured first one nipple and then the other, thrusting and rubbing the whole time. Ali bit her lip and closed her eyes as she threw her head back a minute later. “Yessssss...fuck Ash... yessss...oh my God...Yessssssssss!!!!!!!” she shouted as she came hard, bucking and rocking against Ashlyn’s body as the orgasm took her breath away and made her entire body shake and quiver.

“Yeah baby, that’s it” Ashlyn mumbled against the side of her wife’s breast as Ali clutched her keeper’s head tightly against her chest. “Come all over me, sexy. Cover me with it. Fuck, you’re incredible Ali. So fucking gorgeous. Mmmmmmmmm...”

The keeper stopped moving her hips and slid her thumb away from Ali’s sensitive clit. She wrapped her arms around the brunette’s waist, leaving her enough room to shake and twitch, but just enough. Ashlyn was overwhelmed with the desire to feel and love every inch of her wife’s body. But that would have to wait. Ali felt like dead weight in her arms and she knew her wife must have enjoyed an incredible orgasm to leave her so limp and spent. The keeper carefully rolled them over onto their sides, trying not to move the strap-on, still buried deep inside her wife. She took the glasses off of Ali’s face and set them behind her on the pillow, out of harm’s way. They lay together like that as the brunette tried to catch her breath and remember her name. Ashlyn opened up the suit jacket and shirt as much as she could to get her wife some air to cool her sweaty body. She felt bad for a minute when she thought about having ruined a perfectly clean shirt, and maybe the suit jacket too, for twenty minutes of fun. As if the brunette could read her mind, Ali spoke, still a little breathless.

“You’re taking these to the dry cleaners, bossy” she giggled softly into Ashlyn’s neck as she felt what her wife was trying to do for her. “You always make me such a sweaty mess.” She took a deep breath and exhaled it as she trembled slightly again. “Fuck, that was amazing.” She leaned back just enough to see her keeper’s pretty face. “Thank you so much honey” she kissed her lips slowly.

“You’re more than welcome” Ashlyn smiled into the kiss. “I love you” she gave her another soft kiss. “Thank you for...” she got shy all of a sudden and dropped her eyes. “For...” she tried again.

“For letting you boss me around and give me an incredible orgasm?” Ali offered with a wink and a sweet kiss of her own. When she caught Ashlyn’s shy, grateful eyes the brunette smiled broadly and kissed her wife soundly. “Please, just don’t ever stop making me a sweaty mess, ok?”

“Deal.”

Neither Ashlyn nor Ali had thought about Paula the intern in 7 years. Well, aside from referencing her as they tried to make sense of the Sam Machado mess a year and a half ago. Paula was the tall, beautiful and talented intern who Ali had hired for the summer that Drew was born, back in 2019. The misguided intern had decided to try and use her body and feminine wiles instead of her talent and had made a brazen pass at Ashlyn that had gotten her internship terminated. One of the hardest things Ali had ever done in her entire working life was to fire that bitch without losing her cool and possibly making an enemy of the ambitious young woman. The brunette had recorded the interaction between Paula and Ashlyn in the master bedroom of the big old house that summer afternoon and had used that ammunition to help get rid of the intern. But honestly, Paula could have made all of their lives hell and blasted an embarrassing spotlight on Knight-Harris if she had
chosen to do so. She could have created a real shitstorm of she said – she said, even though Ali had the audio recording. A good lawyer could have convinced a jury that the recording had been altered or manufactured. It still would have been Ashlyn’s word against Paula’s and the only person in that equation with anything to lose was the keeper. Ali had hoped that Paula would realize the error of her ways and just go away without any further tumult. And that, thankfully, is what had happened. But there was, to this day, a tiny part of the brunette that was terrified that they hadn’t heard the last of Paula Curdo.

“Al, what is going on with your phone?” Ashlyn asked with mild annoyance as the brunette’s text message and voicemail message alerts dinged about 6 times as they were eating dinner with the kids at the nook table.

“I don’t know” Ali shrugged, looking over her shoulder towards the kitchen counter where her phone dinged and chirped.

It was 5:45pm and they had only been at the table for about 10 minutes and Ali didn’t want to break the rule about phones at the table. She wondered what the heck was going on as another two messages landed loudly.

“Well you’d better go find out” Ashlyn looked concerned as she finished cutting up Lily’s chicken into even smaller bites as requested. “Something’s definitely up.”

The brunette read texts from Whitney, Marcy and Jared and then listened to three voicemails from the different K-H sports agents who were out on the west coast. She walked to the family room tv and turned it on, breaking another dinnertime rule, and then scrolled through her twitter feed getting caught up on some big stories from the past hour. She flipped the channel to Sportscenter and turned the volume up while nervously chewing her bottom lip. Ashlyn could tell from her spot on the banquette seat at the nook table that her wife was upset. She could see the tv from her seat and just kept handling dinner as Ali anxiously shifted her weight from foot to foot.

“Baby, what is it?” the keeper couldn’t keep her curiosity at bay any longer after five minutes had passed.

Ali turned to face her and choked out two words.

“Paula Curdo.”

Ashlyn swallowed hard and tried to stay calm. If their old intern Paula was involved then it couldn’t possibly be good news. What the fuck did that bitch want now? The keeper closed her eyes for a couple of seconds and steadied herself. When she opened them she saw Ali standing with her back to the table, facing the tv with her arms wrapped around herself. She only did that if she was freezing cold or really nervous.

“It’ll be alright honey” the keeper’s voice almost sounded confident. “Whatever it is, we’ll handle it. Don’t worry.”

The kids began asking questions about why Mommy was allowed to watch tv during dinner and when she was coming back to the table and if they could be excused early and the usual bargaining that went on with Drew and Lily to try to get them to eat their food. Ashlyn tuned it all out, unable to think about anything other than whatever this threat was to Knight-Harris and everything she and Ali had worked so hard to build there.

“Here it is” the brunette announced with a strange edge to her voice and stepped closer to the big tv.
Ashlyn couldn’t take it anymore and got up from the table to stand next to her wife. She put her arm around Ali’s waist as they stood shoulder to shoulder, silent and still. All either one of them could hear was the Sportscenter anchor reading the intro to the next ‘breaking’ story.

“In breaking news, the powerful owner of the Los Angeles Lakers has responded to the inflammatory and stunning claims of corruption, intimidation, and discrimination made earlier this afternoon by Paula Curdo. Curdo, a sports agent whose clientele includes two members of the Lakers, made a statement with the LA county sheriff’s office a few hours ago and the situation has ramped up quickly.”

The anchor went on to read the statement where the owner denied all of the allegations Paula had made on behalf of her clients and herself. They cut to a live reporter on the steps of the LA county sheriff’s office and then to one at the Staples Center where the Lakers offices were located. Ali and Ashlyn watched the news with their jaws on the floor.

“Holy shit” Ali whispered.

“Yeah, wow” Ashlyn shook her head in disbelief. “I did not think she had that in her.”

“Neither did I” the brunette exhaled a huge sigh of relief.

“Maybe she took your words to heart and got her shit together and made something of herself?” Ashlyn pondered quietly.

The story took another full day to develop as sports reporters began to check the facts and research the claims. It only took until later that same night for Paula to be found and unceremoniously interviewed as she tried to get into her car later that evening, west coast time. It was like a feeding frenzy and everyone was feeding on Paula, eating her alive and questioning everything she had ever said or done in her entire career. There were twice as many reporters trying to dig up dirt on her than there were reporters trying to find out the truth about the accused owner and the claims made against him. It was such a huge and provocative story that the major news outlets were covering it too. It wasn’t every day that a hugely well-known and wealthy owner of a major sports team was accused of such serious crimes and offenses. The press got a copy of Paula’s statement in which she described in great detail, at the sheriff’s recommendation, her own attempted sexual assault at the owner’s hands. When Paula refused to back down from the corruption and intimidation charges she had threatened to file against him, the owner had fought back his own way. Paula, that feisty bitch, had maced him and made her escape from his office. That assault was what prompted her to finally go to the authorities the next day.

What happened to Paula over the course of the next week was disgraceful. As so often happened with victims like her, she was dragged through the mud and raked over the coals by the press. Some of her colleagues at the fancy LA firm she worked for even questioned her motives and credibility and behavior. It was the kind of treatment you wouldn’t wish on your worst enemy. Paula kept a stiff upper lip through it all, displaying more backbone than Ali had ever given her credit for. Finally, a small-time female reporter broke the case wide open mid-way through the second week. The reporter uncovered the Lakers owner’s assistant, who had heard the attempted assault and then seen Paula flee the office that evening, her dress ripped practically off of her body. The female reporter got the assistant’s story on tape and it not only corroborated Paula’s entire statement but it also forced the sheriff’s office to take all of Paula’s claims more seriously. The court of public opinion had started to shift and favor the actual victim for a change. By the end of the second week the owner of the Lakers had been formally charged for everything Paula had alleged.

Paula had gone from a trampy woman who had been rebuffed by the powerful owner and was
looking for revenge, to a hero of equality and fair play and professional business practices instead. It was quite a shift and the press now adored the attractive sports agent. Paula was not dumb enough to miss her fifteen minutes of fame. She tried to maximize it to the best of her abilities and was ballsy as she did so. She boldly announced that she would be leaving the sports agency that couldn’t be bothered to try and help her or at least defend her in her hour of need. She asked, during a live interview, for any agencies that were interested in her services to call her and then rattled off her phone number for all the world to have. But she did all of that with an aplomb and a seasoned approach to pushing just hard enough to get what she wanted without going too far. It was kind of brilliant. Towards the tail-end of Paula’s fifteen minutes of fame she did an interview and was asked about her time at Knight-Harris. During the witchhunt some reporters had dug up the fact that she had started but never finished a summer internship at K-H back in 2019 but the cover story Ali had promised to use had stuck and nobody had ever found out the truth. The world believed that there had been a scheduling issue with some other family commitments that had kept the young woman from completing her internship. The brunette couldn’t help but wonder how differently this whole story would have played out if the truth had been revealed. It wouldn’t have mattered that Paula was telling the truth now. All anybody would have seen was that she had been a trampy intern who had gotten embroiled in an indelicate situation with one of her bosses at K-H. She would have been toast and nobody would have believed her about the Lakers owner.

“Here she is again” Marcy hurried into the conference room where Ali and Whitney were eating lunch and turned on the tv. “Sorry to barge in...”

“No, no, thanks Marce” Ali smiled at her. “Stay, please. If you want.”

The three women sat and ate and watched the interview as it aired live. It was Paula’s best yet, in Ali’s opinion. The agent came across as sincere and intelligent and thoughtful and charming and determined. It was a good look and all three women in the conference room found themselves feeling happy for the embattled former intern. Ali even felt a little bit proud for some inexplicable reason.

“I still can’t believe this all happened to her” Whitney shook her head as they watched. “I thought she’d land on her feet, if she ever decided to get her head out of her ass” Ali chuckled. “I’ve never been more afraid of you in my entire life than I was when you let her go” Marcy laughed nervously. “I still can’t believe you didn’t totally blow up at her. It was scary. That was something, let me tell you.”

“I can’t even imagine” Whitney replied with wide eyes.

At the very end of the interview Paula took a moment and thanked a handful of people who had been the only ones to help her when she was in trouble.

‘And last but not least I need to thank someone who helped me years ago and really put me on the right track towards success. As most people know by now, I started a summer internship at Knight-Harris in Boston and even though I wasn’t able to finish that internship I learned so much from my time there. But I want to thank Ali Krieger in particular for showing me what it takes to be a well-respected professional in the sports agency business. Knight-Harris was just getting started when I spent a couple of months there but I knew even back then that they would become one of the best agencies in the country. I wish I had bet on it’ Paula laughed. ‘With the talent they had and with Ali Krieger leading them there was no way they could fail. Pretty much everything I know about taking the high road even when it hurts like hell, or about handling pressure with grace and poise, I learned from watching her that summer. I think she’s the best our business has to offer and I just want to say thank you again Ali.’
As the interviewer brought things to a close on the tv, the three women in the conference room looked at each other with their mouths open. Paula hadn’t been as conceited as that clip sounded. She had used the words of many of the people who had praised her handling of her situation when she paid that compliment to Ali and K-H.

“What the hell was that?” Ali asked, completely flabbergasted by the outpouring of praise she had just received from someone she had dealt with so harshly.

“So, you heard that too?” Marcy replied.

“Wow, I definitely did not see that coming” Whitney added with a low whistle.

Their brief moment of suspended belief ended abruptly when both Marcy and Ali’s phones started exploding a minute later. Paula’s shout out to K-H and Ali herself had caused a huge influx of press and public interest in the company that went on for several months. K-H signed new clients because of it and even hired a couple of good, experienced agents who were looking to work for a successful and reputable company. Before the end of that day, the day of the interview, Ali sent Paula Curdo a text message. It was something she never ever thought she would be doing as long as she lived. But sometimes seven years made a difference and people or circumstances changed.

Ali: Hey Paula, it’s Ali Krieger. Just wanted to congratulate you on your big victory. From here it sure looked like you did a great job. I’m happy for you. And thanks for the shout out. Let me know where you land so I can send you a proper thank you.

Paula: Hi Ali. So you saw that did you? I meant every word. I’ll reach out when I figure out what’s next. You’re not hiring, are you?

Ali: No. I’m grateful, not a masochist. Good luck.
The Princess and the Garden

Somehow that last week of August went by in the blink of an eye but also felt like it lasted for a whole month. It was a strange time-warp situation, at least it was for Ali and Ashlyn. They had lots of things going on but still managed to enjoy the last week of summer with their kids and friends and family as if they had all the time in the world. Having Deb there was a big part of it and they both realized it. She and Mike usually left for Miami that week so it was a real treat to have her helping them so much this year instead. Deb being there allowed Ashlyn and Ali to go, separately, and help Whitney and Ryan make the move from their Arlington condo to their new house in Winchester. The Flanagans had hired movers because Whitney wasn’t messing around. She was just back from vacation, she felt like she had shirked her job duties for the better part of 2 months, and she had an 18-month old baby who was walking better and faster every single day. Mrs. Flanagan was busy and she didn’t have time to try and move everything her damned self. Ryan’s team had missed the playoffs. Again. But they had shown improvement and only missed the playoffs because of a conference W-L record after tying with another team for final results. It couldn’t have been any closer and next year, Ryan told his team with supreme conviction, the Cannons would make the playoffs. The upside for Whitney was that Ryan had been able to go on vacation with everybody last week and now he and his two brothers had done a thousand things at both the condo and the house getting them both ready to be lived in and turned over to new owners.

By Friday, Whitney had been convinced by everyone at the office to take the day off and try and enjoy the long, Labor Day weekend. So she did. She left Ryan and his brothers at the new house to do the final clean-up while she and Becca drove up to Gloucester for the day. Everybody was happy to see her, Drew especially because he had so many good memories of Whitney living there with them at the beginning of his life and shared a special bond with her. He loved the fact that his bedroom used to be Whitney’s, whenever someone reminded him of the fact. They spent the morning at the beach, came home for lunch, put the little kids down for naps, and then Ashlyn, Whitney, Ali and Drew went back to the beach again. Josie had had enough sun and Deb was excited to get to spend some time with the blossoming young redhead all by herself.

“Geez, I had no idea what a pain in the ass it was to own a house” Whitney griped to her best friend as they watched Ali and Drew boogie boarding from their spots on the beach blanket up the beach. “I totally took you and Ali for granted when I lived here.”

“Just wait until winter and you can’t leave your driveway because you haven’t shoveled it out yet” Ashlyn laughed. “Or the first storm comes and you lose power and you don’t have a flashlight handy to help you try and find the fuse box somewhere down in the dark basement…”

“Ugh, stop!” the lawyer rolled her eyes and groaned. “I’m overwhelmed enough as it is” she flopped back onto the beach blanket and covered her eyes with her forearm. “Can we come live with you instead?”

“Don’t tease me woman!” Ashlyn laughed again and settled back onto her elbows, propping herself up so she could still watch her wife and son having fun in the water. “That was the best time” she shook her head. “Deb was soooooo right. I feel like we did appreciate it, but it went by way too fucking fast.”

“That’s right” Whitney turned her face towards the keeper. “I remember her saying that and, just like she said, I thought she was crazy” she chuckled ruefully. “That was the best time.”

They were both quiet for a few minutes, remembering good times shared in the big old house when they were single and fairly carefree.
“You know, if you ever have any questions or need advice or anything, you’d better call me” Ashlyn said quietly, keeping her eyes on her family.

“Oh my God Ash, are you kidding?” Whitney laughed out loud. “I have so many questions and I’ve just been trying to space them out so I didn’t bother you...”

“Oh for fuck’s sake Whit” Ashlyn looked down at her best friend with displeasure. “Don’t do that. Ask away. It’s all new and scary as hell. Trust me, I remember.”

“Well, how did you figure it out?”

“I asked lots of questions!” she reached over and smacked Whitney’s hip. “You big dope.”

“But who did you ask, I don’t remember that.”

“Well, Gram got some of the basic ones, but anything specific to snow or cold weather stuff she couldn’t help me with. Then, once I felt more comfortable around Ali I asked her a ton. She already knew how to own her own home and she had builder friends for some of the harder questions. And Niki was great too. But I tried not to bug her too much because of the baby.”

“Wow. How did I miss all of that?”

“Somebody may have been busy holding a professional soccer team together and keeping a long-distance relationship going and helping their best friend realize she had her head up her ass in the girlfriend department...”

“Oh, is that all?” Whitney laughed again. “Damn, those were good times, well, after that first year – that was hell watching you two idiots pretend not to be in love” she rolled her eyes and sat up, glancing down at Ali and Drew laughing loudly and chasing their boards that had been pulled away by a pretty big wave.

“Yeah, I prefer year two as well” Ashlyn chuckled, watching the same thing her best friend was.

“But this is so awesome Ash” the lawyer spoke softly and earnestly, her eyes still on the surfside frolicking in front of them. “That was the best, but this...” she paused to try and keep her emotions under control. “These lives we have now, the husbands and wives and kids...I wouldn’t trade any of it for the world.”

“Me neither bestie, me neither.”

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August 25th would always be a very special day for Ashlyn and Ali. It was their wedding anniversary and they both had such incredible memories of that amazing day. It didn’t feel real sometimes when they looked back at it now. If they didn’t have tangible proof in the form of Ali’s wedding dress and Ashlyn’s wedding tuxedo, in professional storage bags up in the attic storage space on the third floor, they might not have believed it had really happened. August 25th was a little odd for them though because they preferred to celebrate their February 8th anniversary instead. But that was a year ahead of their wedding anniversary and it confused everybody. This year was their 10th February anniversary and they had celebrated it intimately at the cabin in the woods. This year was their 9th wedding anniversary and they exchanged cards and sweet sentiments and memories of their big, romantic day. But it was nowhere near as meaningful to them. Everybody else liked it though. The August date was the one on other peoples’ calendars. It was the date that someone, and they still didn’t know who had been doing it for all eight years that Drew had been alive – even the very first year when he was only 3 months old, sent them a big
beautiful bouquet of flowers from the kids. It was one of the sweetest gestures either Ali or Ashlyn could think of and it always made them happy when the bouquet arrived. Meg and Deb had made the couple a romantic dinner for a few years but Meg had been in DC for the past two years so that didn’t happen anymore. That was also something sweet and dear that moved both women tremendously. The August anniversary date meant a lot to their family and friends, it appeared, and that made it important to Ali and Ashlyn as well, even though they both knew they would probably never do a big over the top celebration of the day. Their hearts were set on their February anniversary and that would never change.

This year, for some reason, Josie had a lot of questions about their wedding day. As soon as the bouquet of gorgeous flowers arrived on Tuesday August 25th, the little redhead started with the questions. Ali and Ashlyn’s wedding picture was framed and sitting on top of the upright piano in the front parlor, as it had been for almost 9 years. There was a bigger, framed picture from that magical day, of all of their extended families and the wedding party, hanging on the wall in the family room. Grandparents and aunts and uncles had all talked about the wedding for years and had told the Krieger kids all sorts of different stories about that weekend. Most of the time the kids didn’t really care too much. They had a dim understanding of what a wedding was and that was about it. But this year, freshly turned 5-year old Josie wanted to know everything. Deb was only too happy to answer any question the little girl could come up with and used the two wedding albums to show her exactly what she was talking about. The couple had agonized over which pictures to include in the photo album because there were so many that they loved and not nearly enough room in the album. Ashlyn’s simple solution of using as many albums as they needed was the fix for that and somehow they managed to keep it to just the two big books. Deb sat patiently with the redhead as she gazed in wonder at all the pictures. Josie asked who everybody was and Deb did her best to identify everyone, failing at some of the bigger group shots during the cocktail hour after the ceremony and then the reception. They had almost 100 guests that day and there was no way Deb could remember everybody.

“Well, that?” Josie pointed at a picture of the happy couple with their two adorable flower girls.

“This little girl is your mommy’s cousin Allie” Deb explained, “and your cousin too. Second cousin I think but I never know how that works” she chuckled. “And this is Meg.”

Josie’s eyes bugged out of her head and her mouth fell open.

“Meg?” she slowly turned to face her Grandma as she asked the question.

“Yes” Deb chuckled again. “That’s Meggie when she was...” she pursed her lips and tried to do the math. “Gosh, she was your age, almost 5-1/2 when your moms got married.”

Josie became obsessed with any picture of Meg from her moms’ wedding nine years earlier. Her favorite was the picture of Meg dancing in Ashlyn’s arms, the little girl tipping backwards with her arms outstretched wide and a face full of glee. That was one of her favorite things to do with her Mama, to go upside down in her arms, and seeing Meg doing it when she was her own age was really throwing the little girl for a loop. Tipping a kid backwards, making them go upside down, in your arms was a risky maneuver. Some kids loved it and other kids hated it. You had to know your audience or you risked an upset child or even a child with an upset stomach because of it. Even the Krieger kids were divided on the issue. Drew had never liked it but Josie loved it. Even when she was so tiny and sick as an infant she liked to be tipped back like that – maybe not all the way upside down until she was a little older and healthier. And the twins were split on it too. Dodge loved it and Lily hated it. It was so interesting to both mothers how the twins had split and followed either Drew or Josie in so many different things. The easiest explanation was that Drew and Lily were fussier about most things than Josie and Dodge were and most of the things in which
they were alike could be separated along those lines. But it wasn’t always that simple. And it wasn’t DNA because Ali had given birth to one fussy and one easy kid as had Ashlyn. There didn’t seem to be a logical explanation. They both knew that Lily idolized Drew and they could understand her copying things he did because of that desire to be just like him. But all three kids looked up to Drew in that way. He was their leader. He was the biggest and best of them, in their young eyes, and they all wanted to be like him in most ways. There was no easy explanation and Ali and Ashlyn had given up trying to find one. They just accepted the fact that all four of their kids were their own little beings with their own little quirks and yes, two of them seemed to naturally group together while the other two did the same and that was just the way it was.

But that week with the wedding albums and anniversary a hot topic of conversation, Josie had fallen in love with a day she hadn’t even been alive for, and Lily followed right along with her. The day after their anniversary Ali had been surprised to come home from work and find both girls poring over the albums at the coffee table in the front living room. Josie explained, with her own added flourishes and embellishments, what each picture was and Lily nodded along in wonderment. Of course Josie had it all wrong but the brunette wasn’t going to correct her in that moment. Instead, she quietly snapped a picture and a quick video of the adorable scene. She would sit with them after dinner and go through the albums with them, again, if they wanted to. The fascination culminated with Josie having an absolute crying fit the next night. She had been bratty all evening long and when it was time for bed she pulled out all the stops and had a borderline temper tantrum in her room. Ashlyn was at her wit’s end, unable to determine what was the matter so she could correct it. She stood with her hands on her hips next to her daughter’s bed, trying to be patient and almost failing. Josie was crying as she sat under her covers in her pink princess bed.

“What’s the matter?” Ali came into the room, closing the door behind her. She had just gotten everybody else settled down and assured them that Josie would be ok very soon. “Ash” she spoke a little louder when it became obvious that her wife hadn’t heard her over their daughter’s wails.

“What?” the keeper spun around and then rolled her eyes at the brunette. “I don’t know” she shrugged. “I’m waiting for her to calm herself down enough so we can talk about it.”

Ali nodded and gave her keeper a tired smile. She went to Josie’s bed and sat at the foot of it while Ashlyn sat on the edge of it next to the little girl where she had been before. They didn’t say anything. They each put a hand on Josie, just to remind her that they were there, waiting for her. In another couple of minutes the redhead started sniffling and trying to catch her breath and they knew she was almost ready. Sometimes being a good parent was about knowing when to just be there, quietly waiting.

“Are you ready to talk now Jojo?” Ashlyn asked softly after another minute when the girl’s breathing had steadied.

Josie rubbed her eyes with one fist while keeping her other hand on Persey who had come in earlier when she had started crying. She let out a big sigh and then a yawn and then lifted her red eyes to look at her Mama next to her.

“Why are you upset sweetheart?” Ali asked from the foot of the bed, gently squeezing her daughter’s leg underneath the covers.

“Cuz...cuz...” she started and stopped, tears starting to form again.

“Don’t get upset again little one” Ashlyn rubbed her back, “just tell us what’s going on so we can try and help you fix it” she encouraged.

Josie took a deep, shuddering breath and let it out slowly. Her little body seemed to still as soon as
she did it and Persey even rested her head on the girl’s hip in response. But Ashlyn was about to lose her temper and she exchanged pleading glances with her wife. Ali didn’t want to take the lead because she hadn’t been there when the trouble started and they both liked to have the two people involved in whatever situation had arisen be the ones to get to the resolution if at all possible. As the two women were trying to communicate with only their eyes and facial muscles, Josie finally spit out what the problem was.

“I want a wedding” she blurted out.

“What honey?” Ashlyn and Ali exchanged much different looks then as the keeper asked for clarification.

“I...I...want to dance...and...and...dress like a princess...”

They waited for more information but she didn’t say anything else.

“Do you mean you want to be the flower girl at a wedding?” Ali asked after another minute, with a warm smile, hoping she had figured it out. Deb had told her how the picture of Meg and Allie as their flower girls had rocked Josie’s world.

“Ah-huh” Josie nodded.

“Oh ok” Ashlyn exhaled and grinned in relief that the mystery had been solved. “Well, you see, weddings are very special and you have to wait for someone to have one” she tried to explain. “Then you have to wait for someone who’s having a wedding to ask you to be their flower girl...”

“But I WANT to” she yelled and started to get upset again.

“Calm down Josie” Ali cocked her head as she addressed the little girl. “There’s no reason to yell and get upset” she paused and gave the girl a minute to simmer down.

Ashlyn immediately thought of her mother and Carol’s wedding earlier that year. Why the hell hadn’t they had flower girls? Ugh. But that was definitely not a normal wedding, in terms of traditional elements and ceremonies. She ran through other family members in her mind and realized that the only chance they might have at a wedding in the remotely near future would be Tanner. But he was enjoying his youthful bachelorhood and didn’t even have a steady girlfriend at the moment. Other than that, the Kriegers and Harrises were all out of marrying-age people. Unless Mike Harris somehow decided to marry Lydia – but Ashlyn knew that would never happen. Neither of them had any desire to be married again and they had both been pretty vocal about it.

The two moms took turns talking with Josie and asking some more questions to make sure they understood exactly what the little girl wanted. As it turned out, the wedding was only the means to an end. What Josie wanted more than anything was to get dressed up, like a princess, and dance with Ashlyn, in her tuxedo, at a big fancy party. After fifteen minutes of talking, all three Krieger women were able to smile and relax.

“How about we go to a big Christmas party this year and get all dressed up?” Ashlyn suggested with a bright smile. “We can dance at that party. What do you think of that idea, little one?”

Ali’s face registered surprise, then skepticism and then happiness when she saw her daughter’s delighted reaction.

“Yay Mama! Yes, please” she corrected herself. “Please, pretty please can we do that?” she looked from Ashlyn to Ali and back again waiting for one of them to confirm the plan once and for all.
“I don’t see why not” Ashlyn grinned. “But now it’s way past your bedtime” she leaned over and kissed Josie’s forehead as she stood up. “Go to sleep my little princess.”

When they got back downstairs the brunette was eager to hear how her wife was going to deliver on the promise she had just made.

“I can’t wait to hear this one” she said as she sat on the couch in the front living room and began picking up all the art supplies scattered across, underneath, and around the coffee table.

“What? What do you mean?” Ashlyn asked as she sat next to her to help.

“How are you going to make that happen Ashlyn?”

“I’m going to take all of us to the Mental Health Initiative Holiday Party this year, that’s how” she quirked her eyebrow at her frustrated wife. “That party is always fancy and formal. It’ll be perfect. We’ll go early, dance with the kids, and leave early before it gets too late and they turn into toxic pumpkins.”

“You shouldn’t spoil her like that” Ali kept her eyes on the floor as she reached for markers and colored pencils and glue sticks.

“How is that spoiling her? She wants to get dressed up and dance and one of the places I work has a party where we can do that. What’s wrong with that?” Ashlyn challenged, genuinely interested in the answer.

“What if she had asked for something we couldn’t give her? We just basically told her that if she was a brat and had a hissy fit we would get her what she wanted” the brunette countered as she got on her hands and knees to reach under the coffee table and couch. “I think we’re setting a dangerous precedent here.”

“Oh shit, I didn’t think about it like that” the keeper sat back against the back of the couch and rubbed her face with both hands. “Fuck.”

“Hey, don’t beat yourself up babe” Ali put her hand on her keeper’s knee and rubbed it. “I think it’s so sweet how much you want to take care of us all and give us everything you can to make us happy. Honestly, it was adorable watching you two up there” she smiled. “But she saw our wedding pictures and had a temper tantrum before bed tonight and then got what she wanted anyway.”

“I can’t believe I did that” the blonde shook her head and sighed loudly. “Sorry honey.”

“Ash, it’ll be ok” Ali reassured her. “We’ll talk to her about it in the morning and make sure she knows that the two things aren’t connected. We’ll remind her that if she had stayed calm and used her words to tell us what she wanted or needed we could have tried to come up with the solution. The usual party line” she chuckled.

“Yeah, but I fucked it up by offering it to her right then and there. You’re absolutely right.”

“So we’ll fix it. She’s 5 years old, we have wiggle room” Ali laughed as she stood up and put the basket of art supplies over on the bookshelf where it belonged. “Maybe we can even use this amazing reward as incentive when we need it between now and then.” Ali stopped in her tracks when she heard the words that had come out of her own mouth. “God, how terrible is it that I just said that out loud?”

“Oh baby, I was thinking the same thing” Ashlyn laughed, as did her wife. “Hopefully we won’t
need to do that, but this is a tough fucking job and I’ll take all the help I can get.”

“Alright, I’m with you” she giggled as she moved into the mudroom hanging up light fleeces and putting tiny little shoes away in the closet there.

Ashlyn had gotten up and followed her, tossing her wife shoes from the far end of the mudroom.

“Ok, so I’ll talk to her in the morning about how we don’t reward temper tantrums like that. That’ll be fun” Ashlyn whined, meeting her wife in the middle of the small area and leaning in to receive a hug.

“Aside from the behavior thing, how cute is it that she wants to get dressed up like a princess and dance with you at a fancy party?” Ali giggled. “The kid is after my own heart.”

The other nice thing about the last week of summer was that they finally got to enjoy some of the slower growing things from the garden. Lily’s cucumbers had been the first they harvested, way back in the first week of August. It was exhilarating for all of them to see the fruits of their labor with their own eyes. The hardest thing turned out to be keeping the kids from picking the growing vegetables before they were ripe and ready to be harvested. That was a tough lesson. They grew and ate four medium sized cucumbers and they tasted really good. The only problem was that Lily really thought they were going to make pickles and had been pretty disappointed when they didn’t. Ashlyn promised she would look into growing the right kind of cucumbers for pickling for next summer’s garden.

Her sugarsnap peas had been next, about a week later, and Ashlyn loved introducing the kids to the joys of cracking the peapods open right there in the garden and eating the sweet peas on the spot. The peas were probably the most successful crop that year so there were plenty to eat and even bring into the house and share. Dodge’s corn should have been ready at about the same time but it had been a total bust. The stalks never grew very well and the only corn that had grown were a handful of deranged looking mini cobs that proved just how hard it was to grow corn in their area. Dodge had taken it in stride though. It was good that Ashlyn’s sugarsnap peas were around as a distraction. Ali’s cherry tomatoes were ready just as they got home from vacation. Deb admitted to harvesting and eating a few before they made it back home. Grandma told them honestly that she could not resist fresh tomatoes from the garden. Next year she wanted to plant her own full-size tomatoes, if Ashlyn wouldn’t mind.

That brought them to the very end of the last week of summer and Josie’s carrots. The kids thought it was hysterical the way they were shaped so funny. They weren’t straight and perfect like the ones in the grocery store. At all. They were short and fat and round sometimes. Some of them were long and thin. The other thing they couldn’t get over was the dirt on them.

“Ewwww,” Drew wrinkled his nose up as he tugged a carrot out of the soil. “It’s all dirty!”

Ali laughed her short, loud shout of a laugh and listened as her wife tried to explain.

“Well yeah bud, they grow in the dirt” she shrugged.

She was honestly a little worried about the fact that her oldest son expected to pull a carrot out of the ground and have it not be dirty. The more she thought about it though, everything else they had grown had hung off of a low, thick vine or a tall, climbing vine. Even the watermelon sat on top of the ground. That left the carrots as the only veggie to be pulled from the earth at harvest time.
“How come the ones we usually get don’t have dirt on them?” Drew persisted with his line of logic.

“They do when they’re harvested out of the other gardens. But then they get cleaned and washed, just like we’re going to wash and clean ours” the keeper explained patiently.

Drew was still skeptical and Ali laughed again as Ashlyn just shook her head and smiled at the boy.

Drew’s watermelon was the last crop to be ready, and that wasn’t until the second week of September. There were three small watermelons that didn’t taste very good, to be honest. They weren’t nearly sweet enough and the texture of the fruit wasn’t quite right either. Ashlyn reminded everybody that this garden had been a big experiment and tried to keep them from getting discouraged. For each one of the failures – the corn and the watermelon, there had been two successes – the cucumbers, the sugarsnap peas, the cherry tomatoes and the carrots. That was a 2 to 1 ratio and that was pretty darned good, especially for their very first garden.

The most important thing for the keeper had happened without her even realizing it. She had planted a garden and worked on it for almost four months. It had been a fun and exciting activity to do with the kids and she had genuinely enjoyed doing it. She wasn’t at the point where she craved digging her fingers into the soil or anything like that. But she could tell that she would enjoy this more and more each time she did it.

“So how do you feel about your experience with the garden?” Mattie, her therapist, asked at her monthly visit in September.

“I don’t know what I was supposed to get out of it, at all” Ashlyn chuckled. “But I kind of liked it. I especially liked that it was something I could do with the kids.”

“That’s wonderful Ashlyn” Mattie made some notes. “And how would you say the gardening affected you this summer?”

“Ummm, well, it was a time-consuming project, that’s for sure. Weeding and watering and making sure things were growing and had room to grow and putting up the trellises and...” she paused as she thought back over it all. “It was a lot of work.”

“And do you feel like the results were worth it?”

The keeper took a minute to think before she spoke. Slowly starting to put things together in her mind.

“Yes, definitely” she nodded. “Who doesn’t love fresh veggies?”

“And back when we started this...experiment, you were experiencing some new issues with your PTSD, triggered by Meg’s runaway experience. Would that be fair to say?”

“Yep, for sure.”

“We were seeing each other every two weeks and now we’re down to once a month and about to change back to an as needed basis with you attending monthly group sessions instead. Correct?”

“Mattie, you’re killing me. Yes. All of this is yes. Why are you spelling every little thing out for me like this?” there was frustration in the blonde’s voice.

“I don’t think you understand how beneficial your gardening experience was for you this summer.
Ashlyn. It wasn’t designed as a kid-friendly family activity and it didn’t have to be a vegetable garden.”

“Okay?”

The therapist decided to change her approach.

“Can you tell me why you chose to plant a vegetable garden and not a flower garden?”

“Gram always had a flower garden, Chris, my brother, even kept it up after she died and he and his family moved into the house” the keeper explained slowly and carefully. Her mind was spinning as she tried to answer the question and figure out what her therapist wanted her to glean from all of this. She blew a breath out and continued after a brief pause. “That’s why, partly why, I love flowers so much. I didn’t want to plant a flower garden because I didn’t want to fail at it” she swallowed and looked down for a few seconds. “If I was going to screw up a garden, it was going to have to be vegetables instead of flowers. I won’t plant a flower garden until I feel like it can be perfect...or close to perfect.”

They stared at each other for a few minutes until Ashlyn finally couldn’t stand it anymore.

“That’s bad, right? I mean, I should have planted a flower garden. The vegetable garden was a cop-out. It’s almost like I cheated, right?” her voice rose as she started to get agitated.

“No, Ashlyn, no. Not at all” Mattie tried to calm her down. “Those are your words, not mine. I think your vegetable garden was a fine choice and I think it suited our needs very well.”

“You do?”

“I think the most interesting thing is that you made the experiment your own. I didn’t tell you to include your family or to exclude them. You chose to make it a family activity and that says a lot about you and what you reach for when you're struggling and who you need when you're in trouble. Your PTSD symptoms stopped almost as soon as you started the garden, correct?”

Ashlyn’s head was spinning but as she thought back to the end of May she realized that Mattie was right.

“So you’re saying it wasn’t about the gardening at all? I just had to spend more time with my kids to feel better?” the keeper frowned in confusion.

“I don’t know the answer to that Ashlyn. Only you do” she smiled encouragingly at her patient, sensing her rising frustration. “I believe in horticultural therapy, which is why I suggested it to you in the first place. But you made it your own, you tweaked the experiment, and I don’t know if the benefits, the cessation of your symptoms, came from the gardening or the gardening with your kids.”

“So I didn’t screw it up?”

“Not at all” Mattie laughed softly. “What we’ve learned this year is that your PTSD is triggered by threats to your family, to your children. That’s certainly not unusual although it’s not typically what people think about when they hear about members of the military suffering from the illness. But that doesn’t matter. This is your life and your experience, not anybody else’s.”

“And when I was trying to get better, to find a new way to help fight the PTSD symptoms, I chose to do a vegetable garden with my kids” she nodded slowly as she processed the new information.
“Which makes perfect sense to me” the therapist offered when it was clear to her that the keeper was still trying to put it all together. “Part of it is easy to understand—you’re a busy mom and finding time to do any new activity is hard. So you did the smart and efficient thing and made the garden something your whole family could do together. But the other part is that your kids and your family are your center, they’re your sun and your whole world spins around them. That’s why you developed PTSD in the first place, in my opinion. I think it’s natural for you to gravitate to them when you need help, even if you did it subconsciously. That tells me that you know what you need, you know what makes you tick, even if it’s not right up front in your decision making all the time.”

There was another quiet few minutes as Ashlyn started to understand what Mattie was getting at. The therapist was relieved to see a small smile start to spread across the keeper’s face.

“Thanks Mattie” she gave her a shy smile. “I don’t know if it was the gardening or the gardening with the kids either, but we’re doing a vegetable garden again next year so I’ll keep you posted” she chuckled, still a little self-conscious. “I’ve felt really good all summer long. No issues or symptoms at all. So we’re going to keep gardening” she paused as another thought entered her brain. “But, what’s the deal with the flower garden then? What does all of that mean?”

“That, my fledgling horticulturist, is due to your borderline OCD tendencies, which is a totally different matter that we’ll have to get into at another session” the two women grinned at each other. “But, for the record, I think either one would have worked for you this summer.”

“Who knows?” Ashlyn shrugged. “Maybe we’ll do some of both next year.”
I warned you all that the world of the big old house was going to be full of kid stuff. It will continue to be. And this chapter talks about the dogs. They often get short shrift in the story but rest assured, the Kriegers love their dogs very very much. And they do all the goofy things all of us dog lovers do like baby talk to them and regular talk to them and run from the room when one of them stinks it up. For every one time I include the dogs in passing during a chapter, there are twenty more times I don't. They are a constant presence in this family's life and they bring lots of love and happiness to everyone.

Labor Day was late that year so the kids all went back to school on Monday, August 31st for a whole week before celebrating the long holiday weekend. It was unusual, and nobody really liked it, but it meant school would end as planned in mid-June so they all sucked it up. Drew went back to the same elementary school he’d been attending for the past two years, but this year he was a 2nd grader. Josie joined him at the same elementary school for her kindergarten year. That September marked the first time two of the Krieger kids were at the same school and it made all of their lives a little bit easier. There was only one school drop-off in the morning and one pick-up in the afternoon instead of two. The kindergarteners got out a half hour earlier than the rest of the school but Josie and her mom would just wait and talk or play until big brother Drew was finished with his school day. When the twins finally got to kindergarten, not that anybody was in a rush for that to happen, they would enjoy the first of two years when all four Krieger kids were attending the same school. That would be a little slice of heaven for the busy moms. But this year it was just eager little Josie breaking new ground with her move to the elementary school. Instead of having the parents bring the kindergarteners into their classroom as they had done at the preschool the year before, the teachers asked them to have the kids go in by themselves and find the rest of their classmates waiting in the designated areas. It wasn’t a hard or confusing thing to do but, nor was it a far distance, but that morning it sure seemed like a lot to ask of little Josie. Deb thought she would never recover from her heart breaking at how cute Drew had been that morning at drop-off. He waited while both his moms kissed Josie good-bye and wished her good luck. Then he took her little hand in his and walked her into the school building, his Star Wars backpack and her purple Princess Sofia backpack looking very big on them both. Thankfully, Ashlyn had the presence of mind to video it with her phone, trying desperately to keep her rising emotions in check so she wouldn’t be heard crying on the recording. It had been one of the sweetest moments in all of the Krieger kids’ childhood experiences and the three grown women standing there by the curb hugged each other as they watched Drew and Josie disappear inside the building a few minutes later.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything more adorable in my entire life” Deb exhaled as she tried to steady herself.

“You’re not kidding” Ashlyn added, wiping a tear from the corner of her eye.

Ali couldn’t even speak for a few minutes, letting her wife and her mother wrap their arms around her waist tightly as she continued to gaze at the school building in front of them.

“You ok, honey?” the keeper asked quietly, studying the side of her wife’s emotional face.
“Yeah” the brunette squeaked out and blinked away a couple of tears. “I just...” she shook her head in disbelief. “I can’t believe we just sent two kids to school, on their own” her voice wavered. “How did they get so big so fast?”

“Mommy!” Dodge called out from the open door of the minivan right behind them, breaking the women from their nostalgic thoughts.

Ashlyn pressed a kiss into her wife’s cheek and turned around to get back into the vehicle, telling the twins to be patient for just a few more minutes.

“How do you do this Mom?” Ali wondered aloud, still unable to tear her eyes away from the school building. “What’s the secret to make it hurt less?”

“Oh, Alex my love, there’s no secret for that” Deb replied softly as she squeezed her daughter’s waist. “Your heart is just starting to take the hits that are only going to keep coming. It never gets easier. You just have to hope you raise them well enough so they can be happy and, hopefully, find someone who will help take care of them. Then, if you’re lucky, you worry a little bit less.”

“Ugh. That’s the most depressing thing I’ve ever heard” the brunette dropped her chin to her chest and let her mother pull her into a hug.

“It’s not easy honey, but it’s wonderful.”

Another wonderful part of the Kriegers’ lives for the past 9 years had been the dogs. Persey and Fred were every bit as important in the daily lives of the family as any other living thing in the big old house. They were older and much more mature now and a lot easier to deal with, in general. They had never been difficult really. They were good dogs who had been trained and loved and their behavior and demeanor reflected that. Fred jumped up on people when he got excited to see them and Ali and Ashlyn had tried everything to get him to stop. All to no avail. Ashlyn swore he knew what he was doing because he never jumped up on anybody who couldn’t support his weight. He never jumped on the kids or on anybody elderly. He saved it for everybody else and gave them a full-body wag with a couple of small jumps off his back legs while he was standing up tall on them. He’d land his front paws on the person’s stomach and lean his head in for some pats and sometimes deliver a friendly lick at the same time. Ali blamed the unbreakable behavior on her wife dancing with both dogs for their whole lives. Ashlyn would always invite one of the dogs up onto her stomach so she could dance with them if there was music playing, and sometimes even if there wasn’t. She never did it for too long because Fred had arthritis in his back and she was afraid it would hurt him, even though the smile on his face said otherwise. Persey never really liked the dancing but tolerated it for a minute now and then. She had always been a fussy and sensitive dog and those traits had only increased over time. Persey girl had been through the ringer a couple of times in her 9 years and each time she spent time in the animal hospital had made her more skittish and particular about odd things in their home.

The first time Persey got injured was when she was only 6 years old. It was at the end of February 2022, the year after Josie was born, and Persey had broken her leg while on a walk with Ashlyn and Whitney. Whitney and Ryan were living at the big old house for the first two months of that year, waiting for their condo in Arlington to become available for them to move into. Thank God because Josie was 8 months old, and teething, and Ali had just gone back to work full-time and the keeper was finalizing the non-profit status and incorporation of the Mental Health Institute while trying to rehab her leg after the car accident with Drew. Her second appearance on the Ellen show, with Hilary, had just been taped and she was just about to tell the Breakers that her playing career was over. It was a busy fucking time for the Kriegers and the last thing they needed was a broken
dog. But that’s the thing about life, and dogs...you never know when that stuff will happen, but it was usually when you were busiest. If Whitney and Ryan hadn’t been there at that precise time to help with Persey, life would have been really crazy for Ali and Ashlyn. But Persey proved to be just as tough as her name advertised. Ashlyn had been moved by the puppy’s determination to get her attention when she was picking out the pup to bring home with her 9 years earlier. She called the brindle colored dog Perseverance, Persey for short, because of that strength and determination. She walked with a permanent limp after breaking her front right leg but it never slowed her down. She still tore around the backyard after any ball that any human would throw to her. Sometimes she would land awkwardly on it after jumping out and up to catch the ball but she would always hop right back up, ball securely in her mouth and wag in her tail.

The second time she got in real health trouble was two years later, April of 2024, at age 8. The twins were 11 months old and the whole family had gone up to Vermont to watch the solar eclipse at the beginning of the month. Persey stopped eating and became really lethargic for a couple of days and Ali finally decided to take her to the vet to see if she had swallowed one of the kids’ toys or something like that and it had blocked her up. Fred was usually the champion of that and they had to take him to the vet about once a year so they could give him that charcoal medicine that induced vomiting. Sure enough, he would puke up some plastic part of a toy or a checker or even the plastic squeaker from one of the dogs’ toys that he had swallowed and couldn’t pass through his system. Dumb dog. You’d think he would learn. But he never did. Persey didn’t typically do that though, so Ali brought her right in, concerned. The regular vet, local and in Gloucester, took some x-rays and didn’t like what he saw, at all. He told Ali to take the dog to the emergency hospital in Woburn, MA. The brunette knew right where it was because it was close to her old house in Stoneham and her old sales job office had been right across the street from the hospital. Poor Persey had to go right in for emergency surgery because she had swallowed something long and stringy that had stretched out as it tried to pass through her digestive system. It was taut and it was literally slicing up her intestines as it tried to work its way through her belly. The surgeon finally came to talk to a very worried Ali.

“That is one tough dog and that was a helluva surgery we just went through together” the surgeon wiped her brow with her forearm as she stood in front of the brunette. “I had to remove about two feet of her intestines but I was able to save enough of them so she should be able to have normal bodily functions. If everything goes well now that she’s out of surgery.”

“What...what does that mean?” Ali squinted, trying to understand.

“Well, it’s all up to her now. If she can fight off infection and if the repair holds...”

“What do you mean if it holds?!” the brunette’s eyes went wide in fear.

“Everything inside her is swollen right now because she’s had this string ripping everything apart in there for a few days...hold on” she turned around towards the vet tech at the reception desk and spoke directly to him for a minute. “Josh, do you have that string? For the Krieger case?”

A young man with glasses trotted over to them with a quart-size, clear plastic bag in his hand and gave it to the surgeon before going back to the desk.

“That’s what we pulled out of her” the surgeon held the bag in her hands and tried to spread the multicolored string out for Ali to look at. “Have you seen this before? Do you know what she could have eaten?”

Ali studied it for a long time and could see how faded the colors had become because of Persey’s stomach acids working on it. It could have been anything. It could have been one of the long rope toys that Fred liked to chew on. But Persey never bothered with those. Ali talked her ideas out with
the surgeon without coming up with any solutions that day. In the coming weeks though, the brunette was convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that the string had been from one of those disposable dish towels in the checkered patterns, one of the multi-colored ones. Ali had reasoned that one of their neighbors must have used one in their kitchen and thrown it out in their trash and then it must have blown into the Krieger’s backyard on trash day. She remembered that the last trash day, which had been two days before Persey started showing her symptoms, had been really windy and she had picked up several pieces of loose trash from the front yard as well. It had never occurred to her to look into the backyard. Persey must have eaten it because it smelled like food, or trash, and that’s how it had happened. She knew she was right and she kicked herself for not being more vigilant with the dogs while they were in the backyard by themselves.

“So these strings were stretched out inside her and I had to remove all of the damaged intestine. Now, if the sutures I made between the two clean ends of what’s left of her intestine hold...then I expect her to make a full recovery. But it’s a little bit of a guessing game” she tried to explain when she saw the look of distress that had still not left Ali’s face. “If I make the sutures too tight, then it aggravates the already-swollen tissue and more of the intestine might have to be removed because of the further damage. But if I make the sutures too loose then anything she tries to pass through them won’t stay inside and she’ll have a belly full of...”

“Oh God” Ali interrupted, finally understanding.

“So I made the best call I could and now it’s up to Persey. If she’s as strong as I think she is, she should recover fine. She’ll need a lot of rest and quiet. I want to keep her here for a few nights to make sure that happens for her so we can send her home with a good head start on that healing process.”

Persey spent one night in the hospital and was a nervous wreck. The hospital had a service they offered so you could log onto their webcam at a certain time and look in on your animal while in their care. Ashlyn signed up for as many times as possible that first night, dying inside at the thought of poor, sensitive Persey who was probably terrified and in pain and wondering where the hell her family was. Ali would always wonder who had the more difficult night that night – Persey or Ashlyn. When the keeper made the 45 minute drive to the hospital the next day to visit the dog, she finally felt some relief when she was set up in one of the visitation rooms with a very drugged out and woozy Persey. The surgeon surreptitiously watched through the square of glass in the door for a few minutes before coming into the room to talk with the distraught owner.

“Well, this is the calmest she’s been since she came out of anesthesia yesterday evening” the surgeon smiled down at Ashlyn who had sprawled herself out on the tile floor right next to the soft bedding Persey had been set up on. She had her hand on Persey’s back and the dog had her head in Ashlyn’s lap, fast asleep. “I was really worried about her last night. She just wouldn’t settle down and she really needs her rest” the surgeon continued talking in a low voice so as not to disturb the dog’s long-awaited sleep.

“So what can we do?” Ashlyn asked, looking down at the dog who had shifted a little in her sleep at the sound of the keeper’s voice.

“It’s a little unusual and it’s entirely up to you, but if you agree...”

“I can already tell you I agree. What’s the plan?”

The plan was to bring Persey home that afternoon and take care of her as if she was still in the hospital, even though she was in the big old house. The theory was that if she was in her own home with her own people she might relax and get the rest she needed. The risk was that Persey was going to live or die based on how well the next three days went. That meant that if the sutures held
and she fought off any infection and got the rest she needed, she would make it through those three
days and go on to the next stage of her recovery. If any of those things didn’t go well, she could die
right there in the big old house at any point during the next three days.

They kept her in her crate, which Ashlyn brought up from the basement where they’d been storing
both crates for the past five years, more for her own protection from the kids than anything else.
Persey seemed to understand this and never made a peep about being in there. She couldn’t move
very much so she just peed right on the absorbant pads they set up for her. She was drinking liquid
protein milkshakes, basically, for food during that time and she slept about 18 hours a day all
toted. Ashlyn slept on the couch in the front living room, next to her crate, for all three nights.
During the day they moved her from room to room every so often so she had a change of scenery
as well as some of the afternoon sunlight that she loved so much. The keeper took her out of her
crate and opened the mudroom door so the warm sun was streaming in through the storm door.
Everybody in New England knew better than to take their storm door off before May 1st. It almost
always guaranteed a big storm or, at the very least, some bone-chilling temperatures to make you
regret your foolhardy decision. Ashlyn set up the pads and bedding right in front of the storm door
and put Persey there before sitting down next to her. Ashlyn breastfed Lily there all three
afternoons and it was one of the most peaceful things she had ever done in her life. Even little
almost 1-year old Lily seemed to know something really different was going on and she was extra
gentle with the dog.

It had been a scary few days but Persey proved her toughness and made a full recovery. The only
real ongoing symptom was that her toots were absolutely the worst dog farts you could ever
imagine smelling in your whole life. They had been bad before, but after losing so much of her
intestine, it was next-level hazmat type of stink from then on. The other thing that changed was
that she all of a sudden decided she was terrified of fire. Backyard fire, fire in the fireplace,
whatever kind of roaring fire it was, Persey wanted no part of it. Whenever Ashlyn made a fire the
dog just went to a different room until it had gone out again, even if it took hours. All things
considered, for the amount of kids in their lives and the activity level they all enjoyed, both dogs
had lived a pretty uneventful life. Persey’s one big scare aside.

The rest of the dogs in their world were just as fortunate. Sydney’s first baby, Boss, was a 13-year
old curmudgeon who everyone was convinced was never going to die. He was surprisingly good
with all of the kids, but that was mostly because he could escape pretty easily from all of them so
he only dealt with them when he felt like it. Ziggy, the Dwyers’ now 2-year old Goldendoodle was
a lot like Fred but with the energy of a 2-year old puppy. Ashlyn called that the ‘teenager’ years for
dogs and it was her favorite stage. The puppy was old enough to be trained and start obeying most
of the commands, but still a big, goofy, uncoordinated mass of fur and love. Ziggy did not
disappoint. He was just as much of a lovable, easy-going stuffed animal as Fred was. Bandit,
Koty’s big white mutt with the black mask around his eyes, was a great dog. He had turned 6 years
old this year and had turned into the big, 110-pound Great Pyrenees/Hound mix they predicted. He
was basically a gigantic golden retriever but with a thick, wavy, white coat and flag tail instead of
golden. And his head was big and broad like a Newfoundland. He had the brindled right ear and
the thick black circles around his eyes that gave him his name. Koty had taken very good care of
him until he moved out and then left him home with Ken and Vicki where they all knew the dog
would be happiest. Koty and Brianna visited often so it had worked out well for everyone. Bandit
had also enjoyed a relatively injury-free life thus far. He had cut his paws a few times as he tore
through the icy backyard after squirrels and rabbits and other invaders. His primary purpose in life
was to guard and protect his family and he took his job very seriously. But that was about it. His
big risk was overeating and becoming a big fatty. Ken and Vicki had to be strict with him about his
diet because even though he exercised quite a bit and was a pretty active dog, he loved to eat more
than just about anything else. That dog, stubborn as he was, would do anything for a treat or a
And then there was dear, sweet, Luna whom everybody had started calling Tuba once Kyle had given her that silly nickname. She was 12 years old and starting to show her age more and more. She had arthritis in her back, just like Fred did which is how Ali knew to ask about it, and had slowed down a lot in the past year. She loved Edgar and Cristina and being with them had given her a little bit of extra spark and energy this year. The last time she was at the big old house she wouldn’t go upstairs because she didn’t want to do the hardwood stairs themselves. It had been the final determining factor in where Kyle and his family stayed when they came to visit. The Kimballs guest room in their finished basement had carpeted stairs and Luna would go up and down those with only some hesitation. So that was that. She had trouble with her teeth and sometimes didn’t eat her food because it hurt to chew. Kyle and Nathan did everything they could to help her and she still managed to live a good and comfortable life. She still wanted to play indoor fetch down the long hall in their condo every day and Kyle said as long as she still wanted to play he knew she was doing alright.

And perhaps most importantly, all of the dogs got along well whenever they were together. Ziggy was still very much the annoying younger cousin and they all took turns putting him in his place, but as a group of animals there wasn’t really a bad one in the bunch. Even stand-offish Boss was really a love bug who just wanted to cuddle most of the time. It was good to be a dog in the Krieger universe. Ashlyn was still astonished that her brother didn’t have one. When they were kids they always swore they would always have a dog when they could have their own place and make their own decisions. One of the keeper’s biggest fears had been that one of her kids would be allergic and they wouldn’t be able to have dogs anymore. Watching next door neighbor Emma Donaldson go through life like that had been a heartbreaking wake-up call for the blonde. Ashlyn loved what the dogs taught the kids about responsibility and compassion and kindness and patience, every single day that they coexisted in the big old house. Persey, both before and after her brush with death two years earlier, stuck to Josie like glue. If the family was in a room together you could be sure that the brindled dog would be next to Josie or at her feet. Josie wasn’t the biggest dog lover of the kids, that honor went hands down to Lily, but she more than tolerated Persey’s presence. Ali loved to listen to Josie talk to the dog in her sweet little voice, bossing her around just like she did her younger brother and sister. Sometimes she would just lean over and give Persey a big hug or a kiss on the top of her head and then get right back to whatever it was she was in the middle of doing. They were quite a pair. That left Fred for the dog-lover Lily. And they became quite a pair too. Fred was the one who got dressed up and decorated according to Lily’s mood or the season of the year. He was the one who wore the antlers in the Christmas picture and the one who dressed up in a costume for Halloween. He used to wear the costume just at the house so the other kids could see him when he answered the door. But now that the twins had turned three and were able to do a bit more trick or treating themselves, Lily planned her costume around Fred and the understanding that he would be accompanying them this year. She was going to be a princess and Fred was going to be her trusty steed. Fred wasn’t afraid of the ruckus that surrounded the kids 24/7. He trotted down the basement steps and hung out in the playroom with them which is something Persey rarely did. She preferred a little less chaos. But not Fred. He would sit on his haunches and watch for a while before eventually getting lazy and laying down with a loud sigh. He made the very best mountain range for Dodge’s trucks and cars and, as long as the active boy avoided his face, would tolerate it for up to an hour at a time.

The boys were both good with the dogs too, but Dodge was just too rough and Drew had never been quite as interested. He loved the dogs and always had, but his love was more like Ali’s love for them instead of Ashlyn’s. Ali loved dogs more than she loved a lot of people but she never felt like she could understand them the way Ashlyn could. Ali loved when one of the dogs would come up and snuggle on the couch with her, but it didn’t bother her if the dog stayed where they were on
the floor either. Ashlyn, on the other hand, wouldn’t rest until she had convinced the dog to come up onto the couch with her. That was the difference between their two types of dog love. In that regard, Drew was like Ali and Lily was like Ashlyn. If you ever lost track of Lily at somebody’s house, or even at home, all you had to do was find the dog and there she’d be. She would bring whatever toy, or game or puzzle she wanted to do, over to where the dog was and then plop herself down on the floor next to them. Nobody even knew if she was aware that she did it or not. But Ali and Ashlyn didn’t care whether it was a conscious decision or not. Their baby girl loved dogs and dogs made her very happy and that was all they needed to know.

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September came to a close with a flurry of soccer games, both youth and NWSL. Ali coached Drew’s team again as well as the second year of Josie’s 4 & 5 year old co-ed team. The brunette had learned that she really loved coaching soccer. She made a point of writing a letter to her therapist, Mattie, to thank her for helping her make peace with her own crushed soccer dreams so that she could embark on this new journey.

“It makes sense Ali” Ashlyn offered as they sat in the Knight-Harris suite for the Breakers game the final Saturday evening in September.

The Breakers had made the playoffs last year as the #4 team and they were fighting hard to win that same spot again this season. They had lost two of their starters to season-ending injuries back in May and then in June. It had been a steep hill to climb back up out of the hole they had dug themselves with the series of losses that followed the two big setbacks. But they had done it and they were currently battling Houston and Seattle for the fourth and final spot in the playoffs starting in two weeks. The Breakers needed to win both this game and their final game of the regular season next week on the road in Chicago to make it. They had the slimmest of leads, one point, in the table and if they stumbled at all in either of these last two games and Houston or Seattle didn’t, then they could say goodbye to the playoffs.

“What do you mean?” the brunette asked as she watched the Washington Spirit mount an impressive looking attack against the Breakers depleted backline.

“Ooooh, shit, that was close” Ashlyn exhaled as Abby Smith, an experienced USWNT goalkeeper by now at 33 years old, made a save she shouldn’t have had to make.

“Mama said a bad word” Drew tattled from his seat next to Ashlyn, poking the keeper’s arm to make sure she heard him.

“Ok Drew, thank you” Ali nodded at him but didn’t smile. Nobody liked a tattle-tale.

“I’m sorry” Ashlyn patted his leg. “I’ll do better.”

The truth was, even though she hadn’t played a competitive game of soccer in five years, she had a terrible time controlling her mouth and her body language while she was trying to watch the Breakers games. It was almost as if half of her molecules still thought she was down there on the pitch and the other half was fighting to control them. She didn’t have the same problem when she was covering games for work, just when she was purely spectating.

“I mean, your dad is one of the best soccer coaches I’ve ever seen” she continued, trying to explain herself to her wife who was seated next to her. “It only makes sense that you would have some of the same...whatever it is that makes good coaches, inside you too.”

Ali thought about it and had to agree that she had learned so many things from her father during
those formative years when he coached her as a girl and young woman. The lessons went far beyond the soccer pitch too. The brunette may have inherited her mother’s Italian temper and friendly disposition, but she also inherited her father’s patience and self-discipline and determination. Those are the traits that had served her so well in every job she had ever had up to that point in her life. As she sat there contemplating her wife’s words she could hear so many of her father’s comments and opinions and coaching quips coming out of her own mouth at every practice and game. To be a great coach, at any level, you had to have a tremendous knowledge of the game – both the fine points and the basics, and then you also needed to have the ability to talk to people and reach people in several different ways to communicate that knowledge. You couldn’t have one without the other. Most people wouldn’t see it just looking at Ken Krieger, but he was incredibly perceptive and he could explain a concept to ten different athletes in ten different ways so they would all understand it. That was a true gift. Ali had indeed inherited that gift and it had been a big reason why she had excelled in her sales position for so many years. She had always been able to find a way to talk to different builders or contractors or architects and communicate the message she was trying to deliver. Or, conversely, to glean the information she was trying to get from them so she could tweak her approach however necessary. That skill was in the same vein as the ability to remain calm in a crisis and keep a level head when things started to go a little crazy. Both Ken and Ali had that in spades. Ali Krieger looked just like her mother and had been blessed with a lot of Deb’s charming traits like her kindness and warmth and sense of humor. But there was a lot of Ken Krieger at work inside the young coach as well and Ali was just starting to figure that out for herself.

“I never really thought about that part of it before” she shrugged. “He’s always been so good at it and, I don’t know, it never seemed like something I saw myself doing.”

“Well of course not” Ashlyn smiled at her wife, taking her eyes off the game and squeezing her thigh. “You were always the athlete, the student. Your dad was the coach. You probably thought you’d never be able to do what he did or does.”

“I never really thought about it at all, to be honest” Ali covered her wife’s had with her own and returned her smile. “I was a soccer player. Period. Then I wasn’t and it killed me...for a long time” she looked down and let Ashlyn’s fingers intertwine with her own. “Then, after Mattie helped me, I just tried to figure out how to do it” she chuckled and rolled her eyes. “I watched my dad and Syd do it for so long I just sort of assumed I’d be able to do it too.”

“And you did” the keeper cocked her head to the side a bit and replied with a little bit of a question at the end.

“Yeah, but I just sort of muscled my way through it. You know, fake it til you make it kind of stuff those first couple of years” the brunette replied reflectively.

“And now?”

“Now?” she contemplated with a raised eyebrow. “Now it feels normal...not so...foreign or strange. And I really love it” she smiled again.

“Well, that’s good to hear because you’re really good at it. The kids really respond to you, and I don’t just mean ours” the keeper chuckled. “Ours are probably the worst at listening to you. I’ll work on that more this year, I promise baby.”

Ali gave her a heartfelt smile and squeezed her hand before speaking again, both of their eyes back on the field for the first time in about five minutes.

“What about you with the basketball? Do you like doing it?”
“I do” Ashlyn nodded, eyes still on the game. “I don’t love it and I’m only doing it to be with Drew...”

“And Josie this year, she’s so excited to play basketball like her big brother” Ali interrupted with a giggle.

“I know, that’ll be interesting” Ashlyn laughed too. “Some of the girls her age are so small they can barely hold the ball with both hands. I don’t know how in the world they’re going to be able to shoot it.”

“I’m sure their amazing coach will find a way” Ali leaned over and kissed Ashlyn’s cheek, pulling her attention away from the tight game again. “I can’t wait to cheer her on from the peanut gallery” she whispered near her ear, lips pressing another kiss to her cheek.

“Hey now” the keeper turned to look at her beautiful wife, their faces only inches apart. “Don’t go confusing me” she looked deep into her favorite cinnamon eyes. “I’ve got my sexy coach fantasy working just fine” she smirked. “I don’t need any hot cheerleader dreams getting in the way of that.”

“Oh, so no hot cheerleader fantasy” Ali teased seductively. “Got it” she nodded, moving her face even closer to her keeper’s, loving the way Ashlyn was staring back at her. They were surrounded by friends and family and kids in the middle of a tense soccer game and neither one of them cared about any of it. For those brief few moments it was just the two of them, even though Ali could feel Josie’s foot rhythmically kicking her in the knee from her place on Sydney’s lap next to her. All she could see was Ashlyn’s pretty hazel eyes with the flecks of gold in them and her soft, inviting lips. “I’ll just have to cross that one off the list then” she purred.

“Wait, there’s a...a list?” Ashlyn stammered, momentarily thrown by the revelation.

Ali shrugged, coyly, and blinked up through her eyelashes as she leaned in even closer to give her wife a kiss.

“Maybe.”
The Breakers won that game against the Spirit but then tied their last game in Chicago the following week. Seattle tied their first game and won their final game keeping them one point behind Boston. But Houston won both of their games and earned the fourth playoff spot. Ashlyn was crushed for her old team. They really had no business even competing for that final spot, once you took into account the injuries they had suffered all season long. But the team reminded Ashlyn of the Breakers teams she had been a part of. They played with heart and guts and when you added that to the skill and talent level of the players it was an unbeatable combination. The keeper knew that this year’s bitter disappointment would only make the team that much stronger next season.

To make matters worse, Ashlyn found herself in Minnesota for the first playoff game on Saturday, October 10th. #1 Minnesota was hosting #4 ranked Houston and the blonde was, unprofessionally, still ticked off at Houston for taking the Breakers playoff spot. The second playoff game was played later that evening when #2 Vancouver hosted #3 North Carolina.

By the time both games had finished, Vancouver had won as expected, and Houston had somehow upset the Shield Winners – Minnesota. Nobody had seen that coming and it had been a thrilling game that had been a total blast to call. Ashlyn had a great time and did a wonderful job, as usual.

Ashlyn had a great time and did a wonderful job, as usual. It was Houston’s first ever playoff appearance after coming close for the past few years. They certainly got everybody’s attention and were eager to try and win the championship in two weeks’ time. Vancouver, on the other hand, had made the playoffs for the third straight year, winning their playoff game for the first time ever. There would be a first-time Championship winner this year for sure and it was hard not to be excited for both of the final two teams. Championship Week was in Atlanta this year and Ashlyn flew down to call the runner-up game the very next weekend and the Championship game a week later on Saturday, October 24th.

Ali, queen of arranging fun and meaningful trips around her wife’s travel, thought it would be a good idea for Ashlyn to take the twins with her for the week. On the surface that seemed like a big ask, but the brunette had planned for ample assistance. She had asked the Grandparent brigade if anyone was interested in spending a few days in Atlanta with just the twins. The response, even from Tammye and Carol who were sick and tired of travelling that year, was overwhelmingly affirmative. Everybody loved Drew and Josie, that went without saying, but the opportunity for some more dedicated time with just Dodge and Lily was a rare treat for all of them. All of the grandparents had enjoyed time with just Drew and Josie, of course, before the twins had been born. Both Ali and Ashlyn struggled with finding ways to give their twins the same sort of dedicated attention that their two elder siblings had received. The moms made efforts all year round to spend one-on-one time with each child, calling them Mommy dates or Mama dates. Ken and Vicki were the two most common helpers in the cause, often taking Drew and Josie for a sleepover night while Ashlyn and Ali spent time with Dodge and Lily. And they changed it up. Sometimes it was the twins who slept at Grandpa’s house and sometimes it was just the boys or just the girls. For the Atlanta trip, Mike Harris and Lydia came up for the first weekend, Deb and Mike Christopher made the trip for the middle of the week, and Tammye and Carol flew in for the second weekend.

The keeper would be there too, obviously, except for her work obligations and during both actual games on the two Saturdays. But between and around those obligations the keeper enjoyed her week with her two youngest children and her parents and mother-in-law. She realized, as the trip got closer, that her sweet wife had made sure she was surrounded by family and loved ones on her birthday. The keeper would turn 41 on Monday, October 19th and if Ali couldn’t be there to celebrate with her then she would rely on each pair of grandparents to help her out.

Ashlyn and the twins flew down the Friday morning before the runner-up game with Jennifer Tucker, Whitney’s old agent and both Ashlyn and Whitney’s college friend. Jen was the lead agent
for Knight-Harris and had become an indispensable part of the company’s success over the past nine years. Jen and three other agents flew down with Ashlyn, Dodge and Lily and all stayed in the same hotel. The keeper, of course, had balked at potentially relying on Jen for help during the flight.

“Do you think I can’t handle the twins by myself on the plane?” Ashlyn argued one evening shortly after Ali had revealed her plan.

“No, honey” Ali shook her head and took a step towards her wife, but Ashlyn backed up – not ready to be soothed just yet. “Ashlyn, I know you can handle them. I don’t doubt that for a second” she tried to explain and reassure as she stood in the middle of the kitchen floor with her arms limply at her side.

“Well you sure have a funny way of showing it” Ashlyn huffed and took another step back to lean against the counter next to the refrigerator, crossing her arms in frustration.

“Babe, really, I know you can do it” Ali tried again, pleading with her eyes as well as her upturned hands. “I just thought, when I put myself in your position, I’d rather have somebody I knew on the flight just in case...”

“Just in case what, exactly?” the keeper challenged with a glare and a raised eyebrow. “In case I lose one of them? Or...or...in case I forget the luggage or get us all lost in the airport...”

“Are you done?” the brunette put her hands on her hips and fixed her wife with a stare and a quirked eyebrow that Ashlyn knew meant she was getting fed up with the proceedings. When the keeper closed her mouth and set her jaw in a wordless reply, Ali continued, her voice short and filled with barely-controlled irritation. “I thought it would make it easier in case one of them has to pee during the flight, alright? When I thought about anything that would be difficult to do with the both of them, that’s what made me cringe. Taking them both with you into the airplane bathroom. But forget it” she snapped and spun on her heel to go back to finish loading the dishwasher. “You can just do it all yourself. Have at it” she spit out over her shoulder.

Ashlyn dropped her shoulders and sighed heavily, knowing she had overreacted, again. She had an on-going problem with letting her own insecurities about her ability to take care of the kids muddy the water between she and her wife. It didn’t matter how many times Ali told her that she had complete faith in her parenting abilities, Ashlyn occasionally slipped back into this old, recurring trap. The keeper was genuinely excited about the trip to Atlanta with just the twins and here she was biting Ali’s head off about one little detail of it that she hadn’t even given her a chance to explain in the first place. Ashlyn could hear the brunette muttering across the kitchen at the sink and knew she was pissed. She took a deep breath, exhaled, and then walked over to her wife.

“I’m sorry baby” she began, wrapping her arms around Ali’s waist from behind and resting her chin on top of the brunette’s tense shoulder. She felt Ali stiffen and knew she had her work cut out for her. But she didn’t give up. “I did it again, I know, and I’m sorry.” She turned her face to the side and pressed her cheek into Ali’s shoulder blade, never letting go of her waist but keeping some distance between their hips. She felt the brunette rest her wet hands on the edge of the sink after turning the water off and thought it was a good sign. “I love the trip and I’m so happy you thought of it and planned it all out for us” she gave her waist a gentle little squeeze. “I can’t wait for it and it’s going to be awesome and you’re awesome and I’m an idiot and I’m really, really sorry.” Ashlyn felt her wife’s shoulders relax a little bit and knew she had softened her resolve.

“I don’t know why we have to keep having this same stupid fight over and over and over again...” Ali shook her head, her voice low and tired.
“I know” Ashlyn apologized again, quickly straightening herself up and leaning forward to kiss the brunette’s cheek. “It’s not your fault. It’s all on me and I know it. I overreacted and jumped on you and all you were trying to do was help make the flight better for all of us. God, I’m so so sorry.”

“Will you please stop saying you’re sorry? It’s annoying when you get to the double digits.”

Ashlyn paused for a minute before replying.

“But I only said it four times...” she started, trying to be cute about it but not reading the room correctly.

“Are you fucking kidding me right now?” Ali turned her head all the way to the side so she could literally give the blonde the side-eye. “Jesus Ashlyn” she shook her head, frustration mounting.

“No, fuck, I’m sorry...” she caught herself too late. “Fuck!” she yelled up to the ceiling, tilting her head back and closing her eyes.

“Just let me finish this, please” Ali asked but it was the farthest thing from a request you could imagine. “I’m tired and it was a long day.”

“No, wait” Ashlyn kept her arms where they were, still around Ali’s waist, even though the brunette had started to move again and was leaning down to put a kid plate into the dishwasher rack. “Will you turn around, please?”

But Ali didn’t want to turn around because she knew she would cave when she saw her wife’s adorable dimple and sweet, apologetic face. And she wasn’t ready to be over this just yet. Ashlyn was getting better about recognizing this behavior but she still had a long way to go in terms of correcting it. They had been having this same fight since Drew was a baby and Ali was fucking sick of it. The worst part was, there was absolutely nothing for her to do about it.

“Look, I know I drive you crazy when I do this. I know I’ve been doing it for a long time...”

“Seven years now” Ali supplied the specific number in an even voice, still facing the sink.

“Right, ok, well, thanks for the detail, that’s right” the keeper kept trying. “I won’t apologize again tonight but I just need you to know that I really am working on it. I’m sure it doesn’t feel like I am to you, but I swear to God Al, I’m trying.”

When Ali heard the conviction in her wife’s voice her resolve melted away and she turned in Ashlyn’s arms and hugged her. She put her arms around her neck and buried her forehead under her keeper’s chin without saying a word. They stayed like that for a full minute.

“I know you are, I know” the brunette said softly. “Thank you.”

“Aw baby, you don’t have to thank me for trying to work on my own bullshit. You’re sweet, but that’s nothing for you to thank me for” the keeper smiled and pressed a kiss into the top of Ali’s head, still under her chin.

“I just get so frustrated...”

“I know, because you can’t fix it. It’s all on me, and you just have to kind of hope for the best and try not to kill me when I fuck it up again” she chuckled, hoping Ali was ready to lighten the mood. “Please don’t kill me” she begged through her chuckle.

“Then where would I be?” Ali replied, speaking into her wife’s neck. “Alone, trying to raise four
kids and two dogs and with nobody to fight with? What kind of life would that be?” she laughed so softly that Ashlyn almost didn’t hear it.

“It’s not funny.”
“Don’t joke about that.”

They both said at the same time and then squeezed each other tightly.

“I love you so much. And I love the trip you planned. And you’re incredible and I don’t deserve you and I’m glad there will be friendly faces on the plane with us so I don’t have to take both kids into the bathroom with me” Ashlyn rambled out in one long breath. “Thank you honey.”

“I love you too” Ali lifted her head up and puckered her lips, waiting for her keeper to bend down and kiss them, which she promptly did. The brunette smiled as they pulled apart but then frowned when she felt Ashlyn squirming a little bit inside her hug. “What’s the matter now?”

“Oh, um...nothing” the blonde lied, hoping to keep the loving moment going so she could be sure she had repaired this fissure.

“Ashlyn” Ali gave her a tired but still exasperated look.

“It’s just...your hands are wet and I can feel the drips running down my neck...”

“Oh God, I’m sorry babe” Ali removed her arms from around her wife’s neck and dried her hands on the dish towel as she giggled. “Here” she turned her keeper around and dried her neck off for her, running both hands across her shoulders and pressing a warm kiss into her back when she was done. “Better?”

“So much better, thanks” Ashlyn let out a sigh of relief and turned to face the brunette. “Is everything better?” she asked, hopefully, noting the small smile on Ail’s face and hoping it was the good sign she thought it was.

“Yeah, I mean, it still kills me that you do that to yourself, but thank you for catching it and fixing it. I know it’s not easy. Thank you honey” she brought their lips together in a soft kiss.

“My pleasure” Ashlyn replied and then gave her a kiss of her own.

At Championship week in Atlanta, Vancouver beat the upstart Houston team and won their very first NWSL Championship and Ashlyn had one of the best weeks of her life. She missed her wife and other two kids desperately, especially towards the end of the week, but it had been a very memorable and fun experience with Dodge and Lily and the keeper was happy that the kids and grandparents all seemed to enjoy the time too. Ali had managed to have some quality time with Drew and Josie that week as well. All in all, the Atlanta trip would go down as a win for all parties involved, even though both twins insisted on using the bathroom on the airplane at least twice each, per flight. Each time Ashlyn left a twin with her old friend and colleague Jen, she said a little prayer thanking the heavens for her amazing wife.

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Halloween was on a Saturday night that year and that meant it was busier than usual. Not only were there more trick or treaters out and about, particularly older kids, but there were lots more tricks being played too. Ashlyn always worried about the allure of the empty lot next to their house. It was basically just woods with a driveway off the street that led to nowhere. Whatever tiny house had been there decades ago, built close to the street and the far end of the lot because of the huge granite ledge that rendered the rest of the lot unbuildable, was long gone and not even the
footprint of the foundation could be seen anymore. Nature had reclaimed her territory and inched her way around the driveway year after year too. The keeper had a lot of ideas for the lot but there was a potential problem with almost all of them and it always revolved around liability issues. She wanted to build a skateboard park more than anything. The town of Gloucester had one but it was all the way down by the harbor and it wasn’t a very good one. But Ashlyn knew that if she built one on her own private property then she would be liable for any injuries anybody sustained while playing there. And she knew that no matter how hard she tried to keep it private that kids would come and use it anyway.

“Just think about what it was like at the skate park you guys used when you were growing up” Ali suggested one of the many times they had discussed the idea over the years. The brunette wasn’t against the idea, per se, but the downside far outweighed the upside in her eyes. “Really try and remember who was there and what you did while you were all there...”

“Yeah Al, I got it” Ashlyn rolled her eyes more in amusement than frustration. “We were loud and rowdy and the older kids brought alcohol and played loud music.”

“Ok, what else?”

“We were always getting hurt” she chuckled as she reminisced. “There was at least one fight every afternoon and sometimes two or three depending on what else was going on in school or whatever. There was always one of the younger kids who was the lookout. He, and yes it was always a he because the older kids didn’t trust a girl to do it” Ashlyn laughed. “Lucky me” she shook her head and grinned. “I was never so happy to be a girl in my life.”

“What were they looking out for?” the brunette asked, innocently.

“The cops” Ashlyn chuckled again. “The older kids didn’t want to get caught with booze so they made one of the younger kids stand there and watch for the cops.”

Ali’s jaw dropped.

“Yeah, it was a little different in Satty Beach than up here in Ipswich” the blonde continued.

“Well, ok then. I’m sure that was happening in Ipswich too, I just wasn’t cool enough to know about it” Ali giggled. “But that just helps illustrate my point babe. All of that... stuff is going to go on here too. And it’ll be right next to our house, where our children will be watching and playing and trying to sleep. Not only is it a legal liability for us as property owners of the lot, but I’m not sure that’s the kind of influence I want so close to our home.”

“Persey would bark her face off 24/7 too” Ashlyn added.

“And Fred would want to go down and join them so he’d bark too” Ali agreed.

“I know” the keeper sighed heavily. “It’s a terrible idea.”

“No, it’s a wonderful idea” Ali corrected softly. “But I don’t see how it can work without all of that bullshit coming with it.” She paused for a long moment. “But let’s keep thinking about it. Maybe there’s a solution there somewhere and we just haven’t found it yet” she offered optimistically. “In the meantime it’ll just keep being the best place to go adventuring ever.”

But they hadn’t found a good solution for the skate park and the lot still stood empty and inviting, especially on nights like Halloween. Some teenagers had gone in and started a campfire a couple of years earlier which had terrified the keeper. As a result of that experience she had put up a bunch of ‘private property’ and ‘no trespassing’ signs around the perimeter of the property. She had also had
George, their builder friend, install a big light on a tall tree just on the other side of the huge boulder that straddled the property line between the empty lot and the big old house. George had wired it to the house and the switch for it was in the family room, right next to the side door they used to let the dogs in and out. They had only had to use it a few times since then but it worked like a charm. If they heard anything or if the dogs starting acting like there was somebody or something over there that needed to be investigated, Ashlyn or Ali just turned on that big light and whatever it was took off. They were pretty sure that it was just deer or other animals roaming around but if they ever needed it for something else they were ready. Sydney always joked that at least they’d be able to see the walking dead and zombies coming for them once they turned that big light on.

Neither Ali nor Ashlyn thought that was funny though.

The Flanagans had been living in their new old house in Winchester for almost two months by the time Halloween rolled around. They had both been busy at work and hadn’t been able to get to know many of their neighbors yet. Whitney was still trying to make up for so much time away from her desk over the summer and had used September and October to get caught up at work. Ryan had to do all the end of season evaluations for all of his players and coaches in September and then took a 6-week coaching course as well. They left a bowl of candy bars on their front doorstep with a note wishing everybody a Happy Halloween and then took Becca up to Gloucester for the night. Ali thought it was funny how excited the kids were about having the Flanagans sleep over that night. Clearly they had forgotten about how challenging it could be to live with a 20-month old. Becca’s first Halloween had been the year before when she was only 8 months old. Whitney’s parents had flown out for it and they had made the rounds of their condo complex in Arlington for an hour and called it a night. This year they wanted to go out in a real neighborhood and go to real houses with their little ladybug. Becca had been a pumpkin last year and had graduated from vegetable to insect this year. She was adorable either way.

As soon as they all finished an early dinner, Ashlyn, Whitney and Ryan headed down the driveway with all four Krieger kids, Becca, Fred, and Ethan Machado. He was still Drew’s best friend and he still chose to do Halloween with the Kriegers. He would be sleeping over too and everybody was excited for the big night. Ali took the first shift at home because Ashlyn had done it the year before, but they would switch off again just as they had done last year. Lily went as the princess with her faithful steed, Fred who was decked out in a dog costume designed for just such a thing. Drew and Ethan went as agents J and K from ‘Men in Black’ which had just come out with another sequel after 14 years. The costumes were easy enough but the conversation Ali and Ashlyn had to have with their son about why he couldn’t paint his face black to look more like Agent J had been anything but. Josie dressed up as the red witch she had seen again at the Halloween parade earlier that month in Salem. The first weekend of Ashlyn’s trip to Atlanta with the twins, Ali took Drew and Josie to the parade with the Dwyers and they had a great day. The little redhead couldn’t believe it when she saw that same red witch again. Of course, it was probably a different red witch but Josie didn’t know that. She immediately decided that she was going to be a red witch too. Dodge was the one who couldn’t make up his mind this year. He finally settled on Drew’s old T-Rex costume and Ashlyn was pretty sure it was because Drew had tried to get him to wear it the year before. It didn’t matter though. Dodge loved it and was the cutest carnivorous dinosaur you ever did see.

“Did she go down ok for you?” Whitney asked as her best friend sat next to her on the couch in the front living room.

“She did” Ashlyn grinned. “She’s such a sweetheart. God, I just love her” she raved. “How were things down here? I told you I was getting the better end of the deal” she winked.

“No, we’re fine, right guys?” the lawyer looked down at the floor where Josie, Lily and Dodge were all pushing different piles of candy around and randomly making trade offers to each other.
“By the way, I think it’s time to get these kids playing Monopoly” Whitney giggled. “They’re real wheeler dealers.”

“Oh yeah” Ashlyn laughed and nodded. “Did they dazzle you with their negotiation skills?”

“Yep! I could have learned a thing or two from them when I was in law school” Whitney joked.

The kids didn’t even notice. They were in a sugar trance or something and Lily was practically asleep, her head on Fred’s shoulder next to her. There was a kid-friendly Halloween special on the tv that was holding what little was left of their attention and Ashlyn knew they were wiped out. They’d be ready for bed in another fifteen minutes. She was a little surprised that Ali, Ryan and the big boys weren’t back yet. Drew and Ethan were 7-1/2 years old now and they had lots of energy. It made sense that Ali was letting them stay out a bit later. It was a special night after all and they had nowhere to be Sunday morning so they could sleep in if they wanted or needed to.

“I’m gonna have another beer” Ashlyn said as she stood back up. “You sure you don’t want some wine? That’s the whole fun part about a sleepover you know. You don’t have to worry about driving home” she quirked her eyebrow at her best friend as she moved towards the mudroom.

“No thanks. I’m good” the lawyer replied a little awkwardly. She took a deep breath and let it out as Ashlyn came back into the room with her fresh beer. “Thanks though.”

They sat together and watched the kids and the kids’ show for a few minutes until Ashlyn couldn’t stand it anymore. She moved closer to Whitney on the big couch, only Persey’s curled up body between them anymore.

“So, anything you want to tell me? Bestie?” the keeper spoke quietly but insistently, staring at the side of Whitney’s face until the lawyer finally turned to her and sighed loudly.

“Ugh, are you kidding Ash? I turn down one glass of wine and...”

“Aha! So you do have something to tell me” Ashlyn’s voice was still quiet but now full of excitement too. Persey whined softly and started to wag her tail against the back of the couch. “Well...?”

Whitney knew she couldn’t keep it from her best friend anymore and didn’t really want to. Two weeks had been long enough. But she had envisioned she and Ryan telling both Ashlyn and Ali together this time.

“Fine” the lawyer looked over her shoulder towards the mudroom for absolutely no reason before leaning her head closer to Ashlyn’s and speaking so softly the keeper could barely hear her. “I’m pregnant.”

There was more good news in early November, following the Flanagan’s still mostly private good news about Whitney’s pregnancy. Kristie Mewis and her husband Ted welcomed their first child into the world too. Kristie had been wanting to have a baby for so long that the entire Breakers universe was celebrating with her. Almost every single teammate she had ever played with posted congratulations to her on social media and she was quick to respond with a beautiful picture of her little family. Eleanor Samantha Scheffler, Ellie, was healthy and perfect and her parents could not have been more ecstatic. And two brief weeks after that, Christen Press gave birth to her baby son and set the women’s soccer world on fire with the news. As much as she and Tobin tried to keep their private lives out of the public eye, some news was just too good to keep to themselves.
Whitney and Ashlyn were so happy for their friend Tobin that they almost flew all the way to Portland to tell her in person. Zane Ronaldo Heath had been named for his mother’s devout faith as well as her favorite soccer player and nobody could think of anything more appropriate or fitting. He was a gift from God, even born on a Sunday, and was sure to be playing soccer as soon as he could stand on his own two feet.

But as it always seemed to happen, bad news came along with the good.

“Ky, what’s the matter?” Ali asked, recognizing the despair in her brother’s voice over the phone. It was Friday, the end of the second week of November, and she walked across her office and shut the door as she turned the volume up on her cellphone. “Tell me what’s wrong Kyle.”

“It’s...” he sucked in a big breath while his sister’s mind raced at the possible finishes to the sentence. “It’s Tuba” he sniffled. “She’s sick Alex...she’s so sick.”

“What?! Oh BB, what happened?”

Kyle took a few seconds to get himself together enough to explain Luna’s rapid decline just over the past two weeks. She had gotten more and more lethargic and less and less interested in eating so he finally took her to the vet that Monday morning. She had barely moved at all the past two days so he knew something was wrong. The vet had done some tests and taken some blood and Kyle had just gotten the phone call telling him that Luna was suffering from kidney failure and most likely wouldn’t survive the month. There was nothing to be done but to try and make her as comfortable as possible.

“They asked me to make an appointment to have her put to sleep” he managed to get out around a gasp and a sob. “If I thought she was suffering too much.”

“Oh Ky, I’m so sorry. Ugh, I can’t believe it BB. I wish I was there to give you a hug right now, and Tuba. Such a sweet girl.”

“She’s the best, sweetest girl in the world and I can’t imagine not having her here” he whispered as he tried to control his tears. “I’ve had her for 12 years...what am I going to do?”

“Are you home with her? Where’s Nate?”

“Yeah, I’m sitting here with her now. Nate’s getting the kids from school, they’ll be home soon.”

“Oh God, the kids” Ali breathed, realizing the other layer to this sad situation. “What’s Cristina going to do when she finds out? How are you going to tell her?”

They spent the next twenty minutes talking about how long to wait to tell the kids. Kyle wanted to ease them into it by telling them the dog was sick first so they could get used to the idea. But he didn’t want to make Luna suffer any longer than absolutely necessary. She wasn’t going to get better. She wasn’t eating. She wasn’t herself at all. That was no way to live. He couldn’t stand the thought of her being in pain or discomfort and not being able to tell him about it. He would rather put her to sleep, and out of her misery, to avoid that entire possibility.

“I completely agree” Ali replied definitively. She realized that her brother was asking her permission to put his dog to sleep. Or, rather, checking with her to make sure it was the right thing to do. “Don’t make her suffer Ky. That would be the worst thing you could do. Take a day or two for the kids and then let her go” the brunette sniffled as she spoke. “God, I’m so sorry BB.”

Ali and Ashlyn struggled with what to do about Luna’s death for their own children. Lily was going to be devastated but they would all be upset. They talked briefly about making a trip to NYC
to say goodbye but that seemed like too much. They wanted the kids to remember Luna in happier times rather than as a sick dog on her deathbed. They ultimately decided to wait until Luna had actually been put to sleep to talk to the kids about it. Ali brought home three different kids’ books about the death of a pet and they read them together over the weekend while Kyle and Nathan did the same thing with Edgar and Cristina. The dads made sure the kids had good, final moments Sunday evening, knowing that it would be their last night with the dog. They chose not to worry the kids before actually putting Tuba to sleep. Kyle took her to the vet on Monday morning and said his own sad goodbye before she was euthanized. 4-year old Cristina was devastated and they kept her home from preschool on Tuesday so she could grieve and try to process her loss. 6-year old Edgar didn’t seem as bothered by it so they let him go to school as usual. For the next few days both kids’ moods were volatile as they got on with life as normal and then seemed to suddenly remember their loss and react to it for an hour or two at a time. They chose, as a family, a picture of Luna and got it framed so they could hang it up. It wasn’t so much a shrine as it was just a great place to look at her and remember what a great fucking dog she had been.

The Krieger kids responded in many of the same ways that the Guerrero kids had. Ashlyn and Ali were careful to make sure all four of their children knew there was no right or wrong way to grieve. Ali chastised Drew when he told Josie to stop crying because it wasn’t even their dog.

“It doesn’t matter if it was our dog or not” she explained patiently to them all. “Josie loved Luna and she’s sad so she’s crying. And that’s perfectly ok. Just like it’s ok that you’re not crying Drew. Everybody handles death differently so we’ll all just be extra nice to each other until we’re all feeling less sad, ok?”

Ashlyn suggested that they all write Uncle Kyle a letter telling him how sorry they were that he was sad about missing Luna.

“Can I put what I love about Tuba?” Lily asked.

“Of course you can sweet pea” the keeper smiled warmly. “That’s a great idea. Can I do that too?”

“Yup” Lily nodded solemnly.

“Can I draw Unky Ky a picture to help him feel better?” Josie asked next, catching on to the idea.

“Sure. That’s another great idea honey.”

“Can I draw a picture for ‘Tina?” Dodge asked, using his nickname for Cristina because her whole name was a mouthful for him.

“Yes, I bet she’d like that a lot” Ashlyn nodded at her sensitive son who didn’t always appear as tender-hearted as he really was. “She loved Tuba very much, even though she didn’t get to know her for very long, and she’s very sad too.”

“Yeah, she...she...she...” Lily started to stutter a little bit.

“Take a breath baby girl,” Ali encouraged, “and try it a little slower this time” she nodded and gave the girl a small smile.

“She...is always with Tuba” Lily said, slower. “But...she likes Fred and Persey and Bandit too.”

“I think you’re right” Ashlyn came back to the table with a bunch of drawing supplies that they all dug into. “She really loves dogs. So does Uncle Kyle. And so do I.”

“Me too” Drew finally spoke, making both of his mothers smile, as he fished out the crayon he
wanted from the plastic box in front of him.

“Me too.”
“I love dogs too.”
“I do too.”

The other kids chimed in all at the same time, as they set to work on the cards and letters and drawings they wanted to send to Kyle and Nathan and Edgar and Cristina. Ali couldn’t say anything because she was fighting back tears of her own. Yes, she was incredibly sad for her brother because she knew just how very much he had loved Luna for those 12 years. She was sad for Edgar and Cristina and Nathan too, as well as her own wife and children – all grieving in their own ways. But her tears were also tears of gratitude and love for her family, gathered there before her at the nook table working hard to try and bring some peace to cousins and uncles in pain. None of her kids were perfect and Ali knew that. She never expected or wanted them to be. But they were good, sweet, kind children who felt compassion for other people who were sad and grieving. They were still so young with so many more things to learn about life...and death. But this was a good start. The brunette was proud of her kids and she shared a lingering look with her wife on the other side of the table. Ashlyn seemed to understand exactly what Ali was thinking and feeling because she gave the brunette a half-smile and blinked at her a few times before getting back to work on her own drawing. So much love, even through the sadness.
Thanksgiving was a little subdued that year because it was only 11 days after losing Luna. Everybody did a good job of staying positive as much as possible but they all had moments of sadness that they couldn’t fight off for very long. Luna had been a constant in their lives for 12 years. The Krieger clan very rarely saw Kyle without also getting to love on Luna at the same time and her impact had been felt by all. Cristina, in particular, struggled. No-one was sure if she’d reject all the other dogs during her grief or embrace them, but she latched onto whatever dog she could in whichever household she was in. Ashlyn and Ali even let Fred go stay at the Kimball’s house with Kyle, Nathan and the Guerrero kids during their four-day visit. Fred didn’t care. He was, by far, the easiest of all the dogs. Cristina slept with him every night and rarely left his side.

“So it looks like we’re going to be taking Fred back home with us” Nathan teased lightly on Saturday afternoon when all the Krieger kids were back in Ipswich helping Grandpa and ViVi decorate their house for Christmas.

“Ashlyn and I were talking about that last night” Ali admitted with a sad smile. “If Persey wasn’t such a nervous wreck without him we’d let you do it in a heartbeat.”

“No, I’m just kidding” Nathan returned her half-smile as he leaned against the kitchen counter and folded his arms across his chest. “We don’t know how long to wait before we get another dog. How soon is too soon?” he shrugged. “I know it’s too soon for Kyle...”

“Definitely” the brunette agreed.

“But I know he’d do it if Cristina needed it.”

“Yeah, he totally would” she nodded and gave her brother-in-law a side hug, resting her cheek against his shoulder. “You’re so good for him Nate. Honestly, I think about it all the time, but a lot more so these last couple of weeks.” She paused to get her emotions in check. “From what I can see anyway, he’s a really good dad to those kids...”

“Oh Al, he’s the best” Nathan interrupted. “I mean, neither of us is perfect and we’re still learning, but his heart was made for this.”

“I think so too” she squeezed him but didn’t let go. “But the only reason he’s brave enough to open his heart to them is because of you. You taught him it was okay to trust again. You taught him he was worthy of getting love back in return if he did open up again. God, he was so closed-off for so long” she shook her head and fought back tears as she spoke. “But you changed everything for him, for all of us. And I know you’ll help him get through this too.”

“He makes me feel the same way” Nathan smiled and got one of his arms, pinned underneath Ali’s hug, onto the brunette’s side and patted her as best he could. “He’s so much stronger than he knows.”
The holidays that year were going to be a little different and Thanksgiving had changed accordingly. With Meg, Hannah and Dev scheduled to come up and spend Christmas with the Kriegers, Ali had gone into planning mode early with her mother and father and brother to make sure the visit went as smoothly as possible. The Kimballs had announced last year that they wanted to host one of the big holidays this year and everyone agreed. It was nice that they finally felt comfortable enough with the whole, bigger, extended group to want to participate like that. They had seen firsthand what all the kids and dogs did to a house and were still willing to host. That really said something and everyone appreciated it. Ali didn’t want the Kimballs to have to deal with the Karmacharyas during their first hosting gig so, after talking it over with the planning group, it was decided that the Kimballs would host Thanksgiving instead. Their house was about the same size as Ken Krieger’s house but it still had the look of a home that didn’t regularly have toddlers running through it. Ali talked to Kyle about it and Nathan talked to his parents about taking necessary precautions for the dangers of sharp edges of glass coffee tables and dangling cords and little throw rugs that acted more like slippery banana peels under young feet. Ali had offered to help them but they told their son they had everything under control. Ali knew the Kimballs were very interested in being part of Edgar and Cristina’s lives and that made everybody happy. But they were 6-1/2 and 4-1/2 and didn’t need quite as much supervision as 2-1/2 year old Maddox and the 3-1/2 year old twins. The Kimball grandparents weren’t that accustomed to the particular brand of havoc that 2 and 3 year olds could wreak.

But Thanksgiving had turned out just great. There were the usual troubles with one kid or another fighting over a toy or a ball or a treat, but nothing extra. No major injuries. No major meltdowns. No major outbursts from child or grown-up that Thanksgiving. The worst thing that happened was that Bandit threw up because someone, who refused to admit it, had fed him a bunch of greasy turkey skin and gravy drippings. It was obvious what the problem was because the dog had puked the evidence all over the kitchen floor. They did the usual turkey day things like watching football and playing the big soccer game out in the yard. It was a friendly game at first with most of the kids playing too. Edgar loved it and proclaimed it the very best part of the whole weekend. But then it got more serious after the kids left the makeshift pitch, as usual. Ashlyn played forward and scored two goals and gloated about it for a week afterward.

“Is somebody going to jog her memory about the fact that she was a professional soccer player not too long ago?” Whitney complained when the bragging made its way into the Knight-Harris offices the following week.

The Flanagans had gone to Long Island to have Thanksgiving, and Whitney’s 39th birthday, with Ryan’s family and the Kriegers had been bringing her up to speed on the goings on from Ipswich.

“Oh, I did” Ali chuckled. “Several times” she rolled her eyes and grinned at her wife as the three women rode the elevator up to the fourth floor. “She doesn’t care” she laughed.

Ali had loved watching her girl score those goals and she couldn’t hide it. Not that morning in the elevator and not Thanksgiving afternoon in the Kimballs’ backyard.

“That’s right” the keeper grinned, her dimple on full display. “Greatness demands respect. It’s just that simple” she smirked and winked as Whitney pushed her into the side of the elevator.

“Oh my God” the lawyer groaned. “Has she been like this all weekend?”

“This is pretty toned-down actually” Ali laughed as she watched the two best friends wrestle and play as if they were still at UNC and trying to get the last piece of pizza at team dinner.

“Get a grip Harris!” Whitney yelled playfully, pinching her arm and poking her in the side, making the keeper yelp and twist to get away. “You scored on Koty who was only in goal because he hurt
his ankle playing with the kids earlier that day!”

“So? A goal’s a goal” Ashlyn countered through giggles and gasps as the wrestling match turned into more of a tickle fight. “I’m sorry, I meant two goals are two goals! Suck it Engen!”

The best news that came out of Thanksgiving weekend that year was that Cristina had continued to make progress with Ali and the other younger moms. She was already pretty comfortable with Ashlyn, especially after they had bonded over fingernail painting. But the little girl came and sat right next to Ali at one point the day after Thanksgiving. Kyle and Nathan had taken the kids to the big old house that afternoon. Ali and Deb were there, lazily recovering from their insanely early ‘Black Friday’ shopping spree with Sydney and Sandi that morning. Both women were sprawled out on the big ‘L-bend’ couch in the front living room and Kyle had plopped himself down right between them in typical Kyle fashion. Persey was curled up next to Deb at the other end, next to Ali. Cristina and Nathan walked into the room a few minutes after Kyle had and the little girl hesitated for only a few seconds before walking right over to Fred and hugging him. Ali moved over enough so there was room for Cristina to fit between her and the dog and held her breath. Nathan knelt down in front of Fred and that seemed to give the girl the confidence she needed. She climbed up onto the couch and settled in between Ali and Fred and stayed there for almost an hour as the other kids came and went and they all watched a show. Ali didn’t touch her or crowd her in any way and she tried to keep her loud boisterous laugh in check so she didn’t frighten the girl. But it had been wonderful and both Deb and Kyle had the biggest, proudest smiles on their faces the whole time. Ali knew it had been Fred that lured Cristina to her. She had no illusions about it whatsoever. Cristina and Fred were inseparable that weekend but the brunette would take what little she could get. If the breakthrough had only happened because they were all a little soft and tender after losing Luna, then Ali would just have another reason to love and miss one of the best dogs she had ever known.

The kids, including the Guerrero kids, had a great time decorating three houses for Christmas over Thanksgiving weekend. Ken & Vicki’s, the Kimballs’, and the big old house. They did everything but the trees. Christmas season swooped in and brightened everybody’s mood. Kyle and Nathan had decided to wait until Christmas to start talking about getting another dog, as long as Cristina was ok about it. Kyle and Ali secretly talked about how great it would be to have the Guerrero kids open up a big box Christmas morning – with a puppy inside it. Kyle had to talk to Nathan and Ali needed to check with Sweet Paws to see if they had any puppies that might be available in that timeframe, but they agreed it was a great idea. This Christmas was going to be jam packed with activities and guests and the month of December raced by quickly but happily.

The first event was getting the Christmas tree. This year they had decided, although it wasn’t clear whose idea it was originally, to go and cut down their own tree for the first time ever. Ali had done it a few times in her youth but not anytime recently. Ashlyn had never ever done it but always wanted to and was almost as excited as the kids were. When Ali had been younger the only Christmas Tree farms around were up in New Hampshire, but now there were three different ones all on the North Shore of Boston. The weekend after Thanksgiving, they chose the one that was just north of Ipswich so Grandpa and ViVi could join them and get their tree at the same time. Drew was all excited to help use the handsaw to cut the tree down. Both his moms had been prepping all the kids about what would happen and how they could help. It hadn’t snowed yet that year, but Saturday morning was cold and clear and Ali, the only one with real snow sense, could tell it would be coming soon. New England didn’t typically get a lot of snow before Christmas and it was a big deal to have a White Christmas. More often than not, there were a couple of small dustings of snow that fell during the month of December and the real snow didn’t come until
January and February. The brunette had explained the two options to her family and let them decide if they wanted to wait until closer to Christmas and hope for some snow to make their tree search and experience more fun, or if they wanted to get the tree right away even if there was no snow on the ground yet. It had been a unanimous and swift decision not to wait.

“So what do you guys think?” Ashlyn asked, a little out of breath because she had been carrying Lily on her back for the past half hour as they walked up and down row after row of different kinds and sizes of Christmas trees. “Is this the one?”

Everyone was bundled up for the cold weather and wearing boots for their quasi-hike through the farm. They had already found the one Ken and Vicki wanted and watched, wide-eyed, as Grandpa used the orange handsaw and made quick work of cutting down the tree. He offered to let any of the kids hold onto the other end and ‘help’ him but he got no takers. Ali finally accepted the offer and enjoyed a wave of nostalgia as she knelt on the cold, hard ground and tried to keep up her father’s pace on the saw. The distinct aroma of pine tree filled her nose and the needles poked her in the cheek as she bent close to the trunk to complete the task. Ken and Vicki carried their big, tall tree to the end of the row and waited for the farm’s truck to come and tag it and then bring it up to the barn for them. The farm had a good crop of Meyer Spruce, Balsam Fir, and Fraser Fir trees that year and the young Krieger family was considering a 6’ tall Balsam fir that was very nicely shaped and filled out. Ali preferred the Balsam because it was the most fragrant of the three available at the farm and the needles weren’t sharp like the spruce family of pine trees usually were.

“I think it looks perfect for our house” Ali agreed with a broad grin as she squatted down between Dodge and Josie, an arm around each small waist. “What about you Drew?” she asked their boy who was standing right next to the tree, studying it intently.

“Yup” he nodded, his pink cheeks moving up and down in time with the pom-pom of his New England Patriots winter hat. “This is the one” he pointed and announced as he turned to face the rest of his family.

Ali fumbled with her phone to try and capture the moment in a picture but missed it. She had the whole family gather in front of it before they cut it down and Ken and Vicki returned just in time to take the picture for them.

“You ready babe?” Ali hugged her wife and kissed her chilly cheek, right on her adorable dimple.

“So ready” the keeper enthused and squeezed the brunette back. “Alright, now I’ve never done this before so you have to take it easy on me Drew” she quipped as Ali released her and watched her kneel down next to the tree.

“But I don’t know how to do it either Mama” Drew said, shrugging his shoulders with his palms up and his head tilted adorably to the side.

“I bet you two can figure it out together” Ali chimed in. “And the rest of us can help too, if you need us to” she winked at her father who was standing with his arm around Vicki and a big smile on his face.

It took a lot longer than it should have and it started to not be so much fun after about twenty minutes, but they finally got the tree cut down. Ali stepped in to try and hold the branches up and out of the kids’ faces after Drew got poked in the eye and cried for five minutes. Dodge wanted a turn and did a pretty good job, amazing everyone, as usual, with his strength and determination to complete any physical challenge. Lily took her turn but gave up as soon as one of her mittens got some tree sap on it. It was all Vicki could do to keep the girl from crying too – promising her that the sap would come off in the washing machine. Josie watched the scene unfold and wasn’t sure if
she wanted to try it or not, and no-one could blame her. Ashlyn had learned quickly and gotten better at wielding her end of the saw but it was still slow going as the kids rotated in and out.

“How about you come help me and we’ll do this end together?” Ali offered.

The redhead considered for a few seconds and, after an encouraging wink from her Mama, stood next to Ali and did her best to hold onto the saw for a couple of minutes.

“Ok, I’m ready to get this tree down so we can have some hot chocolate and get warmed up” Ashlyn announced as she stretched her back and took her gloves off, gripping the handsaw tightly. “Everybody step back now.”

The former professional athlete put on an impressive display of upper body strength and had the tree down in no time at all. Ali was reminded, for the millionth time, how strong her wife really was, particularly in her arms and shoulders. They had been such an important part of her success as a goalkeeper and, although they weren’t in nearly the same shape they once were, they were still pretty powerful.

“Well that was an impressive finish” Ali flirted quietly as she tried to carry the handsaw for her wife.

Ashlyn blushed but nobody could tell because everyone’s cheeks were pink from the cold.

“You can’t carry this and the tree, princess” Ashlyn teased her, not letting the saw go. “I did all the hard work, now it’s your turn.”

“Mama’s right guys” Ali admitted after giving her wife a look that told her she would hear about this later. “I’ll take the heavy end and Drew, you’re in charge of that end” she nodded at the tip of the tree laying on the ground. “You guys help too” she pointed at the three younger kids, knowing Dodge would be the only one to offer any real assistance but not wanting to let anybody off the hook. “Let’s go.”

To her great surprise, all four kids did their best to lift up the pointy end of the tree and carry it down the long row. It wasn’t very far off the ground but as long as they weren’t actually dragging it Ali didn’t care. The brunette walked backwards so she could watch the proceedings for the first few minutes but then turned around to face forward and concentrate on carrying the 35-pound tree down the long row. Impressed and appreciative of her beautiful brunette’s strength and willingness to do the literal heavy-lifting whenever required, Ashlyn took pity on her and picked up the kids’ end of the tree a few feet after Ali started facing forward. Ali glanced over her shoulder and received a playful wink from her wife as they continued their successful march.

Everybody got hot chocolate and a sugar cookie to enjoy while the two moms hoisted the baled and wrapped tree onto the top of the minivan. The farm provided twine to tie the tree to the roof and Ashlyn set about looping the rough rope through the open windows of the van in four or five different places while Ali took a step back and tried not to laugh. She focused her eyes on the ground for a few seconds as she remembered making the exact same mistake herself once before.

“I don’t mean to butt in here but...” Ken started after walking closer to the front of the van where he could see both women.

“Dad!” Ali groaned but couldn’t keep the smile off of her face. “I wanted to see how long it would take for her to figure it out!” she complained playfully. “Lord knows it took me long enough when I did it” she chuckled and rolled her eyes at the memory of buying a tree for her dorm room at BU with Sydney, Carm and Jess. “We finished it all the way up and tied it down so it wouldn’t move
an inch. Then, when we tried to open the doors to get into the car we realized we had tied the doors shut!” she laughed out loud as did Ken and Vicki who was now listening too.

“Wait, what?” Ashlyn asked, slowly starting to process what was going on.

She took a step back from the minivan and eyed it critically. What the fuck were they even talking about. She had tied the twine in good knots, making sure they were reachable. She had the tree pointed backwards so it was streamlined and the needles and branches wouldn't get all stressed out from the wind on the drive home. What was she missing? What the hell were they talking about?

Ali continued telling her story about how the four college seniors had decided to climb into the car through the open windows rather than undo all their hard work. She had tears rolling down her cheeks she was laughing so hard at the memory. The brunette snapped a picture and texted it to Sydney without any comment at all, knowing she would understand the joke instantly. Sure enough, Ali’s phone dinged with a short video of Sydney’s own hysterical laughter.

Just as Ashlyn started to get aggravated, she saw it. She couldn’t open any of the doors because she had tied the twine through the open windows. The doors were tied shut. She should have opened the doors themselves and then closed them once the tree had been tied down. What the hell? Why had this tree been difficult? She had bought and transported home lots of trees over the years and never had this happen before. Ali took pity on her as she started to untie all the twine with a grim look on her face.

“No, don’t undo it” the brunette giggled and walked around to the other side of the minivan to make peace with her wife. “We’ll go in through the back, unless you can’t make that crawl, Grandma” she teased once more, not sure if Ashlyn was ready to joke about it or not yet.

Thankfully the keeper shook her head, smiled and then began to laugh along with the other grown-ups. Ali hugged her and kissed her, patting her on the butt before letting her finish up the job.

“I love you Ashlyn” she said inside the hug. “And I did the exact same thing once so don’t feel bad.”

“But how come I’ve never had this happen before?”

Ali didn’t have an answer for her wife, but Ken spoke up.

“Have you ever used this vehicle to bring home a tree before?” he asked, helping Drew put his mittens back on.

“I don’t know” Ashlyn considered for a minute. “Why?”

“Well, this one doesn’t have a roof rack. I’ll bet your other cars do and you probably used one of those...”

“The truck definitely does” Ali nodded.

“And that’s what we’ve used more often than not” Ashlyn agreed.

“Mystery solved” Vicki chuckled. “Thank God.”

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The next big event was two weeks later, Friday, December 18th. The Mental Health Initiative’s annual Holiday Ball and Fundraiser was being held in one of the big hotel ballrooms in downtown Boston. It had been five years and two months since Ashlyn Harris went on tv with her interview
about launching the MHI during a Breakers pregame show on Lifetime TV. The MHI had officially incorporated as a non-profit in March the next year and made its first order of business hiring Helen Siegfriedt to run the show and get the fledgling company started. Helen’s five-year contract would be up in March, just three short months away, and Ashlyn had been actively trying to convince the capable and brilliant woman to sign another 5-year contract for the past two years. Honestly, the keeper couldn’t imagine anybody else coming in to do the job. It just didn’t seem possible. So much of what the company did was guided by Helen’s business-sense and experience running and growing non-profit start-up businesses that no-one could picture anybody else doing her job half as well as she did. But Helen had been straightforward when she first signed on. She worked for the first five years to get the company off the ground and then she moved on to the next group that needed her help. And the MHI was completely outside of Ashlyn’s comfort zone or wheelhouse. She knew nothing about the people that funded and sponsored this sort of work. Well, she did now, after 5 years of working with them. But it was all still a completely foreign entity to the keeper. She continued to learn all the time, and did her part whenever Helen asked her to. But unlike both Knight-Harris and The Academy where Ashlyn felt like she could step in and handle things in an emergency without losing too much control over things, the MHI was a horse of a different color. Ashlyn didn’t know how to write a grant proposal or keep track of which new donors might be ready to join their ranks. The keeper knew how to solicit donors, not nearly as well as Helen did, but she could do it well enough. She knew how to do the interviews that the celebrity strugglers and supporters did to help aid the MHI in its search for resources and cures and publicity and treatment and better understanding for all of the people suffering from mental health issues. Ashlyn could record her own heartfelt and personal messages to go out on social media and she could sign letters and pictures and posters and even jerseys when necessary. Her part was important, and she knew that, but her part wouldn’t matter one bit if the organization itself fell apart. Without Helen running things, there would be nothing for Ashlyn to do and the whole thing would come tumbling down.

“Now you’re just being dramatic” Helen teased as she stood at the back of the large ballroom with Ashlyn, Bob Kraft and a Boston philanthropist - another of the seven board members of the MHI, taking in the black-tie event.

“Did somebody say dramatic? Well that’s my cue” Lady Gaga laughed as she entered the ballroom right behind the group of her co-board members.

“Here she is” Ashlyn beamed at the superstar whom she still couldn’t believe she was lucky enough to call a friend. “Thank you so much for coming Stef” she greeted with a careful hug so as not to mess up Gaga’s gorgeous and over the top ballgown.

“I wouldn’t miss it. This is one of my favorite parties all year” she smiled at the group and took a minute to greet them all.

It was still relatively early, only 7pm, and Ashlyn was surprised that Lady Gaga was there already. She normally came in towards the tail end of the evening, like the fireworks show that finished off the 4th of July celebration every year over the Charles River. Saving the best for last. The ballroom was full of a couple hundred of Boston’s finest and wealthiest citizens, along with dozens of different athletes and celebrities who had joined forces with the MHI over the years. Even without Lady Gaga it was an all-star event that the paparazzi and legitimate entertainment journalists alike all clamored to get close to.

“It’s a little early for your curtain call, don’t you think?” Bob Kraft teased the woman he had gotten to know better over the past few years as well. “Tom and Gisele aren’t even here yet.”

Everyone laughed, including Lady Gaga.
“A little birdie told me there were going to be some cute children here and that they turned into pumpkins at 8pm” the superstar smiled at the look of shock on Ashlyn’s face. “So I figured I’d better get here in time to enjoy the dancing” she winked at the keeper.

Helen chuckled but everyone else seemed confused. But it all became crystal clear a few moments later when Ali hustled over just in time to grab Josie’s arm as the 5-1/2 year old got close enough to call out for her Mama. The group turned and laughed together, elbowing each other to comment on how precious the little redhead was.

“Mama! Dance with meeee!” Josie asked with a huge grin across her face and a twirl under Ali’s outstretched arm.

Sydney and Whitney came scrambling behind them with the other three Krieger children wanting to get in on whatever had made Josie so excited. Ashlyn had asked all of their four-family friends if anybody wanted to function as babysitter for them that night. Sydney jumped at the chance to get all dressed up in a ballgown and go to a fancy ballroom – even it was probably only going to be for a couple of hours. When Whitney also seemed interested, Ashlyn decided to bring them both and make it a besties night. They had all gotten dressed up together at the big old house, Ken and Vicki coming down to watch and help if necessary. Ken joked about having flashbacks to Ali’s senior prom and the hubbub that had filled the house that evening. And it kind of felt like a prom. They got dressed up and then loaded into a big limousine and drove into the city enjoying each other’s company and trying not to get too excited too soon. Keeping the kids entertained during the hour-long drive into Boston on a busy Friday traffic evening had been a challenge. Ashlyn pulled up the dancing sequence from Disney’s ‘Beauty and the Beast’, among others, on the limo’s flatscreen and all the kids watched as if in a trance.

The party was something new for all of them. Not even Ali and Ashlyn had attended such a fancy ball together before. By the time the MHI party rolled around each year, they had already attended the Knight-Harris holiday party as well as a couple of other smaller parties at friends’ and colleagues’ houses. Ashlyn typically went to the MHI party by herself and schmoozed the potential donors that Helen pointed out for her. It had always been a working evening for the keeper and she never complained. If that was her job, then she was one lucky lady. But this year she had told Helen she was doing the family thing and would be leaving early. Ashlyn wanted to focus on her wife and kids for once and Helen gave her whole-hearted approval, especially after the blonde told her about Josie’s request for the dance. The wise woman didn’t bother to tell Ashlyn that she knew that everybody there would enjoy seeing the keeper with her beautiful family almost as much as they would enjoy being schmoozed by her. It would be just as impactful.

“Oh my God I might die from the cuteness” Lady Gaga put her hand to her chest and feigned being overcome.

“Josie, we need to wait for Mama” Ali chastised quietly, bent over at the waist and trying to get the girl’s attention without making too big of a deal out of the interruption. “I’m so sorry everybody” she apologized as she stood up and saw everyone looking their way.

“Don’t be silly” Bob Kraft beamed as he motioned them over with his arm. “It’s wonderful to see you” he gave Ali a warm hug and kissed her cheek before bending down and kissing Josie’s hand like the princess she thought she was that night. “Don’t you look as pretty as a princess” he gushed at the girl.

“I am a princess” Josie corrected and twirled again in her beautiful blue dress. It was royal blue and almost matched her eyes perfectly. She wore fancy, sparkly shoes to match and clip-on earrings and even a tiara on top of her shiny orange hair. “See?” she carefully touched the tiara on her head.
Everybody chuckled again as Sydney, Whitney and the rest of the kids joined them. Drew and Dodge both wore rented tuxedos, all black with grey cummerbunds and pocket squares, with black bow ties over white dress shirts. The keeper wasn’t wearing her actual wedding tuxedo – she had retired that special outfit and it hung up in the third-floor attic storage with Ali’s wedding dress. Ashlyn wore her other tuxedo and she had kept it fairly basic because she didn’t need to wear it very often so she wanted something that would stay in style for several years. She looked fantastic in it though. The black tux fit her perfectly and she had dressed it up tonight with a red pocket square and suspenders to match Ali’s dress. Her black cummerbund and bowtie looked sharp against her crisp white shirt and her diamond stud earrings glittered. They were a striking-looking tuxedo’d threesome and the boys both managed not to fuss with their collars and bowties for the first hour or so they were in them. Ashlyn had been smart and not put them on them until just before they pulled up to the hotel. Lily looked like one of those glittery faeries from the picture books, all yellow and golden and glowing. Her medium-length blonde hair fell down her back in soft, natural curls and she looked like a princess too – even though she had refused any jewelry of any kind. Ali had brought the clip-on earrings and tiara with her just in case, predicting that her fickle daughter would probably change her mind once they got inside. But Lily didn’t. She stood shyly in front of Whitney’s legs, holding on to the lawyer’s hands by her chest, and watched the group greet them all.

Ashlyn introduced everyone and then excused herself as she led her family to the dance floor. The DJ was playing the usual fare for those type of events – standards and classics that everybody recognized and could dance to in their fancy outfits. As the night wore on she livened things up a bit and brought a more current, modern feel to the room. But for now the Kriegers danced to the popular old favorites like ‘It Had to Be You’, ‘All of Me’, ‘Crazy’, ‘I Can’t Help Falling in Love with You’, and dozens of others. Every song that the grandparents all got up to dance to at every wedding you’ve ever attended – those were the songs that filled the big beautiful ballroom that evening. Ashlyn started dancing with Josie in her arms and delivered on her promise of dips and dances in fancy dresses from their conversation back in August. All four women danced with a Krieger kid while a lot of other attendees watched with oohs and aahs. It was a pretty sweet sight, even the most jaded person would have to agree. The kids were cute and surprisingly well-behaved and the group didn’t make much of a scene. They weren’t bothering anybody or disturbing anyone, which had been Ashlyn’s only concern when she originally spoke to Helen about it two months earlier. Ali started with Drew, standing on his own two, big-boy feet. Whitney danced with Lily in her arms, and Sydney did the same with Dodge. They all took turns dancing with each kid, trying to keep it fair and fun and when it was almost 8pm they started to slow things down and get the kids ready for the night to be over. They would sit down for a minute, use the bathroom, then say quick goodbyes and get back into the limo for the ride home.

Just as they all worked their way off the large, parquet dance floor and over to the table they had claimed an hour earlier, a song started playing that made both Ali and Ashlyn smile. They locked eyes and shared a romantic, sweet look.

“Go on you two” Sydney nudged her best friend back towards the parquet as soon as she heard the song. “We’ve got the kids” she grinned as Whitney nodded in agreement at Ashlyn.

The keeper took Ali’s hand and brought it to her lips, kissing it gently, before leading her back to the middle of the dance floor. She held her hand up high and twirled the brunette around twice, loving the way her striking red gown moved with her and puffed out at the same time. Ali’s hair was up in a tight, precise bun and her ruby, teardrop pendant earrings glittered under the lights. As much as the brunette wanted to wear a sleeveless gown, she knew that wearing one while taking care of four kids, constantly being bent over or carrying them, wouldn’t work well. She had settled
on a silk faille gown in a timeless silhouette with a geo neckline, easy cap sleeves, and a full tulip skirt instead. Her three-inch red heels, and matching ruby pendant necklace completed her look and made her feel like a princess too as they started to dance to their own wedding song, ‘At Last’ by Etta James.

“You are simply breathtaking” Ashlyn whispered into her ear as she held her close in her arms.

“I don’t think I’ve ever loved you more than I do right this minute” Ali exhaled as she held the back of her wife’s neck with her fingers. “You look incredible and watching you with the kids...I honestly didn’t think I could love you more, but here we are” she shrugged and nuzzled her cheek into Ashlyn’s. “And I do. You are amazing and I’m so lucky. I feel like Cinderella right now” she smiled, not caring how cheesy she sounded because she meant every single word.

“I’m the lucky one baby” Ashlyn spoke, still cheek to cheek, with her lips near her wife’s ear. “You’re my queen. I’d do anything in the world for you.”

Ashlyn had checked off all the boxes for Ali that night: she looked gorgeous in her fancy tux, she had been patient and kind and loving with all four kids all evening long, she had been modest and humble and charming as she introduced her wife and family to the bigwigs in the room, she had kept her promise to Josie and danced with her like she had done with Meg at their wedding, and she lit the spark inside the brunette as they danced to their song to close out the night at the black-tie event. By the time the limo dropped Whitney off and then Sydney off and then the Kriegers off, it was already 10pm. Ashlyn and Ali carried their sleeping children up to their beds, changed them into their pajamas, and tucked them in for the night – all without changing their own clothes first. When they were done, they saw each other from opposite ends of the long, second floor hallway. At the front of the hall, Ali’s bun was slightly messy and her gown bunched up at the bottom because she wasn’t wearing her heels anymore. Ashlyn’s bowtie hung loosely around her neck, her shirt, now open at the collar, was mostly untucked and her cummerbund was draped over her shoulder as she stood down by the twins’ doorways. All they each saw was the most beautiful woman in the world staring back at them.

They met halfway down the hallway, standing a foot apart and pressing their foreheads together and caressing each other’s arms and hips and necks.

“You look so fucking sexy” Ali’s voice was already husky with want and she moved one of her hands under the bottom of her wife’s shirt to feel the bare skin of her lower back. “So do you. Goddamn woman, you are gorgeous” the keeper answered, her voice just as full of desire.

Ali couldn’t resist anymore and brought their lips together in a slow, deep kiss. She walked forward, guiding her keeper back towards their bedroom door at the end of the hallway, deepening the kiss as they went. Ashlyn moaned into the brunette’s mouth and tried to find bare skin on her back too. Frustrated, she reached up and pulled down the zipper at the back of Ali’s dress and slid her hand inside. She moaned again when she finally felt her wife’s warm, soft skin under her fingertips. They both felt the jolt of electricity as their hands explored more skin and their breathing started to get labored. They separated for a second when Ali stopped their progress to close their bedroom door behind her, locking it at the same time. Ashlyn opened her eyes to see what the hold-up was and pulled on her wife’s hips to get her moving towards the bed again. The brunette’s eyes lit up and then immediately darkened as she focused on her sexy keeper. She grabbed the cummerbund in one hand and the bowtie in the other and dropped them on the floor behind her as they continued moving slowly towards the bed. Ashlyn smirked and started unbuttoning her pants, loving the look in her wife’s eye and wanting to speed things along. Ali put both hands on Ashlyn’s chest and pushed the tuxedo jacket off of her shoulders, dropping it to the floor, before moving her nimble fingers to the buttons of the blonde’s shirt. Impatient, she dropped her eyes to the shirt
buttons to help her fingers work faster, sucking in a breath when she felt Ashlyn’s hands on her bare back again. The keeper leaned forward and put her lips onto Ali’s neck while her hands unhooked her bra and pulled the zipper of her dress all the way down to her butt. It was still hooked up at the neck and Ashlyn wasn’t sure how it worked so she waited as patiently as she could and busied her hands with other parts of her wife’s beautiful body. The back of her knees hit the foot of the bed and they both stopped walking.

“Fuck” Ali moaned and closed her eyes when she felt Ashlyn’s mouth on her neck.

She finished the last shirt button and pushed it off of her keeper’s shoulders, making quick work of Ashlyn’s sexy lace bra too. She loved that about her wife. She was tough and dashing and handsome but she was pretty and delicate and soft at the same time. It was an impossibly intoxicating mix and Ali guzzled it down every time. The sexy lace bra underneath the handsome tuxedo was a perfect example of that contradiction. Ashlyn often surprised the brunette with a sexy bra or sometimes even a slightly more feminine pair of boyshorts. It drove Ali wild and the blonde knew it. Ashlyn took advantage of the slight pause to turn her wife around so she could unhook the dress once and for all. She kissed the back of Ali’s neck while pulling the cap sleeves down her arms, taking the black push-up bra with them. Before she could slide the gown down past the brunette’s hips, Ali turned back around and gasped at the sight of Ashlyn – naked from the waist up and staring back at her with dark, hungry eyes. She snapped herself out of her momentary stupor and tugged the tuxedo pants and boyshorts down to the keeper’s ankles, waiting for her to step out of them before adding them to the pile of clothes on the floor. She paused for a second and then changed her mind, picking up the tuxedo pants and jacket and tossing them onto the back of the dressing table chair near the foot of the bed. Even incredibly turned on Ali Krieger was still Ali Krieger and there was no reason to ruin an expensive tuxedo, or dress, by not taking a few seconds and giving them a little care.

“Get ready wife” Ali husked out as she stepped out of her gown and pantyhose, adding her dress to the chair with the tuxedo. “I’m coming for you.”

Ashlyn swallowed hard and then got onto the bed, pulling the covers down and waiting on her knees while she watched her beautiful brunette climb up to meet her. They knelt tall, with thighs and hips and stomachs and breasts all pressed together as they kissed desperately. They clutched at each other’s skin, telling themselves to slow down but not really wanting to. This Ali was probably Ashlyn’s favorite. This Ali was pushy and demanding but she didn’t say much. She used her mouth for things other than talking and exchanging sexy banter. This Ali could make her wife drip like a leaky faucet with just one of those intense, dark, hungry stares. Just like she was doing right now.

“Fuck Al...” Ashlyn moaned when they separated their lips to breathe.

Ali bent down and set her mouth to work on her keeper’s pretty pink nipples, licking and sucking and flicking them until they were both stiff and red. Her hands held Ashlyn firmly by the hips so she would stay right where the brunette wanted her. When she was satisfied with the rock-hard nipples she moved her mouth back up to Ashlyn’s and kissed her hard, smashing their lips together and moaning into the keeper’s mouth. She shoved her tongue inside and explored every inch of the warm, sensual space before sucking hard on Ashlyn’s tongue and making her groan.

“Jesus...baby, yes...” the keeper panted out when her wife finally released her mouth. “You’re fucking incredible. I’m gonna come before you even get near my pussy...”

Ali was already incredibly turned on and struggling to maintain some semblance of control over her own body as it responded to Ashlyn’s. But hearing her wife’s provocative words only sent her libido soaring higher. She pushed the keeper backwards, watching her body land on the bed and
bounce as Ashlyn whimpered in surprise. She barely had time to move her legs out from underneath her before Ali was on her again. The brunette crashed their lips together in another powerful kiss while her hands slipped between their bodies to tweak and tug on Ashlyn’s nipples.

“Mmmmmmmmm...” Ali moaned loudly before dragging her lips down her wife’s neck and sucking hard on her pulse point.

Ashlyn let her hands wander all over the brunette’s back but before she could reach her ass, Ali had moved lower again. She licked and sucked her way between the blonde’s breasts, hands still working them up, and finally spent a moment pressing gentle kisses to her spiderweb stretchmarks on her stomach.

“God you feel so good...that fucking mouth of yours...” Ashlyn groaned and tilted her hips up into Ali’s chest without a thought.

The brunette brought her hands down and pushed her wife’s hips back down into the bed while she trailed the tip of her tongue down to Ashlyn’s mound, making her whimper again. The keeper really thought she was going to come the very moment her wife finally touched her anywhere between her legs. She tried to tilt her hips up again but Ali’s strong hands still held them down. The brunette looked up her wife’s body and levelled her with a smoldering stare as she slowly began circling her clit with the tip of her tongue.

“Ahh, baby, please...God, please...” Ali smirked at her and lowered her head farther, taking a long, broad swipe up through Ashlyn’s drenched folds with her strong tongue. The keeper pressed her head back against the pillow and closed her eyes as she got lost in the amazing feeling of Ali Krieger eating her out. No-one had ever devoured her pussy the way her wife did, not even close. Ali licked and sucked on every inch of her sensitive flesh and then pushed her thick tongue into her pulsing center with a loud moan.

“Mmmmmmm...fuck, so good...” she mumbled into Ashlyn’s entrance, the reverberations travelling up through the keeper’s whole body.

“Oh shiiit...yes, fuck that’s it. Mmmmmmm...” the blonde moaned back as she grabbed the back of Ali’s head with both hands and pulled her face even tighter into her folds.

Ashlyn tried to buck her hips again but they were still trapped beneath her wife’s strong hands. She bent her knees up and opened her hips as wide as she could, somehow hoping she could get the brunette even closer to where she wanted her. Ali just kept working her tongue and her lips through the keeper’s pussy. She was inside and outside and fast and slow and shallow and deep and before too long she had Ashlyn panting and gasping her name while her legs started to tremble.

“Al, I need your fingers...baby, please...Ali...God, don’t stop...”

As much as the brunette wanted to spend another hour enjoying her delicious treat, she knew her wife was close by the way her thighs twitched, just near her head. The keeper had also moved one of her hands up to her breasts, working on her own nipples and moaning loudly at everything her body was feeling at the same time. Ali took one last, loving swirl of a lick through her wife’s pussy lips and then got on her knees still between Ashlyn’s long, bent legs. She looked at her wife, taking a moment to rake her eyes up her gorgeous, sexy body as it writhed in front of her. She felt her own passion pooling between her legs and the painful ache in her own clit as she took in the magnificent sight. Ali sat back on her heels and held onto Ashlyn’s right leg with her left arm, pulling herself right up close to it and almost tucking it underneath her arm. She wanted to feel everything her
The brunette stilled her tongue but kept her face right there in the valley between Ashlyn’s thigh and her mound, pressing soft kisses and gentle licks to her sweet, sensitive skin. She slowed her fingers down so they were stroking her wife tenderly and helping her ride out her high while they both tried to catch their breath. Ashlyn moved one hand back to Ali’s arm and squeezed it while the other caressed her head, lazily playing with her hair. They stayed like that for several minutes, neither woman saying anything, just enjoying the sweet intimacy. Ali was more than ready for her own orgasm and thought about getting herself off quickly while Ashlyn recovered. But she couldn’t bring herself to move her head away from the keeper’s still throbbing pussy. When she felt Ashlyn’s breathing start to slow down again, she pulled her fingers out and casually licked them clean, moaning as she did so. She pressed another kiss into her wife’s mound and let her eyes travel up her body again as the keeper’s chest rose and fell and her limbs jerked every once in a while with an occasional aftershock.

“I fucking love you so much Ashlyn” she confessed, sincerely.

“I love you too my queen” the blonde smiled and lifted her head to meet her wife’s loving gaze. “Give me just a minute and I’ll show you just how much.”

“I know you will” Ali winked at her wife and then crawled up her body, kissing and tracing her side tattoo along the way. “You’re more than worth the wait.”
Meg, Hannah and Dev were coming to Gloucester for Christmas. They were arriving on Wednesday the 23rd and leaving on Sunday the 27th and Ashlyn got more nervous about the visit the closer it got. She wasn’t afraid of Dev anymore, or Hannah for that matter. She and her ex had been basically co-parenting Meg for years now, which wasn’t quite an accurate way of describing their dynamic. Hannah was the parent and Ashlyn was the step-mom who was as involved as it was possible to be from 500 miles away. Hannah and Ashlyn had established and maintained a remarkably healthy, working relationship that revolved solely around Meg. The keeper just wanted the Christmas visit to go well for the people she did care about, like Meg and Ali and their extended family. She knew Hannah would behave herself but Dev was a complete wildcard.

Ashlyn had only seen the man a couple of times, in passing, since she had met him back in 2017 and asked him for permission to have Meg in her wedding. Ali had only met him for the first time this past summer when he and Hannah came up for the fourth week of Meg’s soccer camp at The Academy. It was the invitational week and Hannah wanted to show Dev how good the teen was so he would stop telling her she couldn’t be a professional soccer player. He was a 59-year old Indian man who had some antiquated ideas about a lot of things. He was just trying to protect the girl, Hannah knew, but she also knew he was wrong. Ashlyn said Meg had all the skills and the size and physical attributes she would need to play professionally - if she wanted to. She only had to work her ass off and dedicate herself to it. Dev just didn’t want to see Meg waste her time or have her hopes dashed. Ashlyn was sure that he cared about Hannah and Meg, even if he kept the teenager at arm’s length most of the time. The keeper was pretty sure that he even loved Hannah, based on everything she had heard about him and the things he did for her and they way he treated her. Hannah didn’t complain about him aside from the occasional eye roll about something dumb, but usually harmless, he said to Meg. The keeper didn’t really think she had anything to worry about with the pending visit, but that didn’t stop her from doing it anyway.

The whole idea for this visit had been Meg’s from last Christmas. The teenager had never been to the big old house for Christmas but had heard all the stories and seen all the pictures and videos of all the fun things that went on each year. If Ashlyn saw Meg at Christmastime, she always went down to DC, but she hadn’t done that since the kids were born. It made sense that Meg wanted in on the New England Christmas that had always sounded like such a wonderful experience. As many misgivings as Ali had about having to entertain Hannah and Dev, she understood what the fuss was about. The only saving grace, as far as Ali was concerned, was that Hannah and Dev were staying at the Beauport Hotel, down by Gloucester Harbor, instead of at the big old house. There had been a few tense moments over Facetime when Hannah asked Meg if she wanted to stay in the hotel with them or at the big old house. Ashlyn cringed, knowing that Meg would feel guilty for hurting one of them, no matter what her answer was.

“You don’t have to worry about hurting our feelings kiddo” Ashlyn tried to make it easier for the teen. “Just tell us what you want to do so we can make it happen. No hard feelings either way. There’s no right or wrong answer, ok?”

“Really?”

“Really baby girl” Hannah replied, her voice kind and patient.

“Well, I just figured I’d stay in my room, you know, at Ashlyn’s house” she shrugged and looked at her mother and then into the iPad screen at Ashlyn. “Is that ok?”

Ashlyn saw the hurt look on Hannah’s face and wondered what the hell her ex had thought was
going to happen when she asked that question. It would defeat the whole purpose of Meg being here for Christmas if she didn’t stay with them. All three of them knew, but didn’t admit, that if Dev hadn’t been joining them that both Hannah and Meg would stay at the house with Ali and Ashlyn and the kids. Ashlyn started to wonder about that but pushed it aside so she could focus on Meg.

“It’s ok with me, how about you Han?” she tried to ease the pain a little bit for her ex. “I mean, it’s not like we’re not all going to hang out here anyway. You guys will just go to the hotel to sleep, pretty much.”

“Of course that’s ok Meg” Hannah seemed to snap out of her momentary daze, slapping a smile on her face the best she could.

When they arrived early Wednesday afternoon, Ashlyn picked them up at the airport and drove them to the Beauport to get checked in and settled. Meg looked so happy that the keeper made a silent promise to do whatever she could for those 5 days to keep that smile on her face. It had been a rocky year for Meg and her relationships with almost everybody in her life. She was still a good kid but she was testing the boundaries and starting to try and figure out who she was and all of that fun stuff that 14 year old girls go through. Puberty and the changing hormones that went along with it made every teenager go through mood swings and Meg had been no exception. Ashlyn remembered it well. She had hated a lot of her time in high school and many of her problems there stemmed from her chaotic home life. The keeper wanted to do everything in her power to make sure Meg, and the rest of her kids, didn’t have to deal with that. The one thing she could provide was a stable, loving home and family and she was determined to do it for all of them.

“So are you all set for Christmas Meggie?” Ashlyn asked while she and Meg waited in the beautifully decorated and cheerful, yet still somehow tasteful and sedate, lobby of the Beauport. They were sitting side by side on one of the couches, Meg leaning into the keeper and Ashlyn’s arm around the teen’s shoulders. “Do you need to pick up anything?”

The Krieger clan was still doing the same type of gift giving routine that they had back when Ashlyn showed her southern relatives how a New England Christmas worked. The grown-ups all drew a name out of a hat and that was the one gift they had to provide for Christmas morning, or afternoon, depending on the schedule for any given year. Typically, the grown-ups were Ken, Vicki, Koty, Brianna, Kyle, Nathan, Ali, Ashlyn, Deb, Mike, Sydney, Dom and Sandi. Sometimes Tanner joined them, when his MLS schedule allowed, and sometimes Jared joined them, when his young gay man in the city schedule allowed. Both young men were planning to be there this year. And this year was also the first time Nathan and Jared’s parents were participating in the gift giving so Bill and Iris got added to the names in the hat too. That made 17 grown-ups and the number went up to 20 once Meg, Hannah and Dev were included. The same rules applied to the gifts this year as always: no gift cards, minimum of $25 and maximum of $50, and nothing raunchy. The last rule had to be implemented when too many naughty gifts started showing up, and not always from who everyone expected. Those grandmothers weren’t as innocent as everyone wanted to believe. The names were drawn at Thanksgiving with Deb, Sandi and Vicki the main organizers. It made sense that the grandmothers would eventually take over that role because the younger moms were so busy with their little kids.

When it came to the kids the rule was that everybody bought for their own. It was a big and loving and generous group but Deb didn’t want Sandi to feel like she had to buy gifts for all of Ali’s kids. Ali felt the same about Sydney feeling obligated to buy something for all four Krieger kids. So grandparents bought for their own grandchildren and parents bought for their own kids. Realistically, the parents gave their kids the gifts early Christmas morning with Santa’s presents so by the time the whole group gathered that part was already done. At the big gathering, the kids
opened their gifts from their grandparents while the grown-ups exchanged presents. The only exception to this kid rule was for godparents. Godparents were allowed to give their godchild a present but they did it separately, usually during a visit before Christmas Eve, so none of the kids ever felt left out.

The four-families did their own gift exchange, usually at a get-together before Christmas but sometimes right afterwards. They all bought one family present for each of the other three families – something not too crazy, like a new board game they could all play, or an extra section of play-kitchen or play-workbench to be added onto someone’s existing plastic play-set. They didn’t set hard and fast pricing rules but everybody was on the same page about not spending too much because they all had big extended families and a thousand gifts to buy already. The grown-ups in the four-families did a gift swap exchange game that involved rolling a die to determine what happened on each turn. All eight adults brought a wrapped present and they each selected one – with no shaking or touching allowed, per Ashlyn and Niki who had both grown up with the same harsh restriction. When everybody had chosen their gift they all sat back down and opened them, going around the room one at a time to make sure everybody could see what they had. Then they each rolled the die and took their turn. At the end of the eighth roll of the die, they were stuck with whatever gift they had.

If you rolled a 1 then you could keep your gift..., if you rolled a 2 then you could steal anyone’s gift...

1 – keep your gift
2 – steal anyone’s gift
3 – everyone pass your gift to the left
4 – everyone pass your gift to the right
5 – keep your gift
6 – steal anyone’s gift

There was no rule about keeping things clean with this game and many of the gifts were definitely R-rated, and sometimes X-rated. The only rule was a $50 maximum spending limit. The trick was to keep the risqué gifts out of the minds and hands of the kids. It wasn’t too difficult because the kids were remarkably talented at tuning their collective parents out, especially with new toys of their own to play with. Whomever was hosting made sure to have a movie lined up that most of the older kids would be interested in – that always helped too.

“Ummm...yeah, I still have to buy my present for Nate’s mom” she grimaced and looked at the blonde apologetically. “Sorry.”

Ashlyn chuckled, knowing her step-daughter very well. She had already helped Hannah figure out what to get Nathan and Vicki, the names that had been drawn for Hannah and Dev. When Hannah said she hadn’t helped Meg yet, because Meg didn’t want any help, the keeper knew exactly how this afternoon was going to be spent.

“That’s ok” Ashlyn sighed. “I happen to know someone who’s going shopping this afternoon...”

“Oooh, is Ali going shopping?” Meg couldn’t keep the excitement from her voice.

“She is” the keeper nodded and smiled. “And I think you’re both nuts.”

That afternoon Deb, Ali, Hannah, Meg and Josie went shopping while Mike Christopher took Dev over to their golf club and condo in Manchester for a tour and to pick up the Karmacharya’s rental car. Ashlyn found herself at the big old house with Drew, Dodge and Lily and they enjoyed some good, and rough, playtime together down in the playroom. Deb had offered to stay home with the
kids so the keeper could go shopping instead but Ashlyn just couldn’t do it, not even for Meg. The best thing was that Meg knew how much Ashlyn hated shopping and wasn’t fazed by the decision at all. She and Ali, and Hannah for that matter too, both knew that shopping with Ashlyn when she wasn’t in the mood to shop was no fun at all.

They all regrouped, and were joined by Ken and Vicki, for dinner at the big old house. It was an Italian feast that Deb and Ali had been preparing for two whole days, even making homemade pasta. That was an extravagance that they didn’t indulge in very often because it was a lot of work and very time-consuming. But as everyone dined on lasagna and baked ziti and Ali’s ever-popular mostaccioli casserole that night, the two chefs knew it had all been worth it. They all sat around the big dining room table, with the kids back at the nook table in the corner of the family room, and spent a very pleasant hour eating and talking and laughing together. Hannah was as pleasant as Ali could ever remember her being and the brunette found herself starting to like the woman more every time they saw one another. Dev spent his time talking with Mike and Ken and did his best to be polite to everyone else. Ashlyn got a kick out of watching his whole body cringe every time one of the kids shrieked or laughed or made some other loud noise. Maybe this visit would be more fun than she thought.

Kyle, Nathan and the kids arrived just after dinnertime and immediately brought the energy level inside the house up about two notches. It was Meg’s first time seeing Kyle without Luna at his side and she experienced a wave of sadness that Kyle recognized and helped her get through with a big hug. It was also her first time meeting Edgar and Cristina and the two Guerreros looked at the teenager with a mixture of awe and curiosity that was only surpassed by the way they looked at Hannah.

“It’s the red hair” Ali nudged her brother as they stood there watching. “It dazzles little kids for some reason” she shrugged. “Especially little redheaded kids” she giggled as Josie sidled up to Hannah and looked at Cristina and Edgar as if she was claiming the tall, exotic redhead as her own property.

“Oh my God” he chuckled. “I know you’ve told me about this before but I’ve never seen it. Wow.”

“Yep, I already reminded Hannah to just let me know when she’s had enough of her mini-me” Ali rolled her eyes playfully.

“Which one?” Kyle giggled. “Look at the three reds over there” he nodded at Hannah, Meg and Josie who were all standing close together and talking to the Guerreros.

“I know. I never felt bad about it before because it didn’t occur to me. I’ve got dark hair like Drew and Ashlyn’s got the blonde, or at least a mix, depending on what she’s doing up there, like the twins. But it’s just Josie with the red hair” she shrugged. “It’s no wonder she follows Hannah, and Meg, around” she smiled at the sight again.

There had been some debate about where to celebrate Christmas Eve and Christmas Day once the Thanksgiving hosting decision had been made in the Fall. Ken and Vicki offered to do both, the Kimballs offered to do one or the other, even Sydney offered although she did it only out of love for her best friend. The idea of hosting anything at Christmas terrified the coach because she barely made it through Christmas as it was – and that was with a messy house that didn’t always get picked up right away and certainly wasn’t fit for a large gathering. Everybody was trying to be nice and help Ali and Ashlyn out because they knew they were having the Karmacharyas for the holiday. Ali finally put her foot down and decided they weren’t going to completely upset the applecart just because Hannah and Dev were there this year. Ali and Ashlyn would host Christmas Eve like they usually did, and then Ken and Vicki would host Christmas Day like they usually did.
Keep it simple and try and enjoy it. And that’s exactly what they did.

But before Christmas Eve at the big old house happened Thursday evening, Ashlyn had organized a big skating group for Boston Common in the morning. Meg had always said she wanted to do that, and they had taken her a few times during her February vacation visits, but it wasn’t the same without all the Christmas lights and decorations. So, bright and early Thursday morning the same group from the evening before all drove to the Knight-Harris office building in Cambridge where Ashlyn and Meg gave Hannah and Dev a quick tour while everyone else used the bathrooms and bundled up for their walk to the nearby subway station. Whitney met the group there with her own entourage. Ryan, Becca, and both of Whitney’s parents, who were visiting for Christmas again this year. The lawyer’s brother and his wife were flying in later that afternoon as well and the Flanagans would have a full house for their first Christmas in Winchester. The skating party was probably the most Ashlyn would see of her bestie until the new year, except for texts and their usual Merry Christmas Day facetime. The Dwyer’s minivan had joined the Krieger caravan of vehicles along the way and that completed their large group.

It was cold but there was still no snow on the ground yet. It was a typical end of December day in Boston, cold and a little windy but not too uncomfortable if you dressed for it. The skating itself was very fun. Both Hannah and Meg knew how to skate so nobody had to worry about them. In fact, they even helped the grandparents with the kids at one point so Ali and Ashlyn could have a little skate just to themselves. Dev was the only one who wouldn’t skate. He sat there near the warming heater half-watching the ice and half-watching his phone. Even the California Engens gave it a shot, with Ryan and Ken making sure they both stayed upright as they tried to learn. Ashlyn was just as good a skater as her wife by now and Whitney wasn’t too far behind. Ryan had been teaching her for years, but once the keeper started getting good at it Whitney decided to up her own game too. Mike Christopher was still not very good, but he seemed to genuinely enjoy it. Deb held his hand and skated along at his pace, as she always did. Drew was a solid skater in his own right and Josie did just fine too. She was small, but she was coordinated and had very good balance. Those two made the rounds with Cassius and James Dwyer, Dom close on their heels, just in case. One of the sweetest pictures from that morning was of James and Josie, taken from behind them, holding hands and skating together. Both Ali and Sydney would treasure it for the rest of their lives. The kids who still needed help skated between their moms’ legs. Ali had Lily, Ashlyn had Dodge, Sydney had Maddox and Whitney had little Becca. And Ashlyn made sure she took a few spins with just Meg, checking in with the teen to make sure she was having as much fun as it appeared by the huge grin that never left her face.

Kyle and Nathan took turns teaching Edgar and Cristina how to skate because neither of them had ever been before. The way those two kids looked at everything with such wide, wondering eyes made everybody’s heart hurt a little bit. They were old enough to have seen some of these things before, even if they hadn’t participated, but it seemed like everything beautiful and fun and light was new territory for the Guerreros. Nobody liked to think about how bleak their previous Christmases must have been.

Ashlyn had reserved the private dining room at the ‘Union Oyster House’ restaurant again, knowing she was duplicating her efforts from the last time they did a big huge family lunch after skating. But she loved showing visitors that historic restaurant and she would never get over the fact that she might be eating in the very same place her grandparents or great-grandparents or even the sea captain himself, Captain Leighton, had eaten. She spent most of the meal telling the Karmacharyas and Meg those stories and acting as tour guide. It was a warm and festive room and the keeper was genuinely surprised at how well everything was going. Dev only occasionally listened to her, preferring the company of Mike and Ken and even Ryan to Ashlyn or any of the other women. Ali had been taught about other cultures and the way they viewed and treated women back in college in her womens’ studies courses, but to see it in real live action was wild.
The brunette couldn’t imagine being married to someone like that. It was pretty clear that he loved Hannah and was good to her, but she was literally the only woman he interacted with if at all possible. He was just uncomfortable with the vivacious, loud, fun-loving women that sat around that big table. If it didn’t annoy her so much, Ali would have found it funny.

Towards the end of the meal the youngest kids started to get tired and cranky and it was time to get them home for naps. Ashlyn had already arranged to pay for the meal when she made the arrangements back in November so she couldn’t understand why the restaurant manager was trying to get her attention from the far side of the room. It wasn’t until she got halfway there that she saw Dev, with his face twisted in anger or frustration, standing with their server and the manager.

“What’s up Dev? Everything ok?” Ashlyn asked cautiously, unable to imagine what this could possibly be about.

“I’m so sorry to bother you Mrs. Krieger” the manager spoke quietly and quickly. “But Mr. Karm...uhh...umm...” he stumbled over the difficult to pronounce last name.

“Karmacharya” Ashlyn replied slowly and clearly.

“Yes, of course” the manager blushed. “Mr. Karmacharya is upset because the bill has already been paid...”

“There’s no reason you can’t reverse the charge and let me pay for it” Dev snapped, his credit card in his hand. “It’s just absurd. There’s no need to even discuss it” he huffed and raised his voice a little bit.

Oh shit. Ashlyn didn’t know what to do. Of course the bill had already been charged to her own credit card – that was the plan. But she knew what a proud man Dev was and how much things like this mattered to him. He was her guest this Christmas and she didn’t want him to pay for the meal, which was not cheap for 17 adults and 10 children. But if she refused his generous request it would be an insult to him. It was only day 2 of the visit and they had 3 more to go. If she pissed him off now it would only make the rest of the visit that much harder.

“What’s the matter” Hannah’s voice was low as she joined them, standing between, but behind her ex-girlfriend and her husband.

“Nothing’s the matter my dear” Dev’s voice was warmer and kinder and he smiled sincerely at his wife. “We’re just settling up. There won’t be any more problems with this will there?” he asked arrogantly, looking at the manager and then at Ashlyn.

“Just let him do it” Hannah muttered under her breath towards the back of Ashlyn’s head as she started to turn away. “Please.” She patted Dev’s arm and returned his smile. “Ok gabroo, I’ll let you handle it” she demurred and walked back to the table.

“No, there won’t be any problem Dev” Ashlyn smiled at the man who was only trying to do something very nice and generous for Ashlyn and her family, even if he was being a jerk about it. “Please do as he says” she nodded at the manager and then waited while he took Dev’s credit card and scurried away. “This is very kind of you” she nodded at the Indian man. “You are very generous to me and to my family. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome” he smiled almost stiffly in return. “This is important to Meg and to Hannah” he paused, trying to find the right words to say. “And to me. Thank you for having us this Christmas.”

That evening they all gathered at the big old house for Christmas Eve. In place of the Flanagans
and Engens - Koty, Briana, Jared and the Kimballs joined the crowd. Everybody ate and drank and laughed and sang Christmas carols while Nathan played the piano in the front parlor. There were kisses under the mistletoe, which was hung strategically between the kitchen and the family room – a notoriously high-traffic area. The big, double-sided fireplace was the official divider between the two rooms, and there was open space on either side of it for people to pass through. The space closer to the middle of the house and the mudroom was more frequently used by almost everybody. If you were in the kitchen and wanted to go into the family room or the pantry, that was where you walked. The only time the other space was used, at the back of the room closer to the backstairs was if you were in the kitchen at the sink and needed to go to the nook table. That was the side of the fireplace where the time-out chair was located just for that reason – it was a much quieter space. But that mistletoe got quite the workout with all sorts of odd pairings sharing a Christmas kiss. Most of them were very chaste pecks on the cheek or the lips, but every once in a while an actual couple would find themselves there at the same time. Sydney and Dom were on record with the steamiest mistletoe kiss to date, with Koty and Briana not too far behind. That night as they hustled around their house making sure their family and guests had everything they needed, Ashlyn and Ali wound up under the mistletoe together and almost didn’t notice.

“Hon, can you get Dodge another straw for his milk?” Ashlyn asked on her way into the kitchen. “He ‘lost’ his” she continued, rolling her eyes as she said the word lost because they both knew he had grabbed it from the side of the milk box and thrown it somewhere in his excitement.

The milk boxes were just like juice boxes except they had milk inside and were a little bit bigger. When they were entertaining like this, the two moms let the kids use them instead of their regular sippy cups and milk from the refrigerator even though the milk boxes were usually for travelling. They didn’t really have extra straws for the milk boxes, but Ali had found some drink straws that almost fit into the hole in the milk box. All you had to do was take a blade and make the hole a tiny bit bigger first.

“Yeah” the brunette agreed with a quick nod as she took the milk box from her wife and held out her own hand with two already unwrapped cheese string sticks in it. “Will you give these to Maddox and Lily for me?” she asked, stopping her speedy steps towards the dining room where the youngest kids were camped out, fascinated by a new decoration that danced around and lit up when it sensed someone in front of it.

They both turned back to return from whence they had just come and halted a half step away. Ali turned first, with a big smile on her face, and waited a split second for her wife to turn and face her. “Come here you” the brunette gave Ashlyn the come hither finger curl and the keeper laughed and quickly complied.

“Merry Christmas Eve baby” she mumbled against Ali’s lips as they kissed quickly, both rooms around them full of people and action.

Ashlyn started to pull back, thinking the chaste peck was all she was going to get. But Ali had other plans and used her free hand to pull her wife back in by the back of her neck for a slow, deep kiss. “Uh oh” Sydney teased. “Somebody get the hose, Ali’s forgetting how shy she is again.”

The brunette giggled at her best friend’s jibe as she finished kissing her favorite lips in the whole world. She looked right into Ashlyn’s eyes, their faces still close together, and moved her hand from the back of her keeper’s neck to softly caress her cheek. She had to wait for Ashlyn to open her eyes before speaking. “I love you. Merry Christmas Eve.”
Ali’s favorite tradition from her own youth was putting the star at the top of the Christmas tree on Christmas Eve. It was from her mother’s side of the family and Deb had been so touched when her daughter had chosen to keep the tradition alive. When Kyle was home in Massachusetts for Christmas he made sure to go to his sister’s house in the late afternoon on Christmas Eve so they could put the star up together, regardless of where the official holiday gathering would be held that night. It was easier when Ali and Ashlyn hosted, but Kyle wouldn’t miss it either way. The Christmas Eve star and the advent calendar were both Kyle and Ali’s favorites and it surprised absolutely nobody that the siblings’ best memories and most favorite parts of Christmas were the same. It had been Kyle’s perspective on the advent calendar that had made Ashlyn and Ali change the way they rotated through which kid opened which day’s drawer. Kyle and Ali had always taken turns when they were growing up with Kyle going first because he was the oldest. This was exactly how the younger Kriegers had been functioning as well. The only problem with that plan was that Kyle never got to open the final, Christmas Eve box on the advent calendar. That honor went to Ali every year because Kyle went first, so she went second or last in this case. And it was true for Drew, Josie, Dodge and Lily too. Ever since the twins had been born, Lily had been opening the Christmas Eve drawer on their carved wooden advent calendar. But this year they changed it up. Josie went first on December 1st which meant that Drew got to go last this year for the first time since he had been two years old. Next year Dodge would go first and they would keep rotating so everybody could open the Christmas Eve advent calendar drawer - at least once every four years.

This year, instead of Kyle putting the star on top of the tree with Ali right by his side, the siblings decided to let a first-timer have the honor. Ali handed the star to Meg with a big grin and then watched Kyle give her his shoulder to lean on as she lifted it up towards the top of the tree. Meg was the same height as Ashlyn now, 5’ 9”, and she could reach the top of the 6’ tall tree without needing much more assistance than Kyle’s strong shoulder. The teen looked nervous, but thrilled, as she clutched the beautiful star made of dozens of tiny white lights.

“Just feel around for the top of the tree up there” Kyle offered helpfully. “You can sit the star right on it.”

“There you go” Ali cheered as the redhead took a few seconds to make sure the star was sitting up straight and not leaning too far in one direction or another. “Great job Meg!”

It was a wonderful evening. But it was hard to wreck a Christmas Eve. Everybody was excited, no-one more so than the kids. They were on their best behavior so Santa would deliver the goods. The parents were just as excited because they didn’t have to move that fucking Elf on the Shelf around again for a whole year. Sydney was still pissed at Ali for that mess. The brunette had always thought it was a cute idea and she happily bought the first Elf on the Shelf when Drew was two years old. When he was old enough he named the Elf ‘Hermie’ after the elf in Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer and Ali dutifully moved him from room to room every night. But two years ago she had caved to pressure from the kids and bought ‘Ginger’, the female Elf on the Shelf who they named after the gingerbread women and men they made with their mommy every year. As soon as Cash and James and Maddox heard about Ginger they hounded Sydney to get them a girl Elf too. The Crosses were right behind them once Sydney gave in and they all knew the Flanagans would be next. They all drew the line at the pets that were now available. Nobody needed to worry about Hermie’s dog or Ginger’s cat. Even Ali thought that was ridiculous. As much as she loved creating a little Christmas magic for her kids with the elves every night, the brunette didn’t miss doing it after 24 nights, some of them including panic-stricken dashes around the huge, dark house to move them in the middle of the night - after forgetting to do it before she went to bed. The first thing the kids did every morning was hunt for Hermie and Ginger and they wouldn’t do anything else until they found both of them.

Bill Kimball and Koty spent a lot of time talking with Dev as the two male members of the
extended family that the visitor hadn’t met yet.

“Have you noticed that he only ever talks to the guys?” Sydney asked as she stood talking with Ali, Ashlyn, Dom and Deb.

“Yeah, I have” Ali nodded as Ashlyn looked in surprise from one woman to the next.

“No, not really” the keeper frowned, disbelieving it. “He always prefers the company of men...it’s a business thing, and because he’s from India...”

“ASH, he only talks to Hannah” Sydney kept going. “Unless he can’t help it, like at dinner last night he had to talk to Vicki because she was sitting between he and Ken...”

“No way, you’re exaggerating” Ashlyn balked as her mind started to replay the last day and a half.

“And only straight guys too” Dom interjected with a quirked eyebrow.

“What?”
“Really?”
“No way!”

Ali, Deb and Sydney replied at the same time, whisper-yelling.

“Absolutely” Dom nodded. “He avoided me like the plague last night and most of today until somebody must have clarified for him who I was.”

“But why would he think you were gay?” Sydney asked, innocently.

“Honey, your man is the gayest straight guy I’ve ever seen” Deb chuckled as she put her arm around both Dom and Sydney.

“It’s the tattoos and the stylish clothes” Ali winked at her best friend and they all laughed.

“So, now he has a problem with gay guys too?” Ashlyn clarified, catching up to the conversation.

“No just women?”

Dom shrugged his shoulders and gave her an apologetic look.

“Now that you mention it, I haven’t seen him talking to Kyle or Nathan at all” Ali furrowed her brow as she thought back to the night before and then the day spent skating and at lunch. “He’s been with Mike or Dad most of the time...”

“And he hung out with Ryan a lot this morning” Deb added. “And now he’s chummy with Bill and Koty tonight...” she gave her daughter a wide-eyed look as they all came to the same realization.

“But still has barely said a word to Kyle or Nate” Ali set her jaw and tried to stay calm.

“But he’s always been cool with me, with us” Ashlyn shook her head, confused, and looked at her wife.

“I really couldn’t say that Ash” Ali countered. “I mean, he’s barely said two sentences to me since I first met him this summer. I didn’t think anything of it at the time because, well, because I really don’t care if he talks to me or not.”

“Well, I’m telling you, he’s been fine with us. He wouldn’t let Meg come stay with us if he had a problem with it” the keeper shot back, feeling defensive and agitated by the whole conversation.
“That’s a great point” Sydney raised her eyebrows and looked at the four other faces. “Ash is right.”

“What are we all whispering about over here?” Kyle surprised them all and laughed gleefully when they jumped a mile each. “Wow! Now I really wanna know what we’re whispering about over here!” he hunched over conspiratorially, putting his arms around his mother and Sydney’s shoulders in the huddle.

They all looked nervously at each other for a few seconds. They didn’t want to create a problem if one didn’t really exist. On the other hand, they wanted to protect Kyle, and Nathan and Jared when he arrived for Christmas Day tomorrow, from any homophobic bullshit that might come their way if there was a problem. Ali sighed heavily and then spoke.

“We think Dev...doesn’t like women” she began carefully.

“Or gay guys” Sydney finished for her, looking over her shoulder to make sure they weren’t going to be surprised by anybody else.

“Oh, geez, tell me something I don’t already know” Kyle laughed. “As soon as you introduced us, Nate and I felt the hate” he smiled. “Who cares? Life’s too short. Besides, now I can spend more time talking to the people I love instead of wasting my breath on some homophobic asshole.”

Ali’s heart swelled with pride when she heard her brother’s words. Kyle Krieger could be one of the most vain and shallow men on the planet. Several years ago he probably would have made a scene by ditching the gathering so he wouldn’t make anybody feel uncomfortable, or, a couple of years ago by confronting the narrow-minded bigot and publicly shaming him. Her brother had grown up so much and had turned into such a good person and the brunette just loved him to death. As soon as her heart registered all that love, it ached that Kyle had to deal with idiots like Dev at all.

“Just relax Al” Ashlyn stared at her wife, recognizing the lion getting ready to defend and protect her loved ones. “Has he said or done anything to you or Nate?” she looked next at Kyle and they all waited anxiously for his answer.

“Nope. Not a thing. Just the look of disgust when you introduced us. He’s avoided us ever since and we’ve done the same. And we’re fine with that” he gave his sister a stern look. “Seriously Alex. Don’t ruin Meg’s visit on our account. We’re fine.”

“Are you sure?” Deb squeezed her son’s waist and put her head on his shoulder. “I’ll take care of the problem right now if...”

“Mom, I promise” Kyle reassured the group, any one of whom would defend him in a heartbeat and he knew it. “I appreciate your outrage” he giggled. “Really, I do. But let’s just let it go. He’s a douchebag and we’re awesome and it’s his loss” he shrugged.

The night finally came to a close and Ashlyn and Ali were so thankful to have Meg there for more than just the many warm and fuzzy reasons. For once, they had a lookout while they moved Santa’s wrapped gifts from the attic storage space on the third floor all the way down to the tree in the family room. In years past, it was the most nerve-wracking hour of their whole year as they held their breath and tip-toed down the stairs to the second floor, then walked down the hallway to the top of the front stairs. If any of the kids had opened their doors to go to the bathroom or to come find one of their moms for something, they would have been discovered on the spot.

“Why don’t you guys keep this stuff in the basement, or the garage instead of the attic?” Meg asked
as the three of them stood together, admiring the beautiful tree in the beautiful room with all of the presents underneath and around it.

The rest of the house was dark so the tree appeared to be glowing. They were about to turn in for the night but took that moment to breathe in the magic of Christmas Eve together. The question about the attic was so obvious to Meg that she was sure there had to be multiple reasons why those options wouldn’t possibly work. Ali and Ashlyn just stared at each other, dumbfounded. Meg’s Christmas visit had turned into its own kind of Christmas miracle – it would make Christmas Eve in the big old house infinitely easier for the remaining years Ali and Ashlyn played Santa Claus. Ali chuckled and headed for the backstairs, still shaking her head at Meg’s brilliant observation.

“Where have you been all my life?” Ashlyn deadpanned, squeezing the teenager and kissing the side of her head. “I sure am glad you’re here kiddo. Merry Christmas.”

“Me too” Meg grinned into the side-hug and the kiss, giving Ashlyn a hug in return. “Thanks for letting me be here tonight. This is awesome. I love you Ash.”
Christmas Day was bright and beautiful and cold as hell. The exhilarating morning rush to open presents was truly something to behold in the big old house. Deb and Mike had come over early, as they usually did when they were in town for the holiday, and Meg had grumbled her way downstairs after getting the cutest wake-up call in the history of the world. Drew had woken first, at 6am and waited patiently in his room until the digital clock on his nightstand said 6:30am which was the earliest he was allowed to get up. He was usually a late sleeper but not on Christmas morning. No way. He made sure all of his siblings were with him when he went to get his moms up at 6:30am sharp. They all went upstairs to the third floor where Ashlyn knocked softly on Meg’s closed door. She cracked the door open when she didn’t get a response and smiled at the sight of the sacked-out teenager, breathing through her half-open mouth as she lay sprawled out on her stomach and buried under the covers. The keeper helped the kids up onto the bed and they all got as close to their step-sister as possible without actually sitting on top of her. Ali hugged her wife from behind, moved by the cuteness of the whole thing as the kids giggled and shushed each other as they perched around Meg’s body like adorable vultures.

“You weren’t kidding about early, huh?” Meg’s tired, raspy sleep-filled voice finally came out of her mouth and made everyone laugh.

“Meggie!” Drew squealed from his place near her head. “It’s Christmas!!”

Dodge couldn’t resist any longer and crawled up onto her back, patting her head in a surprisingly gentle way. Josie giggled when the teenager worked her arm out from under the covers to pat them all and then rested her hand in Josie’s lap.

“Won’t it still be Christmas in three hours?” she croaked, only half-joking.

“You wanted the Gloucester Christmas experience” Ashlyn laughed and picked Dodge up, ready to carry him downstairs – not trusting him to take his time on the stairs in his mounting excitement. Ali did the same with Lily as the keeper urged Drew and Josie off of the bed. “Come on guys, let’s go see what Santa brought.”

Meg groaned dramatically but was up and out of bed before the rest of the family had even made it to the second floor. This was exactly what the teenager had wanted and hoped for. She had never in her whole life opened presents on Christmas morning with other excited children, or a sibling or a cousin. It had always just been her. Ashlyn watched her carefully the whole time, loving how excited Meg was and how sweet she was with the kids. The teenager opened her presents from Santa and made a big deal about it just to keep the ruse going for the kids. For a few moments, Ashlyn, Ali and Deb got a glimpse of what grown-up Meg was going to be like...and it had been wonderful.

They spent the rest of the morning playing with toys, eating breakfast, napping – Meg and Mike, and getting ready to go to Ken and Vicki’s for the afternoon and evening. Of course, playing with toys could only come after the grown-ups had opened, untied, unscrewed, cut, or blowtorched the thousand pieces of wire and string and plastic that strapped every part of every single toy to its packaging. The highlight for Meg was helping Josie assemble the canopy bed for her new American Girl doll. The highlight for Ashlyn was watching Meg assemble that bed and stepping in to help both redheads with the screws before they stripped them and rendered them useless.

The festivities that afternoon at Ken & Vicki’s were full of fun and family as well. The Scott Kriegers were staying in western New Hampshire again, the small children anchoring them to their
own area much as they did the Ken Kriegers. Both families knew that it was only temporary though. As soon as the littlest kids were a bit bigger they would start travelling to see each other for these holidays again. This was the first year ever that Scott and Ken’s families hadn’t gotten together for Thanksgiving or Christmas. Ken planned to make sure it didn’t happen again. Aunt Becky was annoying but she had softened a bit with the addition of more grandchildren. And they were still family, annoying Aunt Becky or not.

The gift exchange went surprisingly well, especially considering the size of the group and the new visiting members. Jared Kimball and Tanner Wild joined the gathering for each of their first holiday appearances that year. Tanner had to fly out later that evening for an away game so he couldn’t stay too long, but Vicki was ecstatic to have him home and spent as much time with him as humanly possible. Iris Kimball felt similarly about having Jared there but had the luxury of having him stay over that night so the sense of urgency wasn’t as strong as it was with Vicki and Tanner. Even though Nathan was the son who lived in NYC, Iris and Bill Kimball felt like they saw him more than they did Jared who lived right in Boston. Everybody was happy to be together and even Edgar and Cristina were at their most relaxed ever. Edgar, who would be turning 7 in January, and Cristina, turning 5 in early February, looked and acted completely comfortable for the first time that year. Edgar had gotten over his fear of the young moms after only a few months. Cristina’s struggle had been harder and had taken her longer to deal with but she was now able to sit with all of the young moms in that group quite calmly. She still didn’t like to be touched, unless she initiated the contact, but as long as Ali, Sydney and Brianna kept that in mind there was really nothing to worry about when it came to the recovering little girl. Obviously, running and yelling at her or near her would still set her off, but the result wouldn’t be nearly as catastrophic as it had been back at Easter. Cristina had made her peace with Ashlyn first, a direct result of the nail painting bonding experience in July. The keeper had been the first young mom in the group that either Guerrero child embraced, truly. When they greeted each other now, Ashlyn picked them both up and swung them around just as she would any other child in her life. Everybody knew the rest would come in time and they were willing to be patient.

“Thank you so much Meg” Iris beamed at the girl she had heard so much about and seen so little of over the past few years. “I love it” she gushed as she held the 5 x 7” picture frame with the photo of she and Edgar and Cristina in it to her chest.

“You’re welcome” the teenager blushed at the high praise and looked gratefully at Ashlyn for her help with the gift idea and the picture.

The most exciting present of all had been saved for last. After everyone else had opened their gifts, including the grandchildren, and several adults were helping free new toys and games from their boxes, Nathan disappeared for several minutes while Kyle hung out with Edgar and Cristina in the living room with everybody else. Ken & Koty quietly gathered all of the dogs and put them in the garage. Ali exchanged an excited look with her brother and tried her best not to give anything away. She had done such a good job keeping the secret so far that she had only let Ashlyn in on it a few weeks ago.

“Hey, Ed and Cris” Nathan called from the kitchen, sticking his head into the large open space between it and the living room so they could see him. “Can you come help me with this one last present? It’s pretty big and I can’t carry it by myself.”

Both kids looked at Kyle who nodded towards his husband with a poorly-disguised grin on his face, then went to the kitchen to help their other dad. When they got there they saw a big square box, wrapped up like all the other presents had been. As they bent over it to get ready to help Nathan, the box moved, just a tiny bit, but both kids stood up straight and took a half step backwards in fear. Nathan chuckled and looked at Kyle who was just walking in to join them.
“Seems like your last present wants to be opened right here, right now” Kyle grinned again. “Don’t be afraid, it won’t hurt you, I promise” he knelt down next to the box and put his arm around Cristina’s waist while Nathan did the same on the other side of the box with Edgar. “Let’s do it together.”

The family of four carefully opened the top flaps of the box which hadn’t been sealed at all, just creatively decorated over, to find an adorable 10-week old German shepherd and Australian cattle dog mix puppy. She looked just like a German shepherd except for two areas of coloring. She had a greyish colored face with one eye surrounded by a large black patch of fur, and a grey, black and white spattered tail. Her snout was also a little bit shorter than a purebred German shepherd, but other than that, she was a very good representation of the German shepherd breed.

“It’s a puppy!” Cristina squealed when the dog awkwardly jumped up on the side of the box, trying to get out.

“Is it our puppy?” Edgar asked, seeming to hold back on his excitement until he had more facts.

“It is our puppy” Nathan answered and held the flaps of the box open while Kyle lifted the newest member of the family out of it and set her on the kitchen floor as the rest of the house load of people came in to find out what was going on.

“Oh, she likes you Cris” Kyle giggled as he watched the puppy crawl into the girl’s lap, tumbling a bit over her legs and trying to chew on her fingers. “Oh, don’t let her bite you. Puppies love to chew on things, anything, even your fingers” he gently put his hand around the puppy’s mouth to stop her.

That was all she wrote for the rest of the day. All anybody else wanted to do was play with the puppy and that’s pretty much what happened. After a couple of hours it was time to name the little dog, now that they had gotten to know her a bit better. Kyle, Nathan, Edgar and Cristina all wrote down a different name for the puppy on a small piece of paper and gave them to Ashlyn. The keeper read the names to herself, chuckling a couple of times, and then folded each of them in half. She nodded and Kyle picked up the puppy and carried her into the living room to wait for the signal. Ashlyn stayed in the kitchen and dropped the four pieces of folded paper down in a rough line across the floor in the middle of the kitchen. Each piece of paper was about two feet away from the next one. She moved aside and called out for Kyle to release the puppy while Nathan, Edgar and Cristina called her into the kitchen. They whistled and clapped and coaxed the puppy into the room while most everybody else watched the proceedings with different smiles on their faces. Kyle followed the puppy in, laughing as the young dog practically tripped over her paws and skidded to a halt near the pieces of paper. She sniffed at one and then picked up a different one in her mouth and started to chew on it.

“Oh, whoa, whoa” Ashlyn laughed as she scooped up the puppy and pried the paper out of her mouth. “We need to see that so we can know your name” she kissed the dog on the top of her head and put her back down on the floor, gathering the other three pieces of paper at the same time. “Ok, I am pleased to introduce everyone to the newest member of the Krieger/Kimball clan...Peaches!”

“Yes! She picked my name” Kyle exulted.

“Seriously?” Ali quirked her eyebrow. “You’re the one who wrote down Peaches? I would have guessed that one was Cristina’s.”

“I wanted ‘Dora’” the little girl frowned. “But I like Peaches too” she smiled.

“I wanted ‘Wolverine’ and I think Peaches is stupid” Edgar complained.
“Aw, she looks like a Peaches” Kyle chuckled and ruffled Edgar’s hair affectionately. “Don’t you think?”

“Wait, so I just have to know” Ashlyn spoke up, focusing on Nathan. “What the heck is up with ‘Necky’?” she raised her eyebrows high.

“Oh, ummm, well, it’s silly really” Nathan stammered and blushed a little. “But our initials are N E C and K and I just thought that was cute so I added a Y and wrote it down” he laughed self-consciously.

“That’s so sweet honey” Kyle leaned over and kissed his husband’s cheek. “But we’re keeping Peaches.”

Ali and several other people heard some arguing coming from the corner of the living room but they couldn’t see who it was or hear it well enough to identify the voices. Ashlyn was engrossed in the puppy and didn’t hear anything at all. The brunette looked towards the living room and saw her mother standing closer to the room than she was and looking concerned. She didn’t want to leave all four kids alone trying to get to the puppy but she had a sinking feeling in her stomach and needed to know what was going on so she slipped away, moving behind most of the people standing around the kitchen and stood next to Deb.

“What was that arguing about? Do you know who it is?” Ali asked so only her mother could hear her.

“I heard Dev’s voice but I don’t know what happened” Deb replied, still tuned in closely to what she could hear coming from the living room. “I think, based on who’s in here and who else I can see, that the other person is Jared or maybe Bill.”

Ali scanned the kitchen and the part of the living room closest to it where people had gathered to watch the puppy. Hannah and Meg were right up near the puppy talking to Ken, Vicki, Tanner, Koty and Briana about Bandit and Sweet Paws and Peaches. Sydney and Dom were wrangling their boys and trying to let Edgar and Cristina have some time with their new puppy before being inundated with other puppy-starved kids. Iris was up with Kyle and Nathan laughing about the four different names. As she stood there trying to figure out what to do next, Sandi Leroux walked up to them from the living room with an annoyed look on her face.

“Somebody better tell Dev that this family loves the gays before it’s too late” she shook her head and rolled her eyes dramatically. “He’s in the wrong damned house, that’s for sure.”


“I don’t know, but when I came out of the bathroom Bill was on his way over to find out what Jared and Dev were arguing about...”

Just then, Bill’s voice rang out clear as a bell.

“That’s my son, goddammit. And you’ve got a hell of a lot of nerve...”

Koty, Ken and Hannah’s heads all snapped up when they heard the statement that had been cut off by Dev’s distinctive voice with his Indian accent.

“All I’m saying is that it’s not natural. It’s a shame to see it like this, with the children and everything.”

Ashlyn turned to find her wife’s face on the other side of the room and gave her a pained look. Ali
nodded at the kids and then followed Sandi and Deb into the living room to try and calm things down before all hell broke loose.

“What’s going on Bill?” Deb asked quietly but sternly. She was shocked to see how upset both Jared and Bill looked as they stood in the far corner of the room facing Dev.

“I’m sorry Deb but I can’t take it anymore” Bill replied angrily. “I’ve tried to let things he’s said go but it’s too much” he shook his head and looked at Jared before looking back at Deb. “It’s just too godammed much.”

“Do you know what he said to me?” Jared asked, his voice like steel. Ali moved over to stand between her friend, and colleague and brother-in-law, and the visitor who was apparently as offensive as they had feared. “We were watching the puppy naming from back here and when Kyle kissed Nate’s cheek he told me they would both be killed by their families for bringing them shame back home in India. I told him ‘thank God we don’t live in India’ because I thought that was the point he was trying to make. But no, he believes it. He said he’s never seen anything more disgusting than Nate and Kyle together like that.”

Ali had never seen Jared so furious before and it made her afraid for a second. Whatever Jared said afterwards to Dev must have been what the argument had been that they had heard from inside the kitchen.

“Dev, is everything ok?” Hannah’s voice called out from the large opening between the kitchen and the living room. Ken and Koty were standing right behind her, frowning at the concerned looks they saw on everybody’s faces. “Dev?” she questioned again, taking a few steps closer.

“No. No it’s not” Dev finally spoke, his red face filled with barely controlled rage. “These men are accusing me of...of speaking the truth. Just because they don’t like to hear it doesn’t mean it’s not still the truth” he spit out, his black eyes boring holes in both Bill and Jared.

“Just because you believe some antiquated notion about what constitutes marriage or love doesn’t make it the truth. How dare you come into my family Christmas and say such things about my son” Bill spoke just as bitterly as he looked down on the shorter man. “About both my sons.”

Dev looked at Jared and finally understood why his words about Kyle and Nathan had upset him so much.

“Oh my prayers go out to you” he seemed to be genuinely concerned about Bill’s well-being as he spoke. “It’s bad enough to have one son bring dishonor to your name, but to have two?”

“Why, you son of a bitch” Bill clenched his jaw as he stepped menacingly towards Dev, pulling his right arm back and getting ready to throw a punch.

“Dev, no!” Hannah yelled at her husband’s awful words.

“Bill, wait!” Deb tried to deflate the situation by stepping between the two men, putting her hands on Bill’s chest while Jared also moved to hold him back.

Ken and Koty moved quickly to join the peace-keepers while Ali pushed her mother out of the line of fire and took her place, but facing Dev Karmacharya instead.

“I don’t get it Dev” she squinted at the man and put her hands on her hips. She was only a foot in front of him and her words were hard and short, her tone clipped. “You don’t have a problem with Ashlyn and me so what’s the difference with Kyle and Nate?”
Dev just laughed dismissively at the brunette but backed up a little bit to get farther away from her.

“No, really. I’d like to understand how you can let Meg come and live with us every summer but you can’t stand to see Kyle kiss Nate on the cheek. How does that work?”

“Ali, don’t...” Hannah’s voice was much closer now and sounded afraid of what might come out of her husband’s mouth next.

“No, Hannah, he doesn’t get to come here and spew his filth all over my family” the brunette snapped, never taking her eyes off of the despicable man in front of her. “So tell me Dev. Why is ok for Ashlyn and me to be together but not Kyle and Nate?”

“Because you’re silly women who don’t know any better and as soon as a real man comes along to show you the error of your ways you’ll go back to the natural, normal way of things” he finally answered in a rush of frustrated words that he thought everybody already understood. He spoke to Ali almost as if he was speaking to a child who barely had the ability to comprehend his words.

“Gabroo...” Hannah almost whimpered, horrified by what she had just heard.

“Are you nuts?” Koty asked as he reached forward and pushed Dev hard in the chest, knocking him back another step.

“Koty, don’t” Ken cautioned.

“He is nuts” Ali shook her head in disbelief. “That’s really what you think? Just because Hannah stopped sleeping with women to marry you doesn’t mean that’s how it works for all of us.” Ali’s words dripped with condescension. “What a complete pig you are.”

“Alright, I think it’s time for you to leave Dev” Ken nodded at the guest in his home. “I’m sorry Hannah” he looked sadly at the redhead who was fighting tears as she stood just outside the group. She was hugging herself and staring at her husband who felt more like a stranger than anything.

“It will be my pleasure to leave this house full of so much shame and these families with so much dishonor on them” Dev gave them all a haughty, judgmental look as he spoke to his wife next.

“Get our coats, we’re leaving.”

“Mom?” Meg’s voice sounded from the other side of the living room, near the kitchen.

Hannah closed her eyes as tears slipped down her cheeks and for the first time in eleven years Ali actually, genuinely felt sorry for her.

“It’s ok Meg” Hannah managed to say over her shoulder as she moved towards the den where everybody’s coats had been placed. She was thankful she could keep her back to Meg and not have to face her yet. Hannah wanted to get her tears under control and be strong for her daughter.

Dev turned around to gather up his iPhone and glasses and finish the drink he had been enjoying, and when Hannah walked back into the room two minutes later he spoke again, his voice still harsh.

“Get your things Meg, we’re leaving.”

“Don’t talk to my daughter” Hannah’s words cut through the room like ice as she handed him his coat with a determined look on her face. “We’re staying here with the gays and the lesbians and the other decent people who’ve always been so kind and welcoming to us for all these years. You and I
can talk later tonight when I get back to the hotel.”

It was fascinating to watch Dev’s face twist and contort as he tried to process what was happening. He looked over at Meg and noticed that Ashlyn had come to stand next to her, wrapping her arm protectively around the teenager’s shoulders. Ali swore she saw his eye twitch at the sight. Then he looked his wife in the face with such love and tenderness and hurt that the brunette thought he might cry and beg her for forgiveness right there on the spot. But with frightening speed his face changed back to the enraged visage Ali had seen the whole time she had been standing in the living room. He squinted and set his lips into a thin hard line, his chest heaving as he angrily shoved his arms into his coat. Everybody thought he would get some last words in and make a grand exit, but all he did was huff and puff and mumble to himself as Ken walked him to the front door and closed it behind him.

There was a stillness in the room that lasted for almost a full minute as everyone tried to calm down and remember what they were all gathered together for in the first place. Hannah sniffled a couple of times before turning around to face her daughter with a brave smile. She was relieved to see the teen return it.

“I’m so sorry Bill” she turned and apologized to the man she barely knew. “I apologize to you Jared. And to everybody really” she laughed nervously as everyone in the room stared at her, waiting for some explanation. She was trembling a little bit as she tried to think of what to say and only settled down when Ali reached over and took her hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. “I had no idea...I mean, he never said anything like that to me, or in front of me” she looked at Meg again for some back-up.

“I never heard him say anything like that either” she offered, her eyes wide as Ashlyn squeezed her shoulders again.

“I just can’t believe it...I mean I’m not doubting anything you said” she turned quickly to Jared again. “He has never said anything like that, not ever.”

“Well, it seems he talks differently to his wife than he does to the rest of us” Ken tried to help explain. “He’s been saying things like that, although not that blatantly horrible” he nodded at Jared and Bill, “since he got here but only the lucky few got to hear it apparently.”

“Yeah” Koty added. “Straight guys.”

“Hannah, you and Meg are welcome here anytime” Ken smiled warmly at the tall redhead, taking a cue from the fact that his daughter was holding her hand to try and comfort her. “And I don’t know about anybody else, but I’m starving. Should we get to eating dinner?”

And that was the end of the public conversation about Dev Karmacharya that night. Nobody else spoke of it again while they were at Ken & Vicki’s house. Instead, they got back to celebrating Christmas with love and laughter and songs and food and a brand new puppy. By the time Ashlyn, Meg and Mike Christopher dropped Hannah off at the Beauport Hotel later that night, Dev was long gone. The only way anybody let Hannah go up to their hotel room alone to face Dev was with the understanding that she would call Ashlyn when she got into the room and then again every fifteen minutes until she was sure she wasn’t in any danger.

“He’s not here Ash...he’s...he’s gone” the redhead stammered over the phone the first time she called. “All of his things are gone too, but he didn’t check us out yet, thank God” she exhaled, imagining in horror what he might have done with all of her things if he had checked out in a fit of rage or spite.
“Get what you need and come stay with us tonight” Ashlyn’s voice was strong and steady. “You’ll feel safer and you won’t be alone.”

The keeper and Hannah had been unsure of how much of this drama to expose Meg to, but they both knew she was going to find out about it somehow. She hadn’t heard everything that Dev had said in Ken’s living room that afternoon, but she got the drift. So they decided to be honest with her about it and let her see what was happening as much as possible, within reason of course. That’s why she was with Mike and Ashlyn – she wanted to be there for her mom. Everybody could see that Hannah had been telling the truth at Ken & Vicki’s house. She had no idea how horrible and bigoted Dev’s true opinions were. The woman had just been blindsided by the man she had been married to for seven years. Even Ali’s staunchest allies from the old battle to get Ashlyn away from cruel, bitchy, greedy Hannah found themselves feeling sorry for the redhead that night.

Hannah had agreed to stay at the big old house that night, mostly because it seemed really important to Meg and the mother was still trying to salvage her daughter’s long sought-after Christmas in New England. Hannah wasn’t afraid of Dev and didn’t believe he would ever hurt her. He had never been anything but sweet and kind and caring towards her. He had never said anything cruel to her or raised so much as a finger against her. She was suffering from shock more than anything, but anger was slowly starting to creep in as she settled into bed with her daughter that night.

“Wow, I did not see that coming” Ashlyn exhaled as she curled into her wife’s body, both of them laying on their sides and facing one another.

“I did, but not until it was much too late” Ali pulled her keeper as close to her body as possible and slid her knee between her long legs. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but poor Hannah.”

“I know” Ashlyn shook her head in disbelief as she hugged the brunette closely into her body, their foreheads resting against each other. “Meg seems ok though, right? I mean, it’s a fucking shock and she swears she never ever heard him say anything like that crap...”

“She does seem ok” Ali caressed Ashlyn’s cheek with the back of her fingers and then absent-mindedly played with the hair at the back of her neck. “I think we should just try and make tomorrow as fun and normal as possible. Hannah’s going to have to deal with her own marriage mess, but Meg should still be enjoying herself. It’s not like she loved Dev. And I think she knew he didn’t really love her. I mean, he loved her enough to take care of her but he didn’t really know the first thing about her.”

“You’re right. Meg’s upset for her mom but I don’t think she’ll miss Dev for a minute. Good fucking riddance. What a piece of shit...”

“Shhhhh...don’t get yourself all riled up again babe” the brunette cooed, not wanting to spend another hour as she just had - trying to get the keeper relaxed enough to get into bed. “He’s so not worth it.”

“I know” the blonde sighed, exhaustion starting to take over her mind now as well as her body. It had been a very long and exciting day, complete with Lily having a complete and total meltdown when it was time to leave Ken’s house without the new puppy. “I’m glad Dom told us about his uncle. It’s nice to know we’re not the only people who got duped by an asshole racist, misogynistic homophobe hiding in plain sight in our family.”

“Dev was never part of our family honey. He was just baggage that came from loving Meg” Ali corrected with a soft kiss to her keeper’s warm lips. They were quiet for a minute as their bodies began to wind down and get ready to sleep. “What do you think Hannah will do?” the brunette
asked quietly, not wanting to prolong the conversation when sleep was so close, but not being able to keep her curiosity at bay.

“I think she’ll leave him” Ashlyn sighed again. “I know she’s in love with his money” she chuckled, “so it’ll be hard for her, but I don’t think she’ll go back to him. I can’t imagine anything he could say that would convince her to take him back.”

“Not even, ‘you live in that half of the house and I’ll live in this half and we’ll go to my business social events and keep a steady married appearance up and you can keep spending my money’?” Ali giggled.

“Don’t even joke” Ashlyn giggled with her and rolled her eyes. “I don’t think even Hannah could live with that. Not with Meg in the house too. Besides, she should make out like a bandit in the divorce.”

“God, I hope so. Can you imagine her moving back to that old apartment? I just don’t see that happening, ever” the brunette’s face frowned. “She got what she always wanted in her heart of hearts – a sugar daddy” she paused and got both arms under the covers and situated around her wife’s warm body. “Now she’ll finally have to pay the price.”

Saturday, the day after Christmas, was one that most of the Krieger family had been looking forward to for two months. As soon as Deb had heard that Meg wanted to go to the Nutcracker she had jumped into action, only slowing down to ask her daughter if she thought it would be ok to proceed.

“Are you kidding mom?” Ali squealed as she spoke to her mother over the phone back in late October. “I think that’s the best plan ever! I’ve been trying to find the right time and I think the twins are still too little but I know Josie will love it and Drew probably will too.”

“So I can do it? You don’t mind me tagging along?”

“Mom, don’t make me yell this at you again” the brunette warned but couldn’t hide the love in her voice. “I want you, no, we want you to spend as much time as you can with the kids, always. You’re always invited and welcome. You know that...”

“Alright, so the 26th, right?” Deb clarified one last time. “11 adults and 6 kids tickets for the Saturday matinee, coming up.”

The show started at 1:30pm and all of the blogs that Ali and Deb had read about bringing small children to the Boston Ballet production of The Nutcracker said not to get there too early. The kids would be too excited to wait for the doors to open and the lobby would become a holding cell full of impatient kids. Ali and Deb arranged for two big passenger vans to take them into the city and to a kid-friendly restaurant near the Boston Opera House for lunch before the show. The twins would already be missing their afternoon naps as it was, and there would be pandemonium if they didn’t get a good lunch in them to start. Dodge and Lily were 3-1/2 years old and would be giving up their naps soon anyway so it wasn’t a huge deal. But they both still took at least an hour-long nap every day after lunch and probably would for another month or two.

When Deb had first started to plan her dream come true of bringing all of her grandkids to The Nutcracker, she reached out to Ken and Vicki to see if they wanted to participate as well. Ken had never been a big fan, which is why Deb and Ali had gone by themselves when the brunette was growing up, but this was going to be a special event and Deb wanted to make sure. She already
knew that Kyle and Nathan both wanted to come and Hannah and Dev had signed on as well. Mike Christopher had even said yes when his wife floated her idea past him back in October. Similarly, Ken and Vicki jumped at the chance to participate in the big day that was sure to be memorable for everybody. There were lots of adults to help with the kids if necessary and Deb knew that if Dodge or Lily couldn’t sit through either of the two acts of the ballet that somebody would be more than happy to bring them to the lobby for a little break. Mike and Ken jumping to the top of the list in her mind. Having Meg there as well was the cherry on top of the sundae that Deb didn’t even know she needed.

“I’m so glad you’re here with us this year sweetheart” Deb smiled as she met Meg in a hug at the foot of the front stairs. “And the fact that you’re here for my dream date with my grandkids is just too perfect. This day wouldn’t be half as special without you” she pulled back and smiled again at Meg. “I can’t believe all of my grandkids are going to The Nutcracker with me today!” she laughed gleefully, throwing her head back as they both started to move through the front living room towards the mudroom where everybody else was assembling.

There was an extra ticket and an empty seat because Dev, of course, wasn’t with them. Hannah smiled bravely at everybody but you could still see the shell-shocked look in her eyes. Deb felt awful that she hadn’t included the Dwyers or the Kimballs in the outing, but she had to draw the line somewhere. That morning Deb, Ali and Ashlyn tried to think who might like to join them and use the extra ticket.

“Can I ask Whit?” Ashlyn asked carefully. She didn’t want to overstep and ruin Deb’s dream day. She knew they would probably rather have Sydney take Dev’s spot but bringing her best friend to see The Nutcracker sounded like an awesome idea to the keeper. “She’s never been...”

Deb was flabbergasted that Ali and Ashlyn had never taken Whitney with them before. The decision couldn’t have been simpler for them. But it was up to Whitney really. Her parents were staying with them and her brother and his wife as well. She wouldn’t be allowed to bring Becca because the age limit for kids was 2 years old. That might be a deal breaker right there. Or a deal maker?

“If you want to come I promise we won’t make you help with the kids. You already did that for us at the MHI ball” Ashlyn laughed into the phone early that Saturday morning. “But we’ll be picking you up at 11am sharp if you...”

“Yes! I’ve always wondered what all the fuss was about” the lawyer chuckled through a big smile. “Let me just check with Ryan and I’ll call you right back.”

Bringing your children to The Nutcracker was a big tradition in Boston and both the Boston Opera House and the Boston Ballet understood that. They performed their weekend matinees with those children, those future ticket purchasers, in mind and catered to them as much as possible. There were kid-friendly snacks for sale at the concession stands in the beautiful, ornate lobby. It was kind of surreal to be standing there in your dressy clothes watching kids drink apple juice from juiceboxes. There were booster seats at the back of the theater that you could use if your child wasn’t big enough or heavy enough to hold their own theater seat in the down position. They also needed them to sit up high enough to see over whomever was sitting in front of them. During intermission some of the characters from the ballet, like the bear and the bunny among several others, were in the lobby to interact with the kids and take pictures or sign autographs or just say hi and thank you for coming. And on the way out after the show, every child received their very own Nutcracker crown that they could wear for the rest of their excursion. They were the clear plastic kind that had been printed with the name of the ballet and some Christmas ornaments and decorations. The whole show, including the 20-minute intermission, took just under 2 hours and
was pretty manageable for most of the kids, and adults. There were some bathroom runs at intermission but, for the most part, all of the kids were spellbound by seeing their first live ballet performance. It was new and exciting and their faces reflected that in spades.

Edgar and Drew were the least excited about the whole thing, largely because they were boys and thought the ballet was just for girls. Ali was so grateful that her father and Mike had joined them so the boys could see grown-up straight men having a good time at the ballet too. But when the show was over Drew and Edgar had the most fun running around and acting out the sword fight between the Nutcracker and the Mouse King. Lily had started to doze off during the second act and that was just fine. Deb pulled the tired girl into her lap and couldn’t have been any happier with the development. Their large group spread out over three rows, choosing to stay compact and deep instead of stretching out into two longer rows. That way Deb could sit in the middle row and be surrounded by her grandkids. She had Dodge to her left and Lily to her right with Josie, Cristina, Edgar and Drew in the row in front of her. They spread out the grown-ups to keep the peace and make sure nobody got too scared during the performance. Ali and Nathan anchored the front row with Ashlyn and Kyle helping Deb in the middle row. Meg sat between Lily and Ashlyn in the second row and was the recipient of several pats and squeezes from the elated Grandmother two seats away. The back row was full of the utility players, ready to jump up or in to help any of the kids with whatever they needed: Ken, Vicki, Mike, Whitney and Hannah. Mike sat directly behind Deb and leaned forward occasionally to make sure his wife was indeed having the time of her life. Hannah did the same thing, sitting directly behind Meg and checking in with her with a warm squeeze of her shoulder. Ashlyn apologized to Whitney later about the seating arrangement because the poor lawyer got stuck in Dev’s seat which was between Mike and Hannah. Ashlyn had offered to switch seats with her bestie but Whitney didn’t want to take the keeper away from Meg. She told the Ashlyn she had the best seat of all because she could watch everything that went on in front of her.

It all turned out fine. Most of the kids were scared of the dark when the lights went out just before the performance began and you could hear at least half of the theater calming and reassuring the small children next to them. Dodge grabbed Kyle’s arm so hard he left a mark right through his uncle’s suit jacket. Cristina did the same thing to Nathan’s arm in the first row and Ashlyn had to lean forward and soothe Drew, as quietly as possible so he didn’t look like such a baby to Edgar who was 8 months younger than him but so much braver already. Josie was the only kid who didn’t flinch when the darkness fell so quickly. Sitting between Ali and Cristina she simply leaned forward expectantly, knowing the best part was about to come. Ali reached over and rubbed her daughter’s back, full of pride and wonder at the intrepid little girl. The brunette had known for about a year that her Josie was going to be the one she shared her love of The Nutcracker with. Ali would share it with all of her children, of course, but she knew the littlest redhead was going to love it maybe even more than she herself did as a little girl. As soon as the kids settled down after the Miniature Overture opening and the Christmas Tree scene began, Ali turned to look one row back and six seats over. She smiled as her eyes passed over the euphoric look on her mother’s face as she held hands with Dodge and Lily on either side of her. She loved the sight of Meg, all dressed up and looking so grown-up but somehow at the intrepid little girl. The brunette had known for years that her Josie was going to be the one she shared her love of The Nutcracker with. Ali would share it with all of her children, of course, but she knew the littlest redhead was going to love it even more than she herself did as a little girl. As soon as the kids settled down after the Miniature Overture opening and the Christmas Tree scene began, Ali turned to look one row back and six seats over. She smiled as her eyes passed over the euphoric look on her mother’s face as she held hands with Dodge and Lily on either side of her. She loved the sight of Meg, all dressed up and looking so grown-up but somehow with a child-like look on her face as she watched the magic unfolding onstage. But her heart tugged when she finally got to the face she most wanted to see. She had been to The Nutcracker many times over the years, but not nearly so often now that they had four small children, and she had never sat so far away from her beloved keeper. Ashlyn had always either been right by her side, or just behind her, close enough to feel her presence and hear her laughter. This afternoon the two women sat at opposite ends of their large group and spent more time answering questions from their kids than they did actually watching the performance. It felt different. Ali missed having Ashlyn close to her, a lot more than she thought possible. But having Josie by her side and Dodge close enough so she could reach behind and hold his little leg, filled the void she felt. Kyle sat directly behind her and leaned forward to whisper in her ear.
“Is this the best ever or what?”

She smiled back at him and nodded in agreement. The only thing that could possibly have made it any better would be to have Ashlyn holding her hand from the seat next to her but, as with so many things in their relationship that they had to put on the back burner while they raised their young family, things were different now. Now, with their children scattered in the seats between them, they had to be satisfied with a loving look and the promise of a kiss or an embrace at a later time, communicated wordlessly through a wink or the soft blinking of swirling cinnamon eyes. It may have been Deb’s dream come true, but it was a magical afternoon for Ali and Ashlyn as well.
Bucket Lists

Chapter Notes

Smut warning in the middle.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After the drama of Christmas, Ali and Ashlyn were happy to take their kids down to sunny Satellite Beach for the week before New Year’s. They took a couple of days to recover and see Hannah and Meg off, as well as the NYC Kriegers with their new puppy, and then they got on a plane on Tuesday the 29th with plans to return on Sunday, January 2nd. They celebrated and relaxed with the Harris crew, marveling again at how big all the kids were getting. They spent one day at Disney World and the rest at either Chris & Beth’s house or Tammye & Carol’s beach house. Even the kids seemed happy to just sit still and be for a few days.

The NWSL draft was in Orlando that year as well, so Ashlyn and the twins returned for a long weekend in the middle of the month, leaving Ali, Drew and Josie working and going to school up in the cold and snow. This one had been too easy though. Nobody had to do anything extra to make it happen. Ashlyn and the twins stayed with family and the keeper drove to Orlando for the Friday afternoon and evening event. It was a big deal because the league was introducing the two newest teams to the rest of the world: the Dallas Blue Monarchs and the Utah Royals. The league now had 20 teams and was splitting up into two divisions with 10 teams in the Western division and 10 teams in the Eastern division. It was the 15th year of the league and it had finally reached one of its biggest milestones yet. Everybody was happy and excited and looking forward to the growing and blossoming fandom as well.

February started as a nice, quiet month. Ali and Ashlyn took the kids down to Florida for February vacation week, leaving them with the grandparents brigade while they spent some time alone celebrating their 11th February anniversary. They weren’t planning anything big or even on going too far away. Just far enough to be away and alone for four days in the middle of the week. On Tuesday morning, Ali let Ashlyn rent the coolest new Jeep model that wasn’t suitable for people with children, and Ashlyn surprised her wife by driving her down to Lakeland, Florida to visit Florida Southern College on the shores of Lake Hollingsworth.

“What are we doing here?” the brunette asked as they pulled into the parking lot of the college and began to walk across the street to a small gift shop building. It was just after 10am and they had been on their way to St. Petersburg on the West Coast of Florida, the brunette thought, but they were 2 hours into their 3-hour drive and stopping at some random college campus. “There was a bathroom at the next rest stop babe...” she added, trying to be helpful.

The truth was, Ali Krieger didn’t really care where they were going or why they had stopped here. All she wanted was to be with her wife. That was her only pre-requisite for their four days together. When Ashlyn had asked her if she would rather fly the 170 miles from Melbourne Beach to St. Petersburg the brunette had told her that a road trip with just the two of them sounded really good to her. Ali was pretty sure she would always feel that way about her beautiful wife. Ashlyn was her favorite person in the world. She was Ali’s favorite way to spend time.

“So, we’re not really going to St. Pete’s, not until later anyway” the keeper began to walk
backwards, holding her wife’s hand in between them and meeting her confused but smiling gaze. “But after I show you what I have planned, if you want to, we can still go now instead.”

“Ashlyn” Ali whined adorably and looked up at the blonde through her lashes.

“Let’s check it out, then you can decide” the keeper grinned and pulled her wife to her so they could walk the last 10 yards to the gift shop building arm in arm.

Frank Lloyd Wright was a genius architect and designer but a questionable businessman. Some people, back in his day, even called him a conman. When he was inspired and working on a project he would do anything to see it completed – which led to some times in his life where he was out of work and out of money. During one of those times, he took a commission to design the buildings for a small private college in Florida. Eventually, that college, and those buildings, became Florida Southern College.

Ali’s mouth dropped open when she stopped to read the plaque on the outside of the gift shop building before they stepped inside the door.

‘In 2012 the Florida Southern College Historic District was designated a National Historic Landmark by the National Park Service of the U.S. Department of the Interior for being the largest single-site collection of Frank Lloyd Wright architecture in the world.’

“Are you kidding me?” she turned to look at her grinning wife with her dimple on full display.

“I signed us up for the Behind the Scenes tour at 1pm. It’s 3-1/2 hours long so I thought we’d better eat lunch first” she tried to explain as her beautiful brunette flung herself into her arms.

“Oh Ashlyn I love you so much. Is this really what we’re doing today?”

“It sure is baby” the keeper chuckled as they continued to hug, stopping only when another couple tried to enter the gift shop door that they were blocking. “Sorry” Ashlyn nodded at the older couple who were clearly tourists with their comfortable walking shoes, fanny packs and sun hats.

“Oh that’s alright honey” the woman drawled in a southern accent. “It’s nice to see we’re not the only ones excited about the tour” she laughed as her husband held the door open for her. “See you in there” she winked.

Ashlyn took a minute and pulled Ali off to the side to explain all the different tour options, each one a different cost and a different length and different level of access to the buildings on campus. The keeper had selected the most in-depth one available and Ali nodded eagerly in understanding.

“It’s perfect. We can go check in and look around the gift shop for a bit and then eat lunch and be back for the 1pm start. Absolutely perfect, just like you” she praised her thoughtful keeper again and gave her a slow kiss. “Thank you so much sweetheart.”

“So you like the idea of looking at Frank’s work huh?” she smirked. “Do you think my little surprise might be a good thank you for being so sweet to Meg and Hannah at Christmastime? Maybe?” she swung their arms between them as she held her wife’s hands and grinned.

“Maybe...” Ali milked it.

“Ok, well how about if I tell you that Thursday, after our day in St. Pete’s tomorrow, we’re driving up to Tallahassee to his Spring House too?” her eyes danced as she watched Ali’s face twist into more shock.
“Oh my God” her jaw dropped again. “That would be amazing! Really?”

“Yes, really” Ashlyn cocked her head to the side and grinned like an idiot. “I promised you some Frank Lloyd Wright houses, and technically, there aren’t any of those here” she cleared her throat and made an eek face. “Well, except for the one Uso...Usa...” she struggled with the name of the only house Wright had designed for the campus, pulling the paper with the details out of her pocket to check. “Usonian house.”

“There’s a Usonian house here? Wow, that’s incredible. Most of those are out in the Midwest or on the west coast. But that house we saw up in Manchester, NH?” she looked questioningly at the keeper, getting a nod of recognition before continuing, “that was a Usonian house too.”

“Huh” Ashlyn nodded. “I just thought that was the name of that particular house.”

“No, he had this idea that everybody in America should be able to afford and live in one of his designs. So he came up with these small, simplistic houses that he hoped would be built into, like, subdivisions or communities so there would be 40 or 50 of them at a time.”

“No too much of an ego eh?” Ashlyn chuckled and Ali joined her.

“No, the man did not lack in self-confidence, that’s for sure” she agreed as she turned over the paper with information in her hand. “See, the Usonian house he designed here, for the college, was supposed to be one of twenty faculty houses” the brunette pointed at the paper. “They ran out of money so they were never built...”

“But it says they have one here...” the keeper frowned as she tried to follow along.

“Ah, the college built it themselves back in 2013 using his design and all of his specifications for materials and everything. How cool is that?” Ali enthused.

“That would be pretty cool to use his blueprints and build it the way he would have built it back in the 1930s” Ashlyn agreed. “So are there a lot of these Usonian houses around? How far did he get with his master plan to mass populate the country with them?” she laughed.

“Yeah, that would have been tragic” Ali rolled her eyes. “Everybody would have been forced to live in beautiful houses that sat harmoniously within the nature around them and that had been built with local materials...”

“I’m just kidding Al” the keeper interrupted her wife’s rant before it got too ramped up. “I wish more people thought about what the common man needed or wanted instead of just what all the rich people demanded.”

“Sorry” Ali exhaled. “I know you get it. And I’m not sure how many of the Usonian houses still exist...maybe 60 or 70?”

They continued their discussion as they wandered around the gift shop, entering just in time to see the 10:30am tour participants start walking down the block towards the very Usonian house they had just been talking about. Ali bought a few things, a magnet, a postcard to add to her collection of FLW design postcards, a set of coasters and even a set of cufflinks and a tie-pin that she thought her wife would like. She hid those while Ashlyn was doing something very similar on the other side of the shop, except with earrings for her brunette.

The tour was incredible and there were only three couples on it, which made it much easier for the tour guide to answer their specific questions. Ali had never even included these buildings on her list of FLW houses to see because they weren’t houses, which is what she had chosen to focus on.
He designed office buildings, corporate headquarters, banks, churches, and all kinds of commercial building in all phases of his career. All of the elements he was famous for were easy to see everywhere you looked on the sprawling campus. He had designed and built 12 different buildings for the college, as well as the spectacular Water Dome at the center of it all. That Water Dome had been restored back in 2007 and finally brought to life the way the genius had seen it in his mind back in 1939. The water pumps back then were significantly less powerful than Wright’s imagination so his vision had never been fulfilled. They had cut their losses and divided the enormous fountain into three smaller pools instead. But Ali held her breath when she saw the Water Dome in action, just as Wright had always planned. There were 74 high-pressure jets that created a graceful 45-foot high dome of illuminated droplets above a basin that was 160 feet in diameter. It was an incredible sight. SFU also was the location of the only planetarium Wright ever designed. Ashlyn, who enjoyed architecture more than most, but not quite as much as her wife did, was fascinated by all of the walkways and esplanades that connected the buildings. They were cantilevered and always included shrubs and plants to keep it from looking like one gigantic slab of concrete. It was amazing to stand there and think about one man envisioning most of what they could see in front of them, from the grandest element down to the most basic piece of furniture, like the wooden pews in one of the two chapels he designed for the school.

The tour ended at 4:30 and they spent about an hour inside the Usonian house before getting back in their rented Jeep and finishing their drive West to St. Petersburg. They arrived just after sunset, having watched the whole horizon light up in front of them as they reached their destination. It was a wonderful end to their afternoon full of architecture and artistry and other aesthetically beautiful things from the mind of a genius. They checked into their hotel, freshened up and went out for a nice romantic dinner to celebrate being together and being alone. They skipped dessert and went back to their hotel room to enjoy each other instead, wasting no time stripping and devouring one another. When they fell back into the bed, exhausted and sated, they both felt like they had made the very most of their first day together.

Day two was spent exploring St. Petersburg. Ashlyn had been visiting the picturesque beach city for years and couldn’t believe Ali hadn’t been there before. Anytime she and her friends wanted to enjoy the warmer waters of the Gulf Coast they trekked to St. Pete. There were a million different things to do and Ali and Ashlyn had trouble deciding at first. They slept in and then visited the Salvadore Dali museum before stuffing their faces at the huge Locale Market which was one of those enormous indoor food markets with restaurants inside as well. After lunch they took a glass-blowing class at the Morean Arts Center and then spent a couple of hours at the Sunken Gardens, stretching their legs as they wandered through the lush botanical gardens. Ali thought it was adorable how much more interested Ashlyn was in the gardens now that she had tried her hand at her own vegetable garden last year. They had both always enjoyed spending time in those peaceful and beautiful spaces but the keeper paid a lot more attention these days. By the time they returned to their hotel they were wiped out but happily so.

“T’I’m sorry we didn’t golf today baby” Ashlyn apologized as she took a sip of her whiskey and then set it back on the edge of the huge soaking tub. “Or go to the beach.”

The first two things Ali had said she wanted to do with Ashlyn during their 4 days in Florida were to go golfing and to go to the beach. The golfing made sense because they couldn’t do it in February at home and the brunette was determined to get Ashlyn’s game in shape so they could both participate in Mia Hamm’s charity golf tournament that September. They had seven months left to go and lots of work to do. Ali hadn’t golfed in a long time either and was rusty. She could have used the 18 holes just as much as Ashlyn. And as for the beach, well, Ali was dying to go to a grown-up beach with her grown up wife and just relax together. She couldn’t remember the last time she had gone to a beach and not had to cater to the whims of at least two or three children. And it was stressful bringing your kids to the beach because there was a constant terrifying thought
of some rogue wave crashing the beach and pulling your kid out to sea. Being at the beach with her kids was still fun for the brunette, but it was also nerve-wracking and downright aggravating at times.

“That’s ok honey” Ali smiled from the other side of the tub, stretching her leg out and putting it in her wife’s lap, hoping for a little foot rub. “We still have time. Besides, there were so many fun things to do today, I swear, every time we turned a corner there were four more things I wanted to check out. I had a great day” she moaned as Ashlyn took the hint and began rubbing her aching foot. “I loved our day.”

“I did too. I must have been here a hundred times and I never knew there was a Dali museum here that has the biggest collection of his work outside of Europe. I mean, who knew?” the keeper chuckled and bent over to kiss the top of Ali’s big toe.

“Yeah, that didn’t come up while you and Liz were cruising the bars and getting shitfaced with other hot girls...” Ali teased with a smirk.

“And boys. Liz never made the jump, no matter how hard I tried to convince her” Ashlyn laughed.

“Did you have a crush on your high school bestie?” Ali raised both eyebrows and reached for her glass of wine.

“What? No, that’s not what I meant” the blonde shook her head and motioned for Ali to bring over her other foot. “Liz always liked guys and even though I tried to tell her how much better it was being with a woman, she wouldn’t budge.”

“Just kept going out with that idiot” Ali rolled her eyes, referring to Liz’s long-time on-again off-again boyfriend she had started dating in high school.

“I tried!” Ashlyn closed her eyes and groaned in frustration. “Sometimes straight girls are just always going to be straight girls.”

“You looked really hot today in that glass-blowing class” Ali flirted, shamelessly, rubbing her now free foot against the outside of her wife’s thigh.

“Well, there were ten ovens in there and we were working with liquid glass so yeah, it was hot in there” Ashlyn pretended not to get the brunette’s meaning.

“No” Ali giggled. “You looked hot, sexy...”

“Oh, so you like the whole safety glasses and smock look do you?” Ashlyn smirked playfully and ran a finger up the length of her wife’s foot, making her squeal.

“Don’t!” Ali tried to pull her foot away but the keeper held it firmly. “Don’t tickle me” the brunette pouted and then chuckled, low in her throat. “At least not there anyway” she purred as she ran her other foot against Ashlyn’s thigh again, this time making it all the way to the curve of her ass.

“So I can tickle you someplace else huh?” she grinned and moved her hands to rub the brunette’s strong calf. “Anyplace I want?”

“No” Ali quirked her eyebrow and scooted closer to her wife, finishing her wine and putting the empty glass back on the edge of the tub. “Anyplace I want.”

“So, where might that be, I wonder?” Ashlyn scooted to her side a bit so she was in the middle of
the tub as the brunette kept getting closer. She got tired of waiting and pulled Ali into her by her leg, making the brunette squeal again and splash as she tried to keep her balance. “Hey now, no water in the whiskey, thank you.”

“Well don’t try and drown me then” Ali laughed until Ashlyn got her hands on her thighs and pulled her up onto her lap so the brunette was straddling her. “Oh, hi there” Ali smirked and wrapped her arms around her keeper’s neck as they stared into each other’s dancing eyes.

“Hello yourself beautiful” the blonde leaned in and gave her wife’s soft lips a sweet kiss while she moved her hands up to the top of Ali’s thighs.

The plan had been to come back to the hotel and get cleaned up so they could go out for dinner and maybe some dancing afterwards. But they weren’t in their 20s anymore, or even their 30s. Neither of them wanted to be the one to admit that they were tired and didn’t really feel like going out that night. Ashlyn would muster up the energy if that’s what Ali wanted to do and vice versa. But as soon as the brunette heard the tub filling with water she rejoiced, knowing with a fair amount of certainty that one thing would lead to another and they would end up ordering room service and having sex again all evening. Ashlyn’s plan had worked brilliantly and the keeper patted herself on the back when her wife had walked past her, completely naked, and stepped into the half-full tub. She couldn’t remember the last time they had shared the tub at home and that made her promise herself that she would try harder to make sure they had special time together at the big old house, even when the kids were around.

“Mmmmmm...this is so nice” Ali closed her eyes and let her head rest against Ashlyn’s forehead, enjoying her keeper’s hands as they moved across her belly and her lower back.

Most of Ali’s body was up out of the water in her position on Ashlyn’s lap and that made her skin erupt in goosebumps as it reacted to the cooler air. The keeper could only resist the dark, perky nipples for so long before she leaned over and took one in her warm mouth. She felt a tug in her core when she heard Ali suck in a breath at the contact. They were both hungry and the shared tub was only supposed to be relaxing and romantic so they could eat dinner shortly thereafter – even if it was room service. But Ali was naked and gorgeous and Ashlyn was only human.

“Ash...babe...” Ali tried to focus but her wife’s tongue was doing such wonderful things to her nipple. “What about dinner?” she managed to get out before moaning. “Mmmmmm...fuck...”

Ashlyn was impressed by Ali’s will-power and self-control. The brunette hadn’t started grinding on her or grabbing at her or anything yet. She must really be hungry, the keeper thought to herself with amusement that was quickly replaced by lust as she felt her wife’s nipple turn rock hard inside her mouth. She grazed her teeth across it, making Ali hiss and then moan again, and then moved her mouth to her other breast to continue the feast.

“Damn, mmmmmm...fuck that feels good...” the brunette moaned some more and realized they were not going to be eating dinner first when she felt Ashlyn’s long fingers scratching gently at the top of her neatly trimmed curls.

The keeper grinned around the nipple she was sucking on when she finally felt her wife’s body begin to move. Ali grabbed a fistful of short dark hair at the back of Ashlyn’s head and pressed the keeper’s face into her breast, arching her back into it too.

“Mmmmmm...yeah baby...so fucking perfect” Ashlyn mumbled against the stiffening nipple at her lips.

The keeper’s hands kept moving around Ali’s ass and crotch, making the brunette’s heart beat
faster and her breath quicken. She kept the pressure on the back of Ashlyn’s head with one hand and raked her free hand up and down her wife’s strong back, pressing her fingertips deep into the wet and slippery skin. Ali started to feel flushed as she ground down into her keeper’s lap, looking for hard contact and whimpering when she found none.

“Touch me...please...” she begged, the rapid increase in her desire evident in her shaky voice.

Ashlyn teased the brunette with the long fingers of both hands, one grazing her clit from the front and the other barely touching her wet folds from behind, all while her mouth continued sucking and nibbling at her breasts and nipples. Ali groaned in response and, out of frustration at the fleeting, unsatisfying touches, scratched her short nails hard down her wife’s back. Ashlyn sucked in a breath when she felt it and pulled back to look into those whiskey-colored eyes that were getting darker with every passing minute. The hungry, lustful stare she got in return made her breath hitch and her core twitch.

“Jesus, you drive me crazy when you look at me like that” she exhaled and quickly started working her lips and tongue and mouth up Ali’s neck to her ear.

When the brunette closed her eyes and tilted her head up and away, Ashlyn kissed her way across Ali’s jaw, finally bringing their lips together in a hot, feverish kiss that lasted until they both felt their lungs about to burst. As they panted for the same air, mouths and noses only an inch apart while their hands kept exploring and scratching and teasing, Ali somehow managed one last, flirty quip.

“Don’t you have some tickling you should be doing?”

Almost before she finished speaking, the brunette felt her wife’s long fingers moving through her soaked folds and spreading her pussy lips apart. Ashlyn’s own level of desire had increased so rapidly that she could feel the passion pooling between her own legs as she pushed two long fingers into Ali’s hot core with a long moan. The brunette moaned even louder and threw her head back with her mouth open.

“Yes...shit...that’s the spot” she gasped. “Please babe, fuck me.”

The keeper kept her left hand firmly on Ali’s round and sexy ass, groping and squeezing first one cheek and then the next. But her right hand was the one that had every bit of her wife’s attention at the moment. Ashlyn started pumping her fingers into the brunette’s tight, eager pussy as Ali sat atop her hips. She put her mouth back to work against the brunette’s skin, no longer cool out of the warm water, dragging her lips and tongue down the other side of her neck and across her collar bone to her shoulder. She kept pumping, harder and faster while Ali’s body began to bounce along with her, head still back and low moans still escaping her throat.

“So beautiful...so incredible...” Ashlyn mumbled against her wife’s chest, her lips travelling down to the dark and stiff nipples again.

Ali gasped loudly when she felt her keeper’s teeth on her nipple, snapping her head upright and trying to focus through the waves of pleasure that were travelling through her body. All she could see were flashes of hazel and then brown hair covered by a top layer of blonde as Ashlyn dipped her head back down to move to her other nipple.

“Oh yeah...unnnnhhhhh...mmmmmmmm...fuck...” she groaned as she felt her orgasm starting to
form deep in her belly. “Don’t stop babe...don’t stop...”

“Never” the keeper exhaled against Ali’s breast as she pumped her fingers harder and faster into her drenched pussy, splashing water up towards the edge of the tub. “Never...”

Ali wanted to do more to help bring her release closer but it was all she could do to try and keep her wife’s rhythm, riding her fingers on her knees and sending more water flying.

“Oh God...unnnhhhh...”

Ashlyn kept her mouth moving from one breast to the other while she pulled her left hand back to the front of her wife, quickly moving it to circle her aching clit. Ali continued to moan her approval and excitement while she held onto her keeper’s strong shoulders as her orgasm got closer and closer.

“How about this spot?” Ashlyn groaned as her own ache increased again once she began rubbing her wife’s swollen clit with the thumb of her left hand.

“Oh my God...oh my God...oh my God...” Ali chanted as she climbed quickly towards her release, her head dropping forward in her near-delirium. “Fuck yes... unnnhhhh...mmmmmmm...”

“Fucking gorgeous...” Ashlyn panted, breathing hard with her face still pressed into her wife’s chest, while everything moved with them.

It took a minute more at that fast pace, with both Ali’s pussy being filled and her clit being worked, before the strong orgasm took over.

“Oh God...yes...yes! Fuck, Ashlyn...yessssss!!!!!” she cried out as she came hard. Her body flailed as her legs lifted her up higher and then dropped her down fast, causing a huge sloshing splash that knocked Ali’s empty wine glass off of the edge of the tub. It landed with a crash on the hard tile floor, shattering and getting both women’s attention. “Oh shit” Ali gasped as her body shook through the orgasm while she hugged her wife’s shoulders for support.

“It’s ok, I’ve got you” Ashlyn cooed, her cheek pressed against the brunette’s chest and her arms wrapped securely around her waist. She could feel Ali’s head resting on top of her own and her heart beating wildly in her chest. “I’ve got you, sexy, right where I want you” she chuckled, low in her throat. “And I’m never letting you go.”

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Thursday morning they made the 5-1/2 drive from St. Pete up to Tallahassee to visit the other Frank Lloyd Wright house in Florida, the Lewis House or Spring House as it was sometimes called. It got the name because there was a natural spring on the property that flowed all the way to Lake Jackson, to the North of the city. It was the only private house designed by FLW in Florida and it was famous for being one of the novel ‘hemicycle’ style homes that the architect started designing near the end of his long and prolific career. According to the information Ali and Ashlyn read at the house in Tallahassee, there were approximately 400 intact FLW houses in the USA, and only a fraction of those were from his hemicycle series. Basically, the houses were built in the shape of a semi-circle and stuck to the size and scale of the more middle-class Usonian homes. Some of his hemicycle home designs were significantly larger and customized for wealthy homeowners across the country, with some of the better known in Connecticut and Wisconsin. The Spring House had been included on the National Register of Historic Places since 1979 and had also just been restored after finding itself on the List of America’s Most Endangered Historic Places back in 2014.
They arrived just in time for one of the last tours of the afternoon, stopping for lunch along the way. They were relieved that there was still enough time so they didn’t have to rush through the structure or the property tour. Ashlyn was fascinated by the way Wright incorporated the natural landscape of each lot he built on into the design of the home, regardless of the size. Everybody knew about the spectacular Falling Water house, built above a waterfall in Mill Run, Pennsylvania, but Wright sought to do the same thing on all of the properties he designed for. Sometimes he built high on a cliff overlooking a lake or he tucked the house into the hillside itself. But Ashlyn’s favorite part about spending two days looking at Frank Lloyd Wright’s architecture was definitely, and easily, watching her wife’s face light up and change as they walked through the rooms and gardens together. The excitement that made her eyes dance and her mouth break into an impossibly big grin when she saw some part of the house that really moved her. That was what the keeper lived for. To that very day, Ashlyn’s favorite thing was listening and watching her wife talk about something she was passionate about. Besides sex, that was about as good as it could possibly get. Ashlyn felt lucky to be there with Ali, luckier than usual, walking beside her and basking in her light.

After one last night of uninterrupted naked time where they explored Ashlyn’s fantasy of Ali as a hot and sexy coach, it was amazing how much fun you could have with a healthy imagination and a cheap coach’s whistle, they started their slightly shorter drive back to Satellite Beach and their family on Friday morning. They had enjoyed their time away enormously, as they always did, but they were both eager to see their kids and spend the last two days of their vacation together as a family. Halfway through the 5-hour return trip Ali turned the volume down on the playlist and shifted her body a bit to the side so she could look at her wife behind the steering wheel.

“Can I ask you a question?” the brunette cocked her head and lowered her sunglasses.

“Ummm...yes? But you’re freaking me out. What’s the matter?” Ashlyn glanced anxiously to her right as she drove their rented Jeep down the highway.

“No” Ali laughed. “There’s nothing wrong” she reached over and patted her keeper’s arm reassuringly. “I just...I don’t know” she shrugged and smiled warmly at her wife. “You’ve been so good about helping me cross things off my little bucket list...”

“Partial bucket list” Ashlyn corrected. “Don’t be limited by the handful of things you blurted out while we were goofing around.”

“I know, I know. A good bucket list should always be getting longer” Ali recited her keeper’s often spoken words back to her, making her grin. “But why do we never talk about your bucket list? Every single time I’ve ever asked you about it you somehow change the subject or give me some vague answer just to shut me up. Why is that?” Ali squinted at the keeper, studying the side of her face.

Ashlyn didn’t say anything right away and that made Ali nervous, but the brunette was determined to get an answer this time, no matter what.

“Do you not want me to know what’s on your list?” her voice was quiet and, even though she tried hard, she couldn’t hide the hurt in it.

“No” Ashlyn replied in a hurry, sending a couple of quick glances towards her beautiful brunette. “It’s not that” she reached over and held Ali’s hand on her thigh.

“Then what? I don’t get it. How am I supposed to try and help you get your list done if I don’t know what’s on it?” the brunette pleaded her case, lifting Ashlyn’s hand up to her lips and kissing the back of it sweetly.
“Well, that’s what I don’t want Al. I don’t want you to worry about my list. It’s not that I don’t want you to be a part of it – hell, I want you to do all of it with me” she smiled warmly at her wife.

“So why can’t I help then?”

“I just...I mean...” Ashlyn sighed in frustration at her own inability to find the right words to use. “You already do so much for me and the kids and the business and everything else. You’re the hub. You’re the brains. You’re the part of us that makes everything else work, all the time...”

“But so are you babe...” Ali started to counter.

“No, it’s not the same. Yes, I love the kids and I’ll do anything that needs doing and usually love doing it” she winked at the brunette. “I can even hold down the fort when you’re away for a day or two. But it’s part of who you are Al – you’ve got things planned out for us before we even know we need to think about them sometimes” she chuckled. “It’s just something you do and I have no clue how you do it” she laughed softly but noticed that Ali had gotten quiet. “Hey, baby, it’s a good thing. I’m not saying it’s bad...Jesus fucking Christ why can’t I ever say things the right way?!” she yelled at herself and pulled Ali’s hand over to her lap and squeezed it. “Honey, I swear, it’s the best thing ever and the reason I’ve tried to keep my bucket list from you is because I don’t want to burden you with it. I don’t want you planning it out while you’re already doing all the rest of the planning for our family – for our very grateful family.” She looked at the brunette’s face for a couple of seconds to see if she had gotten her foot out of her mouth yet. “Does any of that make sense?”

Ali took her time, considering everything her keeper had said. Finally, after several more inquisitive, searching glances from the driver, she exhaled and spoke.

“Yes, I guess so. I try so hard not to be that overbearing and controlling mom...or wife” she gave Ashlyn a sheepish look and dropped her eyes to her lap. “I know that’s my fatal flaw and I hate it about myself.”

“Al, what are you talking about?” Ashlyn’s eyes were wide. “That’s what you got out of what I said?” When the brunette didn’t reply Ashlyn tried again. “Sweetheart, I know that’s one of your biggest fears and that you’ve been working on it with Mattie ever since Drew was a baby. And, for the record, I think you’ve done a great job. Honestly. You’re the best mom I’ve ever seen and we’re all so lucky...”

“Ash, don’t just tell me what you think I want to hear...”

“I’m not!” the keeper was getting more frustrated with herself as she tried to explain to her wife what she really meant. “I mean it. Every word. I’m just saying that I know you worry about that. Just like you know I worry about fucking the kids up with my...depression, and my short temper at the table and that’s not even a complete list” she rolled her eyes and sighed.

They were both quiet for several minutes, still holding hands between them but staring straight ahead, thinking. Ali worried constantly that she was ruining her kids’ lives by doing too much for them and being that annoying, debilitating helicopter parent that everybody dreaded. She had learned how to respect the boundaries between she and her wife and had gotten pretty good at being a wife and not an agent. Likewise, with Mattie’s help, she had found a way to relax her strict requirements when it came to the kids. Some days Lily’s hair looked like a rat’s nest and there just wasn’t anything Ali could do about it. Drew had gone through a stretch of months when he was about four years old where he insisted on wearing his Spiderman costume to daycare and then preschool every single day. As the miles went by she thought about many of the things she had learned to let go and just be ok with and started to feel better. Ali knew Ashlyn wasn’t criticizing
her, not even a little bit. But the brunette had gotten self-conscious and defensive all on her own. She understood why her keeper had kept her bucket list to herself. She believed her. She still wished she knew what was on it though. Ali leaned over and pressed a kiss into Ashlyn’s bare shoulder, squeezing her bicep with her free hand and then giving her another kiss.

Ashlyn felt the vice-like grip inside her chest release at the contact and exhaled loudly, making Ali giggle as she moved back over to her own seat, squeezing her keeper’s hand again.

“I love you Ashlyn. I’m sorry I overreacted. I know it’s my deal, it’s my thing. I know you didn’t mean anything by it.”

“I was trying to tell you how awesome you are” she chuckled. “Couldn’t you tell?” she rolled her eyes and laughed, happy to hear her wife join her.

“I know you were, thank you honey. This one’s on me” Ali smiled at her keeper and reached out to turn the volume back up on the music. Before she could manage it, Ashlyn started talking while she kept her eyes focused on the road in front of her.

“I’ve already crossed a couple of things off my list in the last few years” she began. “I learned to golf. I opened The Academy. I went on an awesome surfing trip to Costa Rica” she stole a quick look her wife’s way and felt her heart swell at the growing smile on the pretty face she saw. “But I still want to paint something really beautiful. I want to drive across the country with you, and back, obviously. I want to go to Australia and maybe New Zealand with you. I want to have my own clothing line – for t-shirts at least and maybe more, I don’t know” she blushed and shrugged, feeling self-conscious as she rattled things off in a rush. “And I want to swim with sharks, but I’m saving that one until I’m really old, just in case.”

Chapter End Notes

Glad the USWNT won last night. It hurt to see Ali’s #11 on Mallory Pugh, but somehow not as much as it did seeing it on Sofia Huerta. ?? (I like both those players very much and there's no hate intended here). And, of course, Ashlyn didn't get to play. Again.

It sure looked like they were playing a modified 3-back system to me, with JJ dropping back from her DM role in between the two CBs. I didn't hate the 3-back before, I just didn't think Ellis had the right players doing it. Pinoe, Morgan and Pugh were the players of the match for me. Relentless pressure on display for the whole time they were out there. Very impressive. Denmark didn't look so great so we shouldn't get too excited yet. And I hope Sullivan didn't get injured again. It was also really weird seeing Tierna Davidson wearing #17. She looked pretty good for her first cap - even managed an assist on JJ's goal. Not too shabby. I was glad to see Sonnett get some time on the pitch but of course she can't get in at CB. No.....Ellis pushed her out to RB or wingback in the formation and she barely saw the ball. I was very happy Crystal scored. She was hurt a lot of last season and they never really talked about it so a lot of people just think she had a really shitty year for no reason. Lynn Williams, another player I really like a lot, needs to do more with her chances or she's going to stop getting them. She was the most disappointing for me last night. It would be nice to see Dunn, Press and Williams get the starts and the minutes in the next game and then have Pinoe, Morgan and Pugh come in as subs instead. They, D,P,W, never seem to get that chance as starters. Ok, I'll shut up now. I can't help it. I love soccer. And I
love this team. And I feel like we had a big fight and I'm still mad at them but I can't stay away because I really truly love them. And, as much as I hate to say this.....I wish they would share the wealth more with the promo pictures and photos from camp and stuff - I used to love Kelley O'Hara a lot (see big fight note above) but it feels like they're using her for EVERYTHING. I don't think they've ever shoved one player down our throats more than KO since probably Mia Hamm way back when. And I still love Kelley, I'm just still mad at her for taking Ali's spot and yes, thank you, I know that's irrational but it's how I feel. But I'm getting better about it. It's hard though because nobody on the backline last night played any better than Kriegs would have. Nobody.
Also -shout out to Savannah McCaskill for her first cap and her corner kicks. My Boston Breakers drafted her with the 2nd pick in the draft and I'm excited. Of course, I was excited about Rose Lavelle last year too but then Ellis fucking broke her and she's still not healthy. Sigh...
February ended with a bang. And a crack and a crash and some screaming and cursing. The Kriegers flew home to cold Gloucester at the end of February vacation week only to be greeted four days later by one of the biggest winter storms the area had seen in years. There had been the Blizzard of ’78 that everybody who lived in New England knew about whether they had lived through it or not. It was the most famous storm that had ever hit the area. There had been five major hurricanes in New England including the 1938 ‘Long Island Express’ and another one that destroyed most of the Southern coast of Rhode Island and Connecticut back in 1815. The other three were Hurricane Carol in 1954, Hurricane Bob in 1991, and Hurricane Six way back in 1869. But in terms of modern-era storms, it was impossible to top the Blizzard of 1978. It had technically been a Nor’easter, a type of cyclone, which is what almost all of the really powerful storms were up in New England. They’re usually accompanied by very heavy rain or snow and can cause severe coastal flooding, hurricane-force winds, or blizzard conditions. The winds rotate counterclockwise and come at you from the North East direction, off the Atlantic Ocean, hence the name.

New Englanders grew up hearing stories of people abandoning their cars on the highways after being stranded for hours during the Blizzard of ’78. Boston received a record-breaking 27” of snow during the three-day storm and snowdrifts were as tall as 20’. Many areas saw up to 40” of snow and the intense winds made everything worse. The bulk of the snow fell on the second and third days, a Monday and a Tuesday, and most people in the region didn’t take the weather forecast too seriously. The heavy snow was supposed to start in the wee hours of Monday morning, day two of the storm, but when everybody woke up to nothing but a light dusting they assumed the weather guys had gotten it wrong again. So everybody went to work and to school as normal. The heavy snow was supposed to start in the wee hours of Monday morning, day two of the storm, but when everybody woke up to nothing but a light dusting they assumed the weather guys had gotten it wrong again. So everybody went to work and to school as normal. When it was time to try and get home from school and work, the heavy snow had been falling for hours and many people never made it home. At all. That’s when cars started running out of gas after idling in completely stopped traffic on the highways. Some people died because the exhaust pipes of their cars got buried in snow while they sat inside trying not to think about how badly they had to use the bathroom or how hungry they were. They died from carbon monoxide poisoning and weren’t found until several days later when the highways were finally dug out. The lucky ones were rescued by cross country skis and snowmobiles before they perished. More than 3,500 cars were found abandoned and buried during the clean-up afterwards. All traffic was banned for the rest of the week while the National Guard was called in to try and restore order and power and safety. The whole region shut down for over a week as they dug out. Kids from that time loved it because they didn’t know any better. For them it was a fun extra week of vacation where they boiled their own water and didn’t have to take showers or baths for days. The only real blessing is that everyone’s food stayed cold so going hungry wasn’t a big issue, as long as you didn’t have to cook anything. The snow fell so fast and so hard that nothing could keep up and if you blinked, another 6” of snow had fallen. One of the most tragic stories was of a ten-year old boy in Western Massachusetts who had disappeared in the deep snow just feet from his home’s front door. His body wasn’t found until three weeks later when the mailman saw a glove sticking up through the snow.

The only storm that had come close to the Blizzard of ’78 in terms of snowfall totals and the complete incapacitation of the metro Boston area was the Snowpocalypse from January and February of 2015. What made that so devastating and debilitating was the fact that the original blizzard on January 26th & 27th had been bad enough. It dumped 25” in Boston, which was a record for a single storm in the month of January, and up to 30” in most other areas just outside of Boston. But then it kept coming. There were three more storms over the course of the next three
weeks that left almost 100” of snow in total, with no place to put it. There was literally no place to move during that month-long storm-fest.

Ali Krieger remembered it well because her little house in Stoneham had almost been buried. Her below-grade driveway became impossible to clear with her high-powered snowblower because even it couldn’t throw the snow high enough to clear the 40” of snow that covered everything. The brunette often thought about that winter, that four-week period in particular, and laughed because that had been when she had first met Ashlyn Harris. The idea that the Florida girl who was always cold had arrived to take possession of her Grandmother’s house up in Gloucester just before snowmageddon had struck, tickled Ali deeply. It just seemed so absurd as she thought back on it. It made her admire her wife all the more for not abandoning the idea and high-tailing it back to warmer climes. Ashlyn always joked that she had tried but every mode of transportation had been closed until the end of March and she couldn’t make her escape.

The Nor’easter that the weather prognosticators were predicting for February of 2027 wasn’t supposed to be quite as bad as the Blizzard of ’78 or the Snowpocalypse of 2015, but it was going to be a doozy. It was Ashlyn’s 13th winter in New England and she had endured her fair share of snow storms, but they had all been relatively average up to that point. Snow had fallen, sometimes quite heavily, for up to a day and she had lost a few tree branches when the snow and ice got so heavy that they could no longer support the weight. She had seen the powerlines yanked from the big old house in those fierce Northeast winds – one of the real disadvantages to living so close to the sea. When your house was near the ocean, like the big old house was, everything a storm did to the rest of the area was usually twice as bad for you. The Nor’easters especially took their power from the ocean and the winds and snow and visibility were always worse the closer you got to the sea. It was the trade-off for enjoying all those lovely breezes that came in off the ocean during the summer to cool you down while the rest of the area sweltered away. You also had to deal with the storm surge that accompanied the roiled-up ocean during one of those big storms. If the storm coincided with either of the high tides during the day, or night, then there was sure to be coastal flooding. Ali had always been judgmental about idiot people who built big beautiful homes on the ocean and were then surprised that the ocean had some challenges to go along with the beautiful views and fun beach time it offered as well. But perhaps the brunette’s favorite thing about the big old house and its proximity to the sea was that it was situated on a hill. It wasn’t a huge hill, but it was definitely high ground so their home had never had any issues with flooding. Because they were higher up they had more problems with high winds than anything else. But the beach and the road and the houses at the bottom of the hill just across from the beach often flooded.

Ashlyn had shoveled and snowblown the driveway clear dozens of times over the years but it had never been more than 13 or 14” at a time in any given storm. Thursday, February 25th 2027 was the keeper’s first big, bad, normal life-altering storm and she had been a little excited about it at first. The weathercasters were much better at predicting the Nor’easters now and could usually tell you when the snow would start and where and how long it would last. They weren’t perfect, not by a longshot, but people didn’t just dismiss their warnings out of hand as they had done back in 1978. This storm was supposed to start in the very early hours of Thursday with heavy snow that was expected to last into the night with an occasional break in the afternoon. But later in the afternoon the wind was supposed to pick up and get everything swirling and knock down some powerlines. To make matters worse, there was a smaller system that was going to follow the bigger Nor’easter early Friday morning and it was expected to add more snow to the mix. School had been cancelled for both days with officials hopeful that students could return to school on Monday morning. But that would depend on how much damage, if any, the school took in the storm. Kids also couldn’t go to school if there was no power or heat, or if the roads were still too treacherous for the school buses to be out and driving on. Lessons had been learned in 1978 and changes made accordingly.

Ali had closed the Knight-Harris offices for the two days, knowing that even if some of the more
intrepid employees found a way to get there, the commute would take so long that half the day would be lost anyway. It was just unproductive and she didn’t want to risk anybody getting hurt. She had to plead with Marcy Hopkins not to try and go to the office. Marcy was excited to be back at work full time that month after just completing her MBA. It had taken her two years while she worked part-time but she had kicked ass and come out with top grades and lots of new skills to bring to the K-H table. Most of Boston and Cambridge had been shut down by government officials who were hoping, as always, that individual business owners would follow their lead and keep their workers off the roads and safe at home. The big Nor’easters and other snow storms were always exciting for the kids. They didn’t have any of the worries that their parents did about the basement flooding or the roof collapsing under the weight of all that snow and ice. They just got a day or two off from school, which was the cherry on the sundae this week because they had just had a week of February vacation, and a whole lot of beautiful snow to go out and play around in. The absolute worst thing that could happen for a kid during a big storm was that they would be forced to go out and help shovel after it was all over.

Besides adventuring, the empty lot next to the house was best for sledding. The natural hill was there and once they had established a good path, Ashlyn had hired a tree service to come in and remove a few of the smaller trees so it would be a little safer. The tree experts had been to the house before, shortly after the keeper inherited it. She had asked them to make sure the trees near the big old house were healthy and safe so they wouldn’t come falling down on her in her sleep. Her grandfather had almost lost the whole garage once when she was much younger because of a falling tree from the woods at the rear of the property. She and Chris had ‘helped’ him repair the back half of it when they were there for the summer that year. The Floridian was used to hurricanes and lots of wind, but the whole concept of the extra weight of heavy wet snow and ice on the trees and power lines and everything else was new and made her nervous. They didn’t have to worry too much about the trees in the empty lot because they would usually fall downhill, away from the house if something happened. That is, unless a big gale off the ocean blew them up the hill instead.

But both Ali and Ashlyn felt safe in their home, precisely because they had both been diligent about keeping it in good condition. It had started when Ali was pregnant with Drew and Ashlyn went a little nuts getting the house ready for whatever disaster the world could throw at them. She wanted to make sure they were ready with a portable generator in case the power went out and they needed to heat up a bottle of breast milk for the baby, or keep the breastmilk cold until they needed it. She had bought one of those coffin-like deep freezers and had it installed in the basement — just in case. The freezer had come in handy more often than not. As the number of children increased, they found themselves storing more and more things in it so they didn’t have any tantrums because they had run out of red popsicles or the right kind of bread for Drew’s toast. Once the twins had started eating real food they added an extra refrigerator down there too because they simply didn’t have enough room in the one upstairs in the kitchen. All of the ‘grown-up’ drinks like beer and soda and things like that went in the extra fridge, as did the extra milk, apple juice, orange juice, string cheese, gogurts and everything else the kids consumed a lot of every day of their lives. They still had to go grocery shopping every week, but once a week was better than twice a week for sure. They had also upgraded their portable generator to keep powering the extra vital appliances in case of emergency. The generator lived in the garage with the lawnmower and the snowblower and it was powerful enough to run the essentials for up to six hours at a time, at full capacity. It didn’t usually operate at full capacity because Ashlyn and Ali had bought a big one just in case. So they usually got about eight or nine hours at a time before they had to turn it off, let it cool down, and then refill the gas tank for the next eight or nine hours. So if the big old house lost power they hooked up the generator and enjoyed heat, hot water, some lights, refrigerator, freezer, stove, microwave, and their phones and chargers. They had a transfer switch installed on the side of the driveway side of the house so they could roll the portable generator out into the driveway, turn it
on, and then connect it to the house. When they set it up they had only set up those ‘essential’
circuits for the generator to power. There were no tvs or computers or video games or anything
extra like that. The kids would have to read books and play cards and board games like everybody
else who had lost power – the difference was they could do it in the warm comfort of their own
home and enjoy a nice hot meal too.

It also helped that George, their builder, had turned into such a good friend. Ashlyn paid him every
year to come and inspect the roof of both the house and the garage and make sure everything else
on the exterior was in good shape. Upkeep, her grandfather had always preached to her, was just as
important as building something well in the first place. The two went hand-in-hand together. Ali
couldn’t agree more. She had seen with her own eyes the hell that could result from lazy
homeowners who didn’t take care of their most valuable asset. She had seen windows and walls
rotted right out – some were so bad that she could push her finger right through what was left of the
wood! Ali and Ashlyn were different in many ways but this was one of the areas where they were
completely in synch. Ashlyn may not have been quite up to Ali’s level of preparedness at first, but
once Drew was born she didn’t take any chances with anything having to do with their home or
property.

And it was precisely at times like this that they were both grateful for each other in that regard.
Some people were out running around from hardware store to hardware store trying to buy a shovel
or some pet-safe ice melt or a space heater for when they lost power or a sump pump for when
their basement flooded. But the Kriegers were prepared. The most work they had to do was to
unbury the winter snow stuff from underneath the summer beach stuff in the garage but that had
already been done back in early January the first time it had snowed. Ali and Ashlyn would never
be relaxed about riding out a storm because you just never knew what would happen. Some idiot
neighbor down the street might not have secured all of the crap in their yard and their lawn chair
could come flying through the bay window in the front living room of the big old house. You just
never knew. But, as much as was possible, the two moms were looking forward to a little fun in the
snow with their kids and dogs those two days – and probably into the weekend too.

For most of the day on Thursday everything was normal, just really snowy and windy outside. But
inside it was business as usual for the kids. They squealed when the dogs came in the family room
door, the gates were all snowed in so the only way into the backyard was through that door on the
left side of the house, shaking and snorting and sneezing the snow off of themselves while Ali and
Ashlyn tried to dry them off. The trick was to hold the retired beach towel up and shield the rest of
the room, and yourself, while the dog shook. Then you could towel them off and start to get them
dry. Fred would stand there patiently while you dried his legs and feet off, even letting you pick
the snowballs out from between the pads of his paws. But Persey had never once stood still for that
a day in her life. She always had to walk while you tried to dry her off. She didn’t try to bolt or run
away, but she would just take step after step while you vainly told her to stay so her wet feet didn’t
catch any further than absolutely necessary. It was the one thing that Persey did that incensed
Ashlyn.

“No Pers, no” Josie squealed and giggled as she tried to keep Ali between she and the wet dog just
inside the family room door.

“Oh come one Jose, you don’t want her to dry herself off all over you?” Ali giggled with her
daughter as she grabbed the dog by her shoulders with the towel and started to rub her back dry.

“No mommy, she’s all wet!” the girl giggled as she held onto Ali’s hips from behind, her face
pressed up against the brunette’s butt as cover.

A loud bang by the side door next to them made everybody jump and some of them scream in
“It’s just the storm door” Ali announced calmly after looking up for a minute. “The wind took it. We need to make sure we latch it tight when we close it...”

“Yeah, my bad” Ashlyn offered as she hurried to finish drying off Fred so she could secure the storm door. “I didn’t realize it was that windy already” she looked warily out the window as she finished the dog’s last paw.

“What a good day for a kite!” Drew suggested with a grin from his safe, dry spot, kneeling on the couch watching the dogs and the door. “Can we Mama?”

“No way” Ashlyn chuckled. “You’d blow away in this crazy strong wind and we’d never see you again.”

In another hour, around 3pm, the twins were up from their much shorter naps and the snow seemed to die down to practically nothing. The family took advantage of the break in the weather to get outside and play around a little bit as well as keep the path to the garage shoveled so they could get to the snowblower when the storm was over or to the generator if they needed it. The big debate during the snow storms was when to get out and snowblow. Some of the neighbors, like Neil Donaldson, liked to get out ASAP and clear the driveway and the walkways and the back steps before it was even done snowing. Others, like Ali, firmly believed in waiting until it was all done so you only had to do it once. She had always had a big, powerful snowblower so she could take advantage of that fact and wait the storm out. Other people had smaller machines that couldn’t handle as much snow all at one time. Ashlyn wavered. She felt compelled to go and get started as soon as she saw Neil, or anybody else on the street, go out to do their driveways. Part of it was she was still basically an excited big kid when it came to the snow. Ali loved that about her wife and would never try to change it. She honestly wished she herself loved it as much as her keeper did, but after spending her whole life shoveling and dealing with snow and ice in these storms, the novelty had definitely worn off for the brunette.

Before Ashlyn got a chance to really waver on her decision to wait that day, the snow and wind started up again and made the idea of being out snowblowing and shoveling in it for an hour a lot less palatable. They all rushed back inside, happy they had taken advantage of the brief break to make some pretty kick-ass snow angels. Ali hated having her neck cold and it killed her when the kids would drop themselves into the snow without pulling their hoods up. Every stinking time, no matter how often she reminded them. None of them liked getting all that snow down their neck and Lily usually cried when it happened, but still they forgot to pull their hoods up before making their snow angels. It was truly a mystery to the brunette. Luckily, she was able to get Dodge and Lily to put theirs up just before they dropped back into the freezing cold snow. She saw Drew and Josie drop, hoods down, and knew the twins would want to follow right away.

“Hoods! Put your hoods up first guys!!” she called out as she trudged as fast as she could towards her two youngest kids. Dodge grinned and yanked his up while he was falling halfway to the snow, almost like he was playing chicken with the snow. He laughed and started fanning his arms and legs out to make his snow angel. “Crazy boy” Ali chuckled at her son while she helped Lily pull hers up and then kissed the tip of her nose. “There you go my little snow angel...ready?”

Lily giggled and dropped back into the snow but chose just to lay there instead of moving her arms and legs. She pulled a mitten hand full of snow towards her mouth and licked the snow from it like she was enjoying an ice cream cone.

“Mommy, my neck’s all wet” Drew whined as he sat up.
“Your mother has been telling you to pull your hood up your whole life my son” Ashlyn teased as she stood in front of him and pulled him up and out of his snow angel so he wouldn’t mess it up with hand or foot prints.

He landed on his feet in front of her and grinned, loving the feeling of flying up like that. He wrapped his puffy-coated arms around her waist and hugged her.

“I always forget” he shrugged and then screamed when more snow worked its way down his neck.

“Hold on” Ashlyn laughed, despite the shrillness of his scream. She took her glove off and scooped as much snow as she could out of the back of his neck. Then she shook his scarf and hat out before putting them back on the boy while he made a sour face at the cold, wet feeling down his back. “There. All better” she pronounced and rubbed his back with both hands to warm it up and get him over the objection she knew he was going to make any second.

“I’m cold” he whined.

“Of course you are, knucklehead! You forgot to pull your hood up!” she laughed again and moved over to pick up Dodge and spin him around in a circle, careful to avoid stepping on anybody’s snow angel.

Josie was their snow bunny. She loved the snow and neither mom could ever remember her complaining about being cold or wanting to go inside. It made sense in a way because she was always the first one to overheat in the summer. For whatever reason, her body temperature ran warmer than everybody else’s. Even now, with her own neck and back full of snow, she didn’t whine about it. She trudged over to Ali, turned around and bowed her head so the brunette could do the same thing Ashlyn had done for Drew a couple of minutes earlier. Josie laughed at Lily who was trying to chase Fred through the snow, while Ali worked on her neck, and joined her sister when her Mommy had finished. And that’s how it went in the snow, most days anyway. Fast and furious and ridiculously cute and happy for the first half hour. Then it would get progressively less fun every minute thereafter.

As they dried off inside the mudroom, even the dogs had been lifted over the fence by the two moms so all the snow could stay contained to the mudroom this time, they heard the weathercaster on the tv talking about how the storm was sitting on them and moving slower than originally anticipated. They upped their estimated snowfall totals and adjusted their timeline. It was only 4:30pm but it was already almost dark out because of the cloudy, overcast, stormy sky. Just in the fifteen minutes it had taken the family to get inside the house, the wind and snow had gotten much heavier and harder. Normally they would have had another hour before it got dark, but not that day. The temperature was in the high 20’s but would be dropping overnight and the wind made everything feel about 20 degrees colder than it really was.

The kids wanted a fire but Ali didn’t want either of them going outside again, even if it was just onto the kitchen porch, to grab more firewood, so she put the kibosh on that idea. It was nasty out and she didn’t want any doors open for any reason at all. It was fun and charming for about an hour as they ate dinner together at the nook table and listened to the storm whipping around them and battering the house with big gusts every now and then. As they tucked the kids in and kissed them goodnight a couple hours later they both reminded them again that they might hear some bumps or bangs from the storm but that they were safe in their beds and didn’t have anything to worry about.

“This storm is no joke” Ashlyn said seriously as she peered out the kitchen window at 10pm that night.

They had cleaned up after dinner and gotten everybody’s snow things hung and draped to dry out
and were now standing in the kitchen and worrying about the damage the storm might be doing to the house and garage. Ali moved next to her wife and wrapped both arms around Ashlyn’s arm, holding it tight, as she joined her looking through the window.

“The wind is the worst” the brunette replied and they both instinctively jerked their heads backwards when a big swirl of snow was flung against the window they were looking out of.

“I get it” Ashlyn chuckled nervously. “You didn’t need to summon the weather gods to prove your point.”

“No kidding, geez” Ali said, her eyes wide. “But we’ll be fine babe. We’re ready and the house is strong. We should try and get some sleep.”

“Yeah, I have a feeling the kids are going to be up before the night is through” the keeper recoiled as another icy burst of wind-driven snow hit the window hard.

They went up to bed after opening the family room door for the dogs one last time. Neither dog was dumb enough to go outside though. The wind howled so loudly that neither Ali nor Ashlyn slept very much. An hour after they had gotten into bed they heard that loud bang again, only it happened about four times instead of just once this time.

“That fucking storm door” Ali grumbled as she got out of bed and wrapped herself in her big fluffy robe.

“Want help?” the keeper asked, groggily.

“No, I’ve got it” she patted her wife’s foot under the covers as she walked around the foot of the bed and moved towards the back stairs. “You can get the next one.”

The wind practically blew the brunette backwards and off her feet when she opened the family room door. The six-foot area inside the door quickly covered with snow as she scrambled to her feet, cursing loudly and wishing she had more clothes on. She shut the door and went to get her boots and snow pants and jacket on and found Ashlyn waiting for her at the door when she returned.

“I don’t want you to blow away” she rubbed her sleepy eyes and looked surprised to see her wife in her winter coat and snow pants. “Is it that bad?”

“Go get yours on quick” Ali nodded towards the mudroom while she put one of the dogs’ towels on the floor to dry up the wet snow there. “I might need you to hold onto me for real.”

“Holy shit!” the keeper yelled when they opened the door again five minutes later.

She had been knocked backwards just as Ali had been before, and she had been warned about it too. They worked together, locking forearms, as Ashlyn reached out with her long arm to grab the storm door flopping around and banging in the wind. The flying snow stung her face and she had a hard time keeping her eyes open. As soon as she finally got a grip on it she pulled as hard as she could to get it to close again, Ali joining in once she could reach it too.

“Watch your fingers!” Ashlyn yelled as the wind blew the door shut with the loudest bang yet.

But as soon as it banged shut and the two women let go of it, the wind ripped it wide open again, slamming it back against the house.

“What the fuck?” Ali bitched angrily.
They went through that same exercise three times before the brunette figured out that there was ice that had built up on the sill of the door. It was keeping the storm door from closing and latching properly and was a problem that wasn’t going to go away.

“Do you have an ice scraper inside the house?” Ashlyn asked, frustrated and more than a little freaked out by the strength of the wind and the Nor’easter.

“No but I’ll boil some water” Ali answered quickly. “Can you find some wire so we can rig this to stay closed, once we finally get it to close?”

“Mommy, I’m scared” Josie whined sleepily as she ran across the family room towards Ali.

“Oh little one” she scooped her up and held her as she moved into the kitchen to put the kettle on the stove.

Ashlyn hurried down to the workbench in the basement, cursing the fact that most of their tools and weird stuff like wire and twine was on the big workbench in the garage. She came up the basement steps empty handed and heard cries and whimpering coming from upstairs. Only Drew and Josie were old enough to work the child gates at all the stairs so the keeper knew one of the twins was awake and upset and probably freaked out because neither of their moms were in their bed.

“No wire but I’m going to use a shoelace” Ashlyn announced a few minutes later as she carried a teary and cranky Lily into the family room where Ali was sitting on the couch with Josie, waiting for the kettle to boil again. “Here, take her. I’ll be right back.”

The storm was much worse on the left side of the house and it made sense because that’s where the ocean was. Both girls’ rooms were on that side and they must have heard the storm door banging or some other frightening sound from the fierce wind. Ashlyn had checked on both boys while she was upstairs getting Lily and they were fast asleep. She turned up the volume on their sound machines and hoped that would help drown out any big noises from the Nor’easter. Ali had already poured one kettle full of boiling water on the door sill, trying to melt the ice near the corner of the door closest to the hinges. When Ashlyn returned with two shoelaces they only had to wait another minute for the second kettle before they could try again. This time the ice disappeared after the second kettle and a couple of prods and scrapes with a kitchen spatula. The keeper scraped while her wife poured. They had warned the girls, as cheerfully as possible, about the wind and snow that was about to blow into the room. They each clutched a dog as all four beings occupied the couch and watched the two grown-ups try to defeat the stupid banging storm door.

“Yay Mommy! Yay Mama!” they both cheered when victory had finally been declared.

The storm door was in place and the shoelace had been tied securely around the handle and latch to keep it there. The whole ordeal had taken almost an hour and, after spending even more time reassuring both girls that they were safe in their beds, Ali and Ashlyn finally changed into clean, dry pajamas and got back into their own bed. It was definitely easier to fall asleep and stay asleep without that storm door banging away and all four females drifted off quickly.

When Ashlyn awoke just before 7am the first thing she noticed was how quiet it was. That was a relief. The next thing she noticed was how uncomfortable she was and she slowly remembered each of the four children coming and getting into bed with them during the tumultuous and frightening night. They had a queen size bed and they were using every inch of it with three of the little ones in between Ali and Ashlyn, and Dodge curled up on Ashlyn’s other side, safely wrapped in her arms so he didn’t fall off the bed. The keeper couldn’t move and she longed to stretch out. She couldn’t understand why she couldn’t straighten her legs out though. None of the kids were down at her feet? She picked her head up and turned to look at the foot of the bed. There were both
Persey and Fred curled up into tight little balls on top of the covers. Before Ashlyn could think of complaining she felt the cold filling the room. She touched the tip of her own nose and felt how icy cold it was, and then shivered. The power was most definitely out and that was a real drag. While she was laying there trying to decide whether or not she could fall back asleep or not, she heard her wife’s whisper.

“Babe. Babe, are you awake?”

“Yeah, we lost power huh?” she whispered back, turning her head to talk over her shoulder.

Ali reached out, careful to avoid Josie, Lily and Drew, and rubbed her wife’s shoulder as best she could while keeping her arm under the covers and not letting any of the cold air in.

“Definitely” she shivered. “But it seems like the storm’s over...the first one anyway” she yawned and pulled her arm back, snuggling into Josie even more and appreciating her warmth. “I don’t want to get out of this bed” she admitted quietly.

“Me either, although I’m about as uncomfortable as I’ve ever been” she laughed softly.

Persey heard this and took it as a sign that it was time to get up so she stood up and stretched on the bed. She started to walk up the bed, wagging her whole body at the keeper.

“No, Persey, stay down there” Ali tried to get the dog to stop moving up the bed without raising her voice or exposing any body parts to the cold air. “Ash, she’s going to step on Drew...”

Ashlyn reached her arm back and out to stop the dog’s progression while Drew snuggled into her back with a small whimper.

“She must really have to pee” the keeper remembered the dogs’ refusal to go outside before bedtime last night. “Alright, ok, I’m up” she yawned and then squealed as she exposed her entire body to the cold air. “Fuck it’s cold!”

“Language...” Ali chastised, still whispering and thankful that the kids were all still asleep.

“What’s the plan?”

“Do you want me to start a fire up here and you guys can just all stay here until it warms up?” Ashlyn asked as she hurriedly got dressed in long underwear and turtleneck to go brave the even colder temperature outdoors. “Or should I just start shoveling and set up the generator?”

“I’ll get up too” Ali yawned again and tried not to yell out at the cold floor her bare feet stepped onto. “Jesus!” she whisper-yelled as she hopped back onto the rug near the bed.

The brunette went out first, grabbing the shovel and starting to clear the spot in the middle of the driveway where they usually set up the portable generator. She had to start at the garage and shovel a path from it to the clearing so they could pull the generator and put it in place. She took a moment to survey the house and garage and driveway with their three vehicles parked along the far side of it. Everything was pristinely white and swirlly looking. It was beautiful and appeared almost fake. Everything was covered in about 19” of snow with some crazy looking drifts and snowbanks from the wild winds that had punished them all night long. She made herself concentrate on the shoveling so they could get the kids warm. There would be time to inspect any damage after that was done. The snow was thick and crunchy, but not really that wet. It wasn’t the light puffy kind but it wasn’t the wet and heavy kind either. That was coming from the second storm that was expected to hit them later that morning with a lot more moisture mixed in with it. That was going to suck.
In the time it had taken Ali to get that shoveling done, Ashlyn had gone to the basement and turned off the main breaker from the power lines, filled the gas tank of the generator and checked the oil, ensuring it was ready to go. She opened the overhead garage door and walked the power cord over to the transfer switch on the side of the house and plugged it in. The keeper hustled back to the garage and grabbed another shovel to help widen the path, meeting her wife in the middle and taking the shovel from her.

“I’ve got it. You go on back inside” she nodded towards the house. “I got the fire ready to start upstairs. All you need to do is light it.”

“I’ve got these” Ali took the shovels back. “You just get that going” she motioned over her shoulder at the generator.

It only took another ten minutes to get the big machine in place and started and then connected to the house. It was 8:15am by the time they were both back inside the house and the keeper had gone down to the basement and thrown the breaker switch for the things the generator would run for them for the next eight hours. She could hear her wife yelling and clapping upstairs when the lights came on and she knew they were in business. Ali was tempted to make herself a cup of coffee now that the generator was running, but she wanted to get the fire going upstairs first.

“Why so cold, Mommy?” Dodge asked from his place snuggled into the bed as he watched Ali finish getting the fire going.

“Because we lost power last night honey, and the heat in the house wasn’t working” she explained and then slid into the bed, taking Ashlyn’s spot but moving Dodge to the inside of the bed, closer to the warmth from the fire. “But Mama got the generator going and it’ll be warm again soon. I promise” she kissed the top of his curly blonde head and snuggled down under the covers dressed only in her long underwear top and bottoms. “Scooch over, I’m freezing” she giggled quietly as she hugged her son tightly to her front.

“You cold too!” he giggled with her and flinched when she pressed her cold nose into his warm neck.

“I know. You have to warm me up” she tried to keep her voice low so the other kids could still sleep if they wanted to. It was long past when they would normally wake up but it had been a long, stressful night and she wasn’t going to wake anybody up if she didn’t have to.

Ashlyn joined them soon after that, along with the dogs who had eagerly gone outside, even in the 19” of fresh snow. Ali had shoveled a little area for them to do their business just outside the mudroom door. The keeper brought up some more firewood, put another log on the fire and then stripped down to her long underwear and climbed into Ali’s usual spot, right next to the fireplace. They had extra blankets piled high on top of the bed and even Ashlyn invited the dogs back up again, wanting their body heat to help warm everybody in the bed up. Fifteen minutes later, Ali ran down the backstairs and came back up with sippy cups full of juice for the kids and then made another trip for two big cups of coffee for the moms. There was lots to do that morning to get the driveway snowblown and cleared before the next storm came through and dumped the wet, heavy snow on them. That wet slushy snow would freeze overnight and make everything underneath it rock solid and heavy as hell. But that could wait for an hour or so, at least. The little Krieger family huddled and snuggled together that morning, laughing and gigglng about the dogs being up on the bed with them. It had been a difficult night and not one that Ashlyn wanted to repeat anytime soon. She had survived her first real Nor’easter and her nerves were shot. But that morning turned into a sweet memory that they would all remember for a very long time. They read another chapter of their storytime book together and, when it got warmer, made smores over the fire for breakfast.
because it was a special snowstorm-no power day. A lot of rules were bent that morning and both moms were ok with that. They knew it was one of those times the kids would look back on fondly and tell their kids about, if the twins could remember it at all. Ali and Ashlyn had their hands full that morning keeping the peace among all four kids in their big bed, but for every whine or complaint there was twice as much laughter and sweetness. The kids recognized that it was different and special and they all tried to be good and enjoy it.

“Enjoying your first Nor’eastern?” Ali teased from one side of the bed as the kids started to get a little more riled up.

“Actually” Ashlyn grinned and nodded from the other side of the bed, breaking up some next-level pushing between Dodge and Josie, “I really am.”

Chapter End Notes

One of my best friends lived in the same town, Uxbridge, in Western Massachusetts where that young boy lost his life in the Blizzard of ’78. She was a couple of years younger than him but she remembers everybody searching for him, for days. She says that the medical examiner determined that the boy had gone out the front door of his house in the storm (she thinks it was to go out and play but she can’t quite remember that part, maybe to start shoveling the front step?) and somehow slipped and fell. He hit his head on the railing and was knocked unconscious after falling into the deep snow. Then it kept snowing and covered him, and his footprints and any other sign that might explain where he was, up. I just can’t get over that story. The mailman saw a glove sticking up out of the snow several weeks later and when he picked it up...he found the boy’s frozen body. Unbelievable.
Keep Up the Good Work

The end of February was also the one-year anniversary of Kyle and Nathan fostering Edgar and Cristina. The boy had turned 7 on January 16th and the girl had turned 5 almost three weeks later on February 3rd. They were both showing so many signs of improvement from one February to the next that their foster dads couldn’t believe it. Kyle and Nathan both saw how much work was yet to be done with and for the kids, but Yvette, the CPS caseworker who still checked in on the Guerreros on a monthly basis, was astonished at the progress both children had made.

“Al, she said she’s never seen such a bad case turn around so quickly, especially Cristina” Kyle enthused over the phone that February. “We thought they were doing ok, well, maybe a little better than ok” he confessed with a shy and surprisingly humble chuckle. “But to hear her talk about how worried she was that neither of them might make it back to some sort of normalcy in their lives...” he stopped talking, getting choked up at the thought.

“Oh BB, I’m so happy for you guys, for all of you” Ali had a hard time not tearing up when she heard her brother getting emotional. “That’s the best news.”

“No, it’s not” he shook his head and sniffled, trying to get control again. “The best news is that she thinks they’re going to approve our adoption petition” he squeaked out, words going up two octaves at the end of his sentence.

“What?!” Ali gasped, surprised and elated and confused. “What are you talking about Ky?”

“We didn’t want to say anything because if we told everybody and then it didn’t work, which sometimes it doesn’t work – depending on the judge and the conditions and all of that bs redtape...”

“Kyle!”

“Sorry! We wanted to be sure before we told our families...but Nate and I...we’re adopting Ed and Cris” he gushed. “We’re going to be their real parents, forever...”

“Oh my God!” Ali was flooded with several powerful emotions all at once...joy, love, fear, relief, hurt, happiness. “That’s...that’s...I don’t even know how to say how happy I am for you. And for them” her voice was soft but full of feeling. “How long has this been going on?”

“I know you’re mad I didn’t tell you and I’m sorry sis...really, I am” he began nervously but pushed through because he was so happy even an upset sister wasn’t going to bring him down.

“I’m not mad” she corrected and sighed. “I’m just surprised. This is really big news...”

The truth was, she was more hurt than she wanted to admit and disappointed in herself for feeling that way. She couldn’t think of another time her brother had made such a huge, life-altering decision without talking to her about it first. It’s just what they did. They were sounding boards for each other and always had been. She flashed back quickly to when she bought Ashlyn an engagement ring and almost proposed to her without talking to her brother. She had always felt like he overreacted to being brought in on the news at the last possible second, but she understood it better now. She wasn’t angry, she was happy for him. But it stung.

“Well you’re the first person I’m telling, if that makes you feel any better” Kyle continued on with the details about the adoption process while Ali tried to listen and lick her wounds at the same time. He told her how he and Nathan sat the kids down and told them what they wanted to do, back
in early January. They explained to them that they wanted Edgar and Cristina to live with them forever and to be a family forever, no matter what. And then they carefully asked the kids if that was something they wanted too.

“Ky, I can’t believe you’re going to be a father” she finally replied when he was finished. “Like, not just a foster dad – not that fostering doesn’t count…”

“No, I know exactly what you mean” he interrupted, bailing her out of the words she was unintentionally twisting in her excitement. “It’s going to be real now” he exhaled and paused. “It’s been so nerve-wracking having CPS looking over our shoulders all the time. We’ve both felt like any tiny mistake we made would be reason for them to come and take the kids away” he admitted. “But now, well soon, they’ll be ours and nobody will be able to take them away, ever.”

“When will it become official?”

“Yvette thinks before the end of March but we’re not really sure. I’ll let you know when we get the hearing date.”

“You’d better” she said firmly. “I want to be there...can I be there?” her voice was less confident when she realized her brother and his husband might want to keep their little family celebration just among their little family of four, and Peaches too of course.

“You would do that?” Kyle sounded surprised, but very moved.

“I would give anything to be there for you, for all of you.”

Ashlyn coached both Drew’s and Josie’s basketball teams that winter and had so much fun doing it she surprised even herself. It drove her crazy when the kids didn’t listen, but she found herself remaining surprisingly patient. She was a little less patient with Drew and Ethan’s team of 7-year olds because they were playing in their third year and knew better. But, on the other hand, she and the assistant coach were throwing new things at the older boys all the time so it was getting more challenging for the players every year. The challenge for Ashlyn when it came to Josie’s first-year team of 5-year old girls was to not go too easy on them and waste her time laughing at how freaking adorable they all were. She would never intentionally give the girls’ team short shrift, ever, but it was hard to keep a straight face sometimes at some of the silly and cute things they did at practice and in the game that followed right after. The keeper swore she spent more time tying shoelaces and fixing ponytails than she did anything else for the team that winter, and she was perfectly ok with that. In some of her more reflective moments, she thought back to how tiny and sickly Josie had been as a baby. It never failed to move her almost to tears when she saw how far her daughter had come since then. Sometimes she would steal a glance at her wife watching from the sideline folding chairs and see the same appreciative look on her beautiful face. Josie’s birth had almost derailed them. It had been the biggest challenge they had ever faced as a couple and they had both made mistakes that summer. But they had proved to be as resilient as their fighter of a baby girl, and they had all come through it together in the end. Josie was still the tiniest girl on the court and the basketball seemed almost as big as her body, but she never shied away from it. She took more than a few bounce passes in the chest or the chin and got knocked on her butt at least three times every week either in the practice or the game. But she always got up and kept going, a look of determination on her face that made her coach prouder than she thought possible. The only time Josie ever cried was when she got one of her tiny little fingers jammed by the ball. But both her moms knew just how much that hurt and rushed to her on the court. Ken and Vicki had to keep the twins from following Ali out there and both grandparents were touched by how concerned Dodge seemed to be for his big sister. Josie came and sat with Ali for a few minutes
while Ashlyn got back to the team, but the little redhead hopped off her mommy’s lap at the next stoppage in play. She hustled across the court, gave her coach a high five with her good hand and took her seat on the bench with her teammates.

“She is so much like you were at her age that it takes my breath away sometimes” Ken leaned over and spoke into his daughter’s ear. “She’s got the same spunk you always had” he smiled proudly as he moved back to his own airspace. “That you still have” he winked.

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The fallout from the huge Nor’easter they had weathered at the end of February could have been a lot worse. The big old house lost a few shingles off the mansard roof in the high winds and one of the windows in the garage had a branch blown through it and needed to be replaced. The biggest problem had been one of the big old pine trees in the woods behind their property falling down and into the backyard of their rear neighbors. It crushed their neighbor’s small utility shed that they kept near the back of their yard. Both Ashlyn and Ali were just grateful that the tree had hit the shed and the random branch had hit the garage window and not the other way around. Some people, especially in Gloucester and Rockport near the coast, hadn’t been so lucky. Whole homes had been destroyed by the combination of wet heavy snow and hurricane force winds from that Nor’easter. What complicated things was that their backyard neighbor, Larry Woods, was being a dick about it. The damage was to his property so it was technically his responsibility to pay for any repairs or replacement. This was usually done through the property owner’s home insurance.

The Kriegers had gone through it themselves a couple of years earlier when a tree at the edge of their extra lot had fallen from Mr. & Mrs. Van Auck’s backyard after a big, windy summer storm. The tree had crashed into several other trees in the Krieger’s empty lot and they had to hire a tree service to come and remove the fallen tree and then trim and prune and repair some of the other damaged trees that were still standing. Ali and Ashlyn had filed an insurance claim and it had been handled that way. The Kriegers had to pay a deductible and then their insurance company paid for the rest of it. This was just how it was done, legally. The phrase that everybody used was ‘if it falls onto your property it’s your responsibility’ and that’s what the Massachusetts law was and that’s how everybody handled it. There were rare exceptions like if the Van Auck’s tree had been sick and they had been negligent in removing it before it could fall and cause damage, then the Van Aucks would have to pay to have the clean-up and repair or removal work done in the Krieger’s empty lot.

Well Larry Woods either didn’t understand or didn’t like the law and kept trying to get Ashlyn to write them a check for the damages. There had been more than one heated exchange between the two neighbors in the weeks after the big February Nor’easter. Every time Ashlyn went out to the woods behind their backyard fence to try and clean up some of the fallen branches and other debris from the storm, Larry would come waddling out, his red face fixed in a permanent scowl. The keeper had been nice about it the first two times it happened, politely explaining to him how it worked and using her own personal experience with the Van Aucks as an example.

“There’s nothing worse than having a disgruntled neighbor” Ali cautioned seriously when she and her wife had discussed it later. “Let’s do everything we can to keep him happy...”

“We’re not writing him a check Al” Ashlyn shook her head as they moved around the kitchen getting dinner ready.

“No, I’m not saying we should...”

“Well, that’s what he wants” Ashlyn shook her head in frustration. “I don’t know what else will make him happy.”
Mr. Woods pulled into the driveway of the big old house one evening after the backyard encounters stopped happening, the third week after the storm. Ali answered the mudroom door because she was closest to it, having just gotten up to get Dodge more milk.

“Hi Mr. Woods” she smiled, sippy cup in one hand, as she opened the door with the other. “This is a nice surprise. Would you like to come in?” she stepped forward and pushed the storm door open since he hadn’t made any effort to pull it open himself.

Ali ushered the dogs into the front living room and put the gate up so they wouldn’t jump on the man who was already upset with the Krieger family. They both stood there wagging their tails and whining softly at the strange man who stood in their mudroom looking awkward and uncomfortable.

“I’m sorry, we’re just eating dinner right now” Ali waved the sippy cup and nodded over her left shoulder towards the kitchen and family room beyond it.

“Oh, ah, yeah, um...” he stammered and cleared his throat. “I’m here to pick up the check for the new shed and the other damage to the yard and trees” he recovered and completed the well-prepared speech.

“Oh” Ali raised her eyebrows in surprise, staying calm even though her blood was boiling at the audacity of the man. “I thought you were going through your insurance company, like everybody does” she took a quick pause to reset her temper, reminding herself that you get more flies with honey than with vinegar. “Do you know, we had something similar happen to us just two years ago,” she began in a friendly, conversational way. “The Van Aucks, do you know the Van Aucks? Stan and Cathy? Well one of their trees came down in that big summer storm and we put a claim in through our insurance company to have it removed and...”

“Yeah, whatever” he shook his head quickly and dismissively, waving his hand towards Ali as if he was swatting an annoying fly out of his way. “I’m just here for the check. The other one...Ashley, she told me to come by and pick it up.”

“Ashlyn” Ali corrected pleasantly.

“What?” he frowned.

“Ashlyn. My wife’s name is Ashlyn” she smiled at him and shifted her weight to her other foot which he had no way of knowing was a sign that she was getting ready for battle.

“Yeah, right, whatever. She told me...”

“Oh, hi Larry” Ashlyn greeted their backyard neighbor casually, with a friendly smile. “Dodge can’t wait” she winked at her wife before taking the sippy cup from Ali’s hand and disappearing back into the kitchen.

“Mr. Woods, we’ve been over this” Ali fought the urge to fold her arms across her chest, keeping her voice light and as non-confrontational as possible. “We’re not writing you a check. That’s not how it works. You need to file a claim through your insurance company. They’ll take care of it for you as part of your homeowners insurance” she explained what she knew her wife had already explained twice to the stubborn or stupid man. It was hard to tell which exactly was his problem. “Your insurance company can send someone out to lay it all out for you, all you need to do is call them.”

“No, you need to write me a check for it, that’s how it works around here” he raised his voice a
little bit and scowled.

Ali was done with the conversation so she moved the gate and let the dogs into the mudroom as the frustrated man was talking. Fred went right up to him and stuck his snout into his crotch, which is how Fred tried to greet everybody. Persey hung back, closer to Ali. Mr. Woods took a step back, pushing the storm door open with his large backside while bringing both hands to his crotch to try and keep Fred away. Ali and the dogs took a step closer and Mr. Woods took another step back. The brunette reached forward and grabbed Fred’s collar before he made his escape, speaking as she did so.

“Please Mr. Woods, call your insurance company. That’s how the law works and that’s how we’ve all taken care of things like this in the neighborhood. It’s happened to all of us at one time or another and I’m sure it’ll happen again” she kept a warm but slightly more stiff smile on her face as the man backed all the way out the door. “Be careful there on the driveway now, it’s still a little slippery in a few spots” she stepped out onto the tiny porch and waved as he huffed and turned to open his car door and get in. “Give Elaine my best.”

But he didn’t stop there with that brazen attempt to play one woman against the other. Neither Ali nor Ashlyn could figure out what the hell his problem was and why he wouldn’t take care of the shed the right way. They both just assumed he was a cheapskate who didn’t want to pay the deductible. Two evenings later a police officer showed up at the big old house, standing in the mudroom with his hat in his hand and looking apologetically at the two moms with their four kids and two dogs all excited to see him. They hadn’t sat down to dinner yet but were just about to when Officer Fulkerson rang the doorbell. He was a younger man, probably in his early 30s, and he had been very patient and friendly with the kids and dogs. After several minutes of introductions and multiple offerings of water or coffee, they all sat down in the front living room together. Drew tried, again, to offer him a bottle of water.

“He doesn’t want any buddy” Ashlyn ruffled the thick, dark hair on Drew’s head and pulled him towards her with a chuckle. “He’s learning how to be a welcoming host in school right now. They’re doing customs and...”

“Traditions” the boy filled in eagerly when he heard his Mama pause.

“That’s right” Ashlyn grinned while Ali smiled proudly at their son.

“Oh well, if it’s for school” the officer grinned at Drew whose face lit up. “I’d love a bottle of water” he stuck his hand out and let Drew high-five it as he ran past him towards the kitchen.

“So what can we do for you officer?” Ali asked, still nervous even though she knew there was no reason to be.

Officer Fulkerson’s radio squawked loudly, making all of the Kriegers jump. He reached and turned it down as Drew came back into the room with a bottle of water held out in front of him.

“Here” he said with more excitement in his voice than shyness.

“Thank you” the officer nodded and then made a show of opening the bottle and enjoying a big swig.

Ashlyn mouthed ‘thank you’ to him as he took another sip. Dodge and Lily were standing less than a foot away from the officer, transfixed by his uniform and everything else about him. The big kids had seen police officers before at school when they had come in to do presentations or safety demonstrations and talks. But the twins hadn’t seen a law enforcement officer up close since their
experience with the NH state police two summers ago when Ashlyn had forgotten to put the new registration sticker on the minivan. Dodge reached out to touch his hat on the arm of the couch.

“Don’t touch Dodge” Ali gave him a warning look when he turned his face quickly to look at his mommy’s stern but loving visage.

He put both his hands behind his back and linked his hands as he turned his attention back to the officer in front of him. He blushed a little bit, embarrassed at either his own lack of self-control or by his mother’s reprimand.

“Maybe before I go, when I’m done talking with your moms, you can try it on” Officer Fulkerson grinned at the little boy and winked at Lily. “You too, if you want.”

“Mommy, can we?” Lily turned and pleaded with Ali first and then Ashlyn. “Mama?”

“We’ll see” the keeper smiled. “Now come and sit down, both of you, so the grown-ups can talk for a few minutes” she patted the couch.

“Is the dog bothering you?” Ali asked, noticing that Fred was sitting right next to the officer with his head on the man’s thigh.

“No, no he’s fine.” He patted Fred’s head and cleared his throat as he looked at some notes in his small black notebook. “So, we got a complaint from one of your neighbors and I just wanted to get some more information so we could take care of it.”

“Are you kidding me?” Ashlyn sat up straighter and her nostrils flared. “Larry Woods called the police because we won’t pay him directly for the tree damage” she said to Ali as if the brunette couldn’t figure it out.

“Is that what this is about Officer Fulkerson?” Ali inquired, wanting to be sure to get the facts before either of them got too upset.

“Yes, pretty much” the officer gave them both a sheepish smile. “Why don’t you tell me what happened” he suggested, ready to make more notes.

A half hour later they were done filling in any blanks Officer Fulkerson’s report had and he let all four kids try on his hat before moving to the mudroom to take his leave. He patted both Fred and Persey and put his hat back on his head as he straightened back up to his full height.

“Isn’t there something you can do?” Ali asked. “The last thing we want is to make an enemy of one of our neighbors, but we don’t know what else to say to him anymore.”

“No, you’ve done the right thing. All you can do is point him in the right direction. It’s up to him to take care of his own mess” the officer nodded thoughtfully. “It’s all documented now” he patted his jacket pocket. “We may want to come out during the daylight and take some pictures and look at the damage, but we can probably do that through him when we go back to tell him you’ve done nothing wrong.”

“That oughta go over well” Ashlyn made an eek face.

“Whatever you need from us, just let us know” Ali added, reaching out to shake his hand. “We’ve lived here for 13 years and we get along great with all of our immediate neighbors. We’d really like that to continue.”

“We’ll do our best to make sure he understands you’re not at fault. Have a good night now” he
doffed his hat, gave one last round of high-fives to the kids and then was gone.

“Why is it always the jerks who make all the noise?” Ashlyn grumbled as they got the kids to the table after heating up dinner again. “Nobody calls the police to tell them we had old Mrs. Ornstein stay with us for two days until her power came back on after the Nor’easter. How come there’s no public record of that?” she huffed.

“I know babe” Ali rubbed her wife’s back as they took their seats at the nook table with their excited children. “I know.”

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Hannah filed for divorce at the end of March after not hearing a word from Dev himself since he left Ken Krieger’s house on Christmas Day. Dev’s lawyer had sent her an official email notifying her that her husband was going to be in India on business for the next few months but left her no way to contact him other than his cellphone that she already had and that he was not picking up. She left him more than a few voicemails asking him to call her back so they could talk but he never did. To his credit, he never shut her off financially or asked her to vacate their home or anything like that. Not until the official divorce papers were filed. Then he turned into a complete asshole and did everything he could to keep her from spending his money, including kicking she and Meg out of his big, fancy house. Hannah’s only real concern was disrupting Meg’s school year with all of this bullshit. The redhead was a lot of things, but she had never been a fool. She had been a hard-working single-mother when she had met Ashlyn and a crafty, some might say shifty, financier too. Hannah had been saving as much as she could from every one of her paychecks since she had first started dating Dev. She didn’t work as many hours anymore and handled far fewer events, but she still got paid for them and Dev had never shown any interest at all in that income, except when it was time to pay taxes.

She had a nest egg and she broke into it to rent a modest apartment for she and Meg at the beginning of March after she had made up her mind to leave her husband. She had talked to a lawyer about her situation and had been advised to get herself all set up before filing the papers just in case he went ballistic. Dev had never been violent or anything close to it, but Hannah had also never served him with divorce papers before. Her lawyer told her that she had an excellent case and could expect a sizeable settlement from Mr. Karmacharya once the divorce had been finalized. Dev may even choose to settle with her out of court to keep his name from being sullied by the claims that Hannah was going to make public. All Dev cared about was his business reputation – nothing was more important to him. Part of the reason he fell for Hannah in the first place was that he knew she would help him make more money and impress more clients and business associates. He had been right too. Her event-planning expertise had come in more than handy at every single dinner party or business function that they had attended or hosted together. The redhead had been hesitant to get too cutthroat with Dev because she really had loved him, the him that she had known anyway. She didn’t want to hurt him and take a bunch of his money, which surprised the hell out of Ashlyn when they had talked about it in February. Hannah had instructed her lawyer to just file for the divorce and a small amount of alimony until she could get back on her feet and earn more hours at work. But when they received Dev’s lawyer’s countersuit, the gloves were off. Dev, through his lawyer, was contending that Hannah was the reason their marriage had ended, even going so far as to paint her as an unfit mother. Hannah hadn’t even asked him for a penny of child support for Meg originally. Despite her reputation among Ashlyn’s friends and family, she wasn’t trying to bleed him dry. But if he was going to make up lies about her and threaten to take Meg away from her then she was going to come at him with everything in her power, and then some.

“Man, I wouldn’t want to be Dev when this thing’s all over” Ashlyn whistled as she and Whitney visited Niki and Molly one evening after work in early March.
“No kidding” Whitney, 6 months pregnant, rolled her eyes. “I can’t believe he claimed she was an unfit mother!” she added, incensed. “I mean, I’ve never been a big fan of hers” she had to wait for everybody else in the room to stop laughing and rolling their eyes at her before she could continue. “But the one thing she always got right was Meg. At least as far as I could tell anyway.”

“No, you’re absolutely right” Niki agreed quickly. “What a jerk” she shook her head angrily. “He barely had anything to do with Meg the whole seven years they were married. Now, what? He wants to be her father? Gimme a break.”

“Well, she’s got one of the best divorce lawyers in DC” Whitney offered. “She’s going to spend big bucks on her representation but she’ll more than make up for it when it’s all said and done.”

“You think so?” Ashlyn asked, real worry creasing her face.

“From what I’ve heard about Hannah over the years, she’ll be just fine” Molly patted Ashlyn’s arm reassuringly. “And in my experience, some of those older Indian firms are desperate to avoid any kind of scandal whatsoever” she added. “His family – it’s a family business right?”

“Yeah” Ashlyn nodded. “His father’s company, and his father’s still alive. He’s, like, 85 or something, but he’s still the head of things, even though Dev runs most of the actual business part.”

“Ok, well that’s even better for Hannah then” Molly explained. “His family, his father in particular, will want him to handle everything outside of the courts to avoid any blowback on the family name and the business. And if her lawyer is as good as you say she is” she quirked her eyebrow at Whitney, “then they’ll make hay with all of Dev’s horrible opinions and beliefs. That shit may fly over in India but homophobia and racism and misogyny is a big deal over here now – at least publicly.”

“I think most of their business is in the US now too” Ashlyn said, starting to feel a bit better. “Maybe he’ll stop being such a dick and do the right thing.”

She knew she wasn’t in any way responsible for Hannah or anything the woman did. But Ashlyn would do whatever she could to help with Meg while Hannah was fighting Dev for her independence and her reputation and her daughter. She just wasn’t sure what that might be yet. She had talked to Ali first and the brunette had agreed that they should offer to help with Meg financially, if Hannah needed them to. Her soccer camps and tournaments and all of the things that went along with them was expensive and the costs added up quickly when you factored in hotels and airfare and food when travel was involved, which it often was. At first, Hannah refused the assistance, very politely and appreciatively. But when her lawyer explained that this could drag out for a couple of years if Dev chose to make it, Hannah agreed to let Ashlyn pay for all of Meg’s soccer and extra-curricular things until the divorce was finalized. But she insisted on keeping track of everything so she could pay the money back. They also agreed, continuing the theme of openness from the Christmas Day mess, to let Meg know what was going on. Neither Hannah nor Ashlyn wanted any secrets kept from Meg. She turned 15 at the beginning of March and was getting more mature all the time. Plus, it wasn’t like they needed to try and spare her feelings about the father she loved who was doing horrible things to Hannah through his lawyer. Meg had never liked Dev much to begin with so she certainly felt no allegiance towards him whatsoever. They told Meg not to talk too much about the details of the divorce with anybody but encouraged her to share what she needed to share with her friends. If Dev agreed to settle out of court and made Hannah’s silence about his bigoted opinions part of the deal, they didn’t want Meg running around telling anybody what a real shitheel he was. Not yet anyway.
On Tuesday, March 30th, two days after an earlier than usual Easter Sunday in March, the Krieger clan assembled in the small Family Courtroom in NYC to watch Kyle and Nathan sign the final adoption papers to become Edgar and Cristina’s adoptive parents. It usually took 6 to 8 months for the adoption process to work through the system, but Yvette had presented a compelling case for this family becoming official. The children had already been living in the foster home for over a year, which also made things go a little bit faster. Kyle had been surprised, although he wasn’t sure why, when all of his family wanted to be there to celebrate the adoption and welcome Edgar and Cristina to the family just as Ali had wanted to. So after a little bit of back and forth about logistics, they just decided to do a caravan to NYC the day after Easter, following the NYC Kriegers back to the big apple. Both of the Guerrero kids had wanted to come back up to Boston for Easter again this year. They were eager to fully participate in the Easter egg hunt without any fearful limitations or restrictions. Nathan tried to talk them into skipping a year and having everybody come down and spend Easter with them instead, but it was no use. The first Easter had made quite an impression on both foster kids and it was clear to both of their foster dads what they really wanted. So they agreed to drive up to Boston for Easter weekend and help their kids race around the Dwyer yard and play with their cousins and be the happiest they had seen them in 14 months.

Ali and Ashlyn pulled their kids out of school and daycare for two days, driving down Monday afternoon as soon as school was out and returning Wednesday evening. Ken and Vicki, Deb, and Bill, Iris and Jared Kimball made the trip as well. Mike Christopher, Koty and Tanner all had to miss the big Tuesday morning event but made sure to call and send their love. The Family Court judge was surprised to see so many people in her courtroom that morning and even more surprised to learn they were all part of the same family.

“This is not something we see every day here” she beamed as Kyle, Nathan, Edgar and Cristina stood before her with the rest of the extended family filling the benches behind them. “Are all of these people here to celebrate with you today?” she looked right at the two Guerreros and grinned, waiting for them to answer.

“Umm, yeah” Edgar looked over his shoulder and couldn’t help but smile when he turned back to the friendly judge. “That’s our family” he shrugged and bumped his shoulder into his little sister who also smiled shyly.

“Well, they must love you very much” she looked at Cristina, hoping the little girl would speak but the look on her face answered her question for her.

Cristina grinned from ear to ear and rocked up and down on her toes as she stood in front of Nathan with her favorite stuffed dog under her arm.

“All of the paperwork seems to be in order” the judge scanned several documents and handed them to the court clerk before fixing her gaze on the hopeful family in front of her again. “I know you’ve all gone through the interview and evaluation process already but I just like to ask a couple of my own questions, if you’ll indulge me?”

“Of course, your honor” Nathan replied, swallowing a nervous lump in his throat and wondering what had gone wrong that needed any extra questions. Kyle squeezed his hand and they shared their nerves, trying to keep them from Edgar and Cristina.

“Nathan and Kyle, do you both want to adopt Edgar and Cristina and make them a permanent part of your family, forever?” she lifted her smiling face to the two dads who looked relieved.

“Yes, we definitely do” Kyle replied quickly, “your honor.”

“We absolutely do” Nathan added. “Nothing would make us happier. Nothing in the whole
“Peaches” Cristina turned around and looked up at Nathan. “It would be better if Peaches was here.”

“Oh, and who is Peaches?” the judge inquired, giving a warm and interested look at the little girl who had finally spoken.

“Our puppy” Edgar offered when it became clear that Cristina was too shy to answer.

“Well, that would be nicer wouldn’t it?” the judge chuckled as did most of the rest of the courtroom. “Well when you get home you give Peaches a hug from me ok?”

“Ok” Cristina’s tiny voice came back to her in reply.

“Edgar and Cristina” she leaned forward, still smiling at them both. “Do you both want to be adopted by Kyle and Nathan and be a family with them and have them be your dads forever?”

The brother and sister looked at each other, grinned and then nodded and spoke together.

“Yeah, we do.”
“Yeah please.”

Ali couldn’t handle it. She started to cry as she stood there with her own young family around her. Ashlyn pulled her into a side hug, kissing the side of her head and squeezing her shoulders. The brunette tried to wipe her eyes so she didn’t scare the Guerreros for some reason. The kids were so much better after 14 months, but the younger moms in the family were still careful and cautious with anything new or different, just in case.

“Well guess what?” the judge grinned at all the smiling and tearful faces in her courtroom, “It’s official. You are now a family, forever, even though Peaches couldn’t be here today” everybody laughed, including Cristina. “Good luck to you all, although it seems like you’ve got a good thing going on here already. So keep up the good work.”
I find it particularly serendipitous, or maybe cruel, that this chapter contains a good deal of Boston Breakers history in it. Kind of freaky if you ask me.

RIP Breakers

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Breakers started training camp in March and then kicked off the season with the Meet and Greet the Thursday before the long weekend and Marathon Monday in April. Their home opener wasn’t until the following weekend and both Ali and Ashlyn were excited to start bringing their family to the games again. The team was in pretty good shape and they had high expectations for the season. Their goal was to make the championship game in Minnesota that October and win it all.

Tammye and Carol’s one-year wedding anniversary came with about as much fanfare as their actual wedding had. Not very much, just as both women wanted. They had been doing very well and enjoying their first year of wedded bliss. Tammye had indeed taken Carol’s name, Lanier – her maiden name, not the name of her abusive ex-husband, and brought up the subject with both of her children.

“I think it’s great mom” Ashlyn told her over the phone during one of their talks. “Whatever makes you happy is what I want for you.”

“Thank you so much honey, that’s what I thought you’d say” she chuckled warmly. “Let’s just hope your brother feels the same way.”

“Are you nervous to tell him?”

“Oh, he already knows” she chuckled again. “But yes, I’m nervous to talk with him about it. It’s been a whole year and I’ve been putting it off and putting it off.” She was quiet for a moment. “I know it’s silly, but I feel like...like I’m letting him down. Or, maybe I’m afraid he’ll feel like I’m rejecting him...”

“Because you’re rejecting his last name” Ashlyn finished when her mother could not. “I get it. I felt some of that when I took Ali’s name. You don’t think it’s going to be a big deal, but, it kind of is.”

“Yes, exactly. I’m surprised by how strong my feelings are for the Harris name, even after all these years.”

“Well Chris is carrying it on strong, for all of us. And Johnny will after him and who knows, maybe Lizzy will too” Ashlyn tried to remind them both of the existing and future Harrises who would carry the name they had both chosen to give up.

“That’s right” Tammye agreed. “That’s a great way to think about it sweetheart. Thank you.”

For the first half of April vacation week they took the kids up to Maine to ski and snowboard and
enjoy the last bit of snow for the season. Ashlyn had continued to get better at snowboarding and Ali had still refused to try it again, preferring skis. They went up with Niki and Molly and their kids and had a great time in the still pretty good conditions. Meg was coming up to the big old house for the second half of the week, after she completed a soccer camp down in DC.

Drew played little league baseball again, starting in April. And Josie tried her hand at softball for the second year. The big new thing for the twins was that they were no longer napping. Both moms were bummed about it for two reasons. First and foremost, they were sad to see their youngest kids getting older. Second, they were really going to miss the freedom that came from having kids who still napped. It wasn’t tremendous, life-altering freedom, but even the shorter, hour-long naps that Lily and Dodge had been taking for the past few months afforded them the time to get a few things done around the house that were infinitely easier without kids running around them.

They were gearing up for another extremely busy May, as usual, but before the month really got going they were thrown a bit of a curveball that set them both back on their heels.

“What the fuck does that mean?” Ali scrunched her face up as she studied the lab results from the doctor’s office.

“What is it sugarplum?” Ashlyn asked, walking up behind her wife in the mudroom where she was opening the day’s mail at the desk.

The keeper put her hands on Ali’s hips and rested her chin on her wife’s shoulder as she scanned the report in her slightly trembling hands. Both women held their breath as they read and re-read the scant and confusing words to themselves. ‘ultrasound’ ‘abnormality’ ‘follow-up’.

Ashlyn felt her wife’s body shiver and wrapped her arms around her waist to hold her close. She could hear the kids playing in the front living room, Josie leading the twins through the imaginary veterinary clinic they had created so they could ‘fix’ their stuffed animals up. Drew was watching a show, sitting in the recliner like a boss and separating himself from his younger siblings even though part of him still wanted to join in. Ashlyn didn’t think she would ever be able to forget that exact moment in time, Monday May 3rd at 4:10 in the afternoon. It was the moment she thought her world was ending.

“Call Patty” she stammered, trying to make her mouth work when the rest of her body felt numb. “We don’t even know what this means Al, just call Patty.” Ashlyn waited all of 2 seconds for the brunette to move before taking action herself. “Fuck it, I’m calling Patty.”

Ashlyn picked her phone up off of the desk and made the call. Ali still didn’t move. Dr. Comello was with a patient so the keeper left a message for her to call them back right away.

“We’ll figure it out baby” Ashlyn pressed a soft kiss into Ali’s pale cheek. “Patty will call us back and tell us what it means. Try not to worry too much, ok?” the keeper was starting to get freaked out by her wife not moving or saying anything. She kept an arm around her waist and guided her through the kitchen towards the backstairs. “Why don’t you go up and get changed, or you can take a nice bath...” she took Ali’s phone from her and kissed her other cheek. “I’ll watch both phones and bring whichever one rings as soon as Dr. Comello calls back, I promise.”

In what was easily one of the longest hours of their entire lives, Ashlyn paced around the first floor, keeping an eye on the kids and then trying to focus on getting dinner ready for them. She started to go up the backstairs at least six different times but talked herself out of it every time. When Ali was ready to come down, she would come down. She must need some time to herself as she tried to process what she thought the confusing results might mean.
“No, she’s right here doc, I’m putting you on speakerphone right now” Ashlyn huffed out as she ran up the backstairs and into the master bedroom. She was stunned to find Ali sitting stock still on her side of the bed, still wearing her work clothes. “Go ahead. We’re both here” the keeper said, sitting next to Ali, nudging her and encouraging her to say something.

“I’m here.”

“Alright, hello ladies” Patty sounded serious and distracted, as if she was really pressed for time. “I’m sorry about the lab results going out in the mail this time. They were supposed to let me know if any of your results came back...with a question involved in them so I could take a look and call you myself. I’m really sorry Ali, you too Ash.”

Ashlyn waited again for the brunette to participate in some way but jumped in when she didn’t.

“So, I read that damned thing 50 times and I still don’t understand what it means” the blonde’s frustration and anxiety was evident in her voice. “Can you tell us, in English, what the hell is going on?”

“Well, I need to look at a few things but I can tell you without any doubt that this does not mean you have ovarian cancer Ali. So don’t waste any time assuming that. In a nutshell, the results are telling me that there’s something we need to take a look at. And that’s all it’s telling me so don’t read anything else into it.” She paused, waiting to hear her patient’s voice. “Ali? Are you there?”

“We’re both still here” Ashlyn answered, putting her arm back around the brunette’s shoulders and giving her a soft squeeze. “You ok honey?” she asked quietly and was relieved when Ali nodded her head once.

“I’d like you to come back in for another ultrasound so we can take another look. But in the meantime, I want to sit down with you and explain what’s going on. Can you come in tomorrow afternoon?”

“We’ll be there” Ashlyn answered after getting another nod from the brunette.

The next afternoon Dr. Comello smiled warmly at both anxious, tired women.

“Didn’t get much sleep last night eh?” she asked softly as she patted Ali’s knee.

They were sitting in one of the exam rooms but Ali was fully dressed and sitting on the table with Ashlyn standing beside her, clutching her hand.

“Not really” Ali replied, her voice tight.

“Ok, well, the ultrasound, the first one, not the second one you did earlier this afternoon, it showed something that we need to look at again or keep an eye on. It could be a little polyp, it could be some sort of cyst, it could be a shadow for all we know. That’s why it’s important not to jump to any conclusions and get too worked up about anything yet.

“Easy for you to say” Ashlyn grumbled anxiously.

“I know, you’re right” Patty nodded. “But I really don’t think it’s anything to be too worried about. My wife gets these annoying results almost every time she gets a mammogram. She has cyst-y breasts and always has. Her mother and sister are the same way” the doctor explained. “But the mammogram shows one of the cysts and then she gets all panicky for a few days until they come back and tell her it’s just a harmless cyst.”
“Is that really what you think it is in Ali’s case?” the keeper asked, squeezing her wife’s hand and starting to feel optimistic for the first time in two days.

“I do. But that’s why I ordered the second ultrasound. We’ll look again and make sure. I gave some specific instructions to the technician about what I wanted to focus on...”

“That’s why it was different this time” Ali nodded, understanding the few extra angles and shots the tech took earlier that afternoon.

“That’s right” Patty chuckled. “Very observant” she patted Ali’s knee again. “So the other good news is that your bloodwork came back fine so that’s something positive you can focus on if you want to try that. And once I get another look at this second ultrasound from today I’ll call you and tell you what I’m seeing. Ok?”

“Yeah, ok” Ali’s shoulders slumped but she tried to put on a brave face with a smile and everything.

“I now it’s scary guys” the doctor looked from one nervous woman to the next. “But these kinds of things happen all the time. The more ultrasounds you have, the more likely you are to have some of these abnormalities show up. It’s simple probability theory stuff.”

“10, it was my 10th ultrasound...” Ali offered weakly. “Well, not counting the extra one today.”

“So yeah, we’re getting up there in the quantity so it makes sense that something might show up for us to take another look at. Does that make sense?”

“Kind of” Ashlyn spoke first. “How soon will we have the results from today’s ultrasound back?”

“The usual, unfortunately” the doctor frowned at the news. “But it’ll only be three or four days and I’ll call you as soon as I get the results. I promise.”

Ali had plans to surprise her brother in NYC on Thursday that week for his 20th sober date and she wasn’t going to change them. It was only Tuesday afternoon and she wouldn’t be getting her results until Friday afternoon at the very earliest. It made no sense to change anything they had planned for the week. Ali would just have to put on a brave front and get through it. She and Sydney, whose birthday was Friday May 7th, were driving to NYC Thursday morning after getting their kids to school. They would spend the day relaxing and shopping in the afternoon and then attend Kyle’s sober party as a surprise that evening. Then the two best friends would spend Friday in the city as well, doing more of the same and celebrating Sydney’s 43rd birthday with another night out before driving back home Saturday morning. It was Mother’s Day weekend and they needed to be home so their kids could do something nice for them and then they could spend the rest of the day cleaning up the mess from it.

“So are you gonna spill or what?” the coach asked as she drove her car across the border from Massachusetts into Connecticut Thursday morning. “It’s been an hour and a half and I can’t take it anymore” she added as she kept her eyes on the road and felt Ali’s attention on her.

“What do you mean?” the brunette tried to bluff her way through it, determined not to ruin Sydney’s birthday getaway or her brother’s party by bringing up her own worries. She didn’t even have bad news yet.

“Alexandra Blaire Krieger...” Sydney gave her a wicked side eye. “Don’t even start with that weak-ass playing dumb shit. I’m not buying it.”

Ali looked down, anxiously tugging on her fingers in her lap and silently cursing her best friend
who knew her so well, still – after nine years of children’s schedules making it difficult to stay as close as they once were.

“It’s not a big deal” she tried to sound confident. “It’s nothing really” she gave Sydney the biggest smile she could muster.

“Listen, Ash told me. She says you haven’t even talked with her about it yet...”

“Ugh, fucking Ashlyn” the brunette grumbled and turned her frowning face towards the window as Sydney kept on talking.

“Hey, she’s really worried about you. And, in her defense, I knew something was up with you so I grilled her” she smiled as she saw Ali roll her eyes and crack her own small smile. “She didn’t stand a chance.”

“Oh Sydney Rae” Ali sighed and turned her head back towards the front of the car. “It really is nothing yet. It might not even be anything” she shrugged, letting her head drop back against the head rest in resignation. “We won’t get the results back until tomorrow at the earliest and maybe not until next week sometime.”

“So if it’s nothing why are you stonewalling your wife? Not to mention your best friend. Have you talked to Kyle about it at least?” Sydney’s voice had gone from tough love to tenderness as she spoke those three sentences.

Ali pursed her lips as she thought about the questions and the answers. She knew in her brain that she was being silly, even a bit childish. But the idea of talking about how frightened she was only made her more terrified.

“Come on boo, talk to me” Sydney reached over and took Ali’s hand, holding it on the brunette’s thigh. “You know it’s always better to get it out” she encouraged softly. “I promise I won’t say anything. You just tell me where you’re at. Just get it out there so it doesn’t eat you up.”

They drove on for another several minutes in silence, Sydney still holding Ali’s hand. The coach thought she had failed in her mission to get her best friend to open up, the silence stretched out so long. As she started to pull her hand back to the steering wheel, Ali squeezed it and wrapped her other hand around it as well.

“I’m fucking scared out of my mind” the brunette finally admitted, her voice so quiet Sydney almost couldn’t hear it. Ali kept her eyes straight ahead as she clutched Sydney’s hand in her lap and tried not to cry. “I’ve been doing so well not freaking out about these ultrasounds and blood tests. The first year was awful but I faked it til I made it. Those four were definitely the worst. Then last year it just got easier. Before I knew it I had eight and then nine of them under my belt with nothing to report. All good results, well, for what they can look for anyway – but that’s a whole other box of fun that makes me mad and scared” she rolled her eyes and paused to take a deep breath. “I don’t know Syd, maybe I started to get cocky. Maybe I started taking things for granted. I usually don’t do that, not after almost losing Josie and then Ashlyn and Drew that year. We both...we both know how lucky we are” she turned to look at Sydney, another small smile on her lips.

The coach met her gaze, quickly, and squeezed her hand.

“And then this last one” Ali shook her head slowly and frowned. “I feel like whatever it is that showed up on the ultrasound is like a punishment, or a slap to wake me up and remind me not to take them lightly or something. And when I opened that fucking lab report on Monday...” she
sucked in a breath and closed her eyes while Sydney gave her hand another supportive squeeze. “It scared the absolute shit out of me and I just shut down. I don’t know why. I mean, I didn’t make a decision to not talk about it. It’s just sort of what happened. Poor Ashlyn” she grimaced. “She was so sweet, even though she was just as terrified as I was, probably even more. But I’ve been so afraid to open myself up to this...whatever it is. Whatever the fuck showed up – a cyst or a polyp or a fucking shadow...It’s like I put all those walls up again to protect myself from the scariest thing in my life” she paused again, trying to control her building emotions as she thought about what was at stake. “Her...them...I can’t even think about losing them” she gasped quietly. “I didn’t mean to shut her out, or you...” she started to cry softly and almost silently as they drove on.

Sydney let her cry and take the time she needed to pull herself together again, never letting go of her hand. After several more minutes and a few more miles of highway had passed, Ali brought one hand to her face and wiped her tears away. She sniffled and straightened up a bit, trying to get her eyes to focus on the uninspiring Connecticut highway scenery. As she sat there she felt better than she had all week and knew that her bestie had been right. Ashlyn had always given her that same advice too but had given her some space this time. Ali knew her wife must be suffering this week as well and got angry with herself for not being better about helping her. It felt, in a way, like they had both just gone into survival mode as their minds raced with horrifying possibilities. The brunette knew that her wife had spoken to Whitney about it because the lawyer had given Ali a big hug when she saw her Wednesday morning at the office. Whitney never said anything, just hugged her and moved along. The brunette made a mental note to call Ashlyn as soon as she got the chance at their next rest stop along the way.

“I can’t believe you haven’t said one word” Ali gave her best friend the biggest, truest smile she had been able to make in four days.

Sydney laughed and Ali joined her, noticing the mascara that had started running from the corner of the coach’s eye.

“You can talk you know. I mean, you’re the one who decided not to talk. I’m just saying” Ali chuckled.

“A really good friend of mine always reminds me how important it is to really listen sometimes” she winked at the brunette. “I know this is a big, scary deal and I wanted to make sure you got it out, whatever you needed to get out. That’s all.”

“Well it’s out” Ali sighed again, feeling even better. “I didn’t want to talk about it because it’s too scary. I had to push it away I guess.”

“Can I tell you something that you once told me?”

“Sure. I think” the brunette giggled and then rolled her eyes. “Why do I feel like I’m going to regret this?”

“Remember when I found that lump in my breast last year?”

“Yeah, of course” Ali nodded, her face getting serious at the stressful memory.

“I was waiting for the biopsy results and was losing my mind, remember?” she waited for another nod and then continued. “You told me that you knew it was benign and that I had nothing to worry about. You just knew it. And after I gave you all sorts of shit about it you finally had to admit that you didn’t absolutely know it. I was a total jackass but you stuck with me and tried to distract me for three days. Do you remember?”
“Oh yes. I definitely remember” she chuckled again and yelped when Sydney pinched her thigh. “Ow!”

“The point is what you said to me after I shut down your impossible to prove optimism. You were mad, or at least frustrated, by then and you told me I was too fucking mean and tough for cancer to get me” Sydney laughed at the memory and was relieved when Ali joined her.

“Ok, making me feel like a shitty friend right now is an interesting angle to take, I’ll give you that” the brunette giggled.

“No!” Sydney laughed and made an exasperated face before getting serious again. “You were trying to tell me I could beat it even if I did have breast cancer. And that’s what I needed to hear Als” she squeezed her best friend’s hand again. “It doesn’t matter what the result of this extra ultrasound is boo. I hope it’s negative and you’re in the clear, duh. But what I’m saying is that even if it’s not...even if there is something there to keep your eye on or deal with, then that’s exactly what the fuck you’re gonna do. That’s the whole reason you’re doing these tests and procedures, right? I mean, unless having some stranger probe you with a piss-poor dildo every three months is what does it for you...” she joked.

“Groooosss” Ali scrunched up her face at the thought and smacked Sydney’s hand with a chuckle.

“I didn’t think so, but you never know” she winked before getting serious again. “You’re looking for shit just like this so you can take care of it before it gets a foothold or whatever. I know having a scare like this sucks, but that’s what you signed up for with these ultrasounds. I kind of want you to see these things every once in a while so we know the tests are working and doing their job. So we know what’s going on...so you can stay ahead of it...so you can start kicking its ass early. Right?”

Ali hadn’t thought about it like that before. She had been good about keeping a positive attitude about the procedures themselves. She was hunting for the ovarian cancer before it could get to her. But she hadn’t considered what would happen along the way. She hadn’t really thought about everything that hunt might entail. Of course there were bound to be some frightening moments along the way with some tough terrain to negotiate. This hunt wasn’t some silly walk in the fucking park, was it? She could choose to be paralyzed by fear every time this sort of result happened. Or she could choose to stay positive and aggressive and forward-thinking as she navigated her way through the jungle.

“Of course I could be completely full of shit too” Sydney tried to backtrack when the brunette’s silence dragged on too long.

“No, Syd” Ali turned to face her brave best friend. “You’re right! You’re absolutely fucking brilliant” she leaned over as far as she could and gave the coach a half-hug. “Thank you for helping me see it this way. I never prepared myself for this part of it, but you’re right. This is going to happen, probably a lot if I keep having these every three months, if I keep hunting for this fucking cancer. And I can’t let it destroy me like this” she smiled at Sydney, who grinned right back at her. “God I love you so much” she pulled the coach’s hand up and kissed it before patting it and putting it back down on her leg.

“I love you too” Sydney replied, fighting back tears. “I’m so fucking proud of you Alibaba.”

Dr. Comello’s phone call came Monday mid-morning while Ali was at work, on another call. Part of her wanted to call the doctor right back for the results but part of her wanted Ashlyn with her when she got the news – whatever it was. The brunette had called her wife an hour after her
revelation on Thursday, while Sydney got gas and some snacks for the rest of the drive. Ali poured her heart out to Ashlyn and explained everything as best she could, leaving them both in tears but feeling much better about things, regardless of the test result. And when Ali got home from her NYC trip Saturday afternoon they had reinforced those feelings with one of the longest, strongest hugs they had ever shared. They hugged in the mudroom for so long that the kids got tired of waiting to greet Ali and went back to whatever they had been doing when she walked in the door. And that night they had connected in their favorite way, worshipping each other’s body and making love slowly, tenderly and reverently. They were both still frightened but they had agreed to not let it break them down. Monday morning, as Ali sat there with her phone in her hand, she realized that she didn’t want to get this news alone. She knew she couldn’t wait until she was home or until Ashlyn could drive into Cambridge, so she did the next best thing she could think of.

“Whit?” she poked her head into the lawyer’s office as she knocked on her open door. “You got a minute?”

“Hey Al, what’s up?”

Ali closed the door behind her and the two women sat knee to knee, facing each other, in the two chairs in front of Whitney’s desk. The lawyer held her friend’s hand while Ali put Dr. Comello on speakerphone, then greeted the friendly ob-gyn who had delivered Becca and would soon be delivering Whitney’s second baby.

“Oh Patty” Ali blew out a big breath. “I’m ready.”

They sat together and listened while the doctor explained that there was a tiny little something that had shown up on the second ultrasound too. She wouldn’t even call it anything yet because it was too small and, she thought, insignificant to worry about. The plan was to keep an eye on it at the next ultrasound in July. If it was still there they would compare it to the image from this result and see if it was getting bigger or smaller or changing shape or whatever. But there was nothing to be alarmed about yet.

“And remember” Patty cautioned again, “your bloodwork all came back perfectly fine too, so I really am not worried about this little blip. But we’ll know more next time.”

“Ok Patty, thank you for calling me right away, I really appreciate it” Ali replied, truly grateful.

“No problem. And how’s your heartburn Mrs. Flanagan? Did you figure out what the culprit is?”

“Oh, umm yeah” Whitney answered, surprised that Dr. Comello was talking to her when the call had been so important to Ali. But that was what everybody loved about Patty – she was just so normal and easy to talk to and patient and kind. Sure, she wanted to know how Whitney’s heartburn was, but she also wanted Ali to know that she was so unconcerned about her blip that Whitney’s heartburn might even be more important. “Peppers, green and red. I’ve been careful to avoid them the last couple of weeks and it’s been much better.”

“Excellent sleuth work” Patty chuckled. “I’ll see you in another week then. Have a good afternoon ladies.”

“Thanks Whit” Ali stood and tried to find a way to thank her friend for being there for her but before she could say anything else, the lawyer stood up and hugged her.

“Happy to be the stand-in” she grinned as they pulled apart. “You’re calling her, right?”

“Dialing now” Ali smiled and showed Whitney her phone as it tried to connect with Ashlyn’s
“Tell her I said hi” Whitney smiled as she opened her office door so Ali could go back to her own office and talk with her anxious wife.

“Hey babe, we got good news, I think, from Patty...” Ali winked at the lawyer over her shoulder as she started walking down the hallway. “And Whit says hi...”

The very next weekend was the twins’ birthday party and then two weeks after that was Drew’s. Ali made birthday cakes shaped like a 4 and an 8 and celebrated with more gratitude than usual. How in the hell did their babies get to be four years old already? And how the fuck did Drew get to be their big eight-year old boy so fast? It just didn’t seem possible to either Ali or Ashlyn.

While Tammye and Carol visited for the two weeks between the twins’ birthday and Drew’s, Ashlyn took full advantage and planted this year’s vegetable garden. The kids were still into it and Carol was a huge help. With the older, more experienced gardener’s encouragement and advice, Ashlyn felt confident enough to double the size of last year’s garden. And, as previously discussed, Deb planted two different kinds of full-size tomatoes.

“You’re sure you don’t mind?” Deb asked her daughter-in-law for the third time in as many hours, her gloved hand poised above the raised bed holding a garden digging tool about to get to work.

“Deb, if you ask me again I’m going to start singing the song from Rainbow Days...on repeat!” she threatened with a menacing quirk of her eyebrow.

“Oh God, please no” Deb groaned and then chuckled at the thought of hearing the one song from any of the kids’ tv shows that she, Ali and Ashlyn all despised. Of course, the kids loved it and Josie even played a simplified version of it on the piano. “You win! I won’t ask again, I promise” she laughed and started digging the first hole, glad the kids were still making their way outside to join them and couldn’t hear them trashing their favorite song.

Ashlyn knew she was taking a risk by increasing the size of the garden so much. It was going to be a busy summer with the Women’s World Cup right around the corner, but she felt like she could do it because she wouldn’t be travelling too far for it. The keeper was more excited about the garden than she expected herself to be, buoyed by Carol’s presence and steady hand. It had also helped that she got to enjoy the daffodils and tulips that had bloomed in early April. The couple of hours she had spent back in October planting the bulbs along the side of the house proved to be well worth it. Maybe she could get the hang of this gardening thing after all. Ashlyn was really looking forward to spending time in the dirt with the kids that summer.

The other big events that month were the induction of Kristie Mewis into the Breakers’ Pillars of Excellence at the end of May and the bike-riding progress of the Krieger children. Dodge became the youngest member of the family to learn how to ride a bike with training wheels, achieving the feat at only 4 years and one week old. By comparison, Lily wouldn’t manage it for another whole year. And Josie, perhaps spurred on by her little brother, perfected her bike-riding skill less than a month later by mastering the thing with no training wheels at all.

Ashlyn and an enormously pregnant Whitney made their way onto the field during halftime of the Breakers home game against the NC Courage. Kristie had carefully selected that game so her sister Sam could be there with her for her big day. The younger Mewis was gearing up for the WWC 2027 that was about to take place just two weeks later. It was the USA’s turn to host the prestigious tournament and there would be WWC games played at six different stadiums up and
down the eastern coast of the US, both Boston and NC hosting three group stage games each. Kristie was a local girl who had grown up on the South Shore of Boston, played her college soccer at Boston College, and then spent her entire NWSL career with the Boston Breakers. She had 42 caps with the US youth national teams and 15 caps with the USWNT on her resume as well. She had been loaned out by the Breakers over the years to Canberra United FC in Australia, Iga FC Kunoichi in Japan, and Bayern Munich in Germany, representing her home club proudly at each and every stop. It was the kind of hometown hero story that was truly rare in this day and age of professional sports and the Boston sports fans loved it. She had been one of the best teammates Ashlyn had ever played with, right up there with Whitney and Angela Salem and Tasha Dowie and Julie King. Kristie never shied away from anything on or off the pitch and had often times been the glue that held the team together through some of their more challenging times before Ashlyn and Whitney arrived in 2015 and than again after they retired.

Kristie played twelve seasons with the Breakers, making her the longest tenured Pillar of Excellence member ever. Her good friend and long-time teammate, Julie King, had also played her entire career with the Breakers, including one season in the short-lived Women’s Premier Soccer League Elite which was the precursor to the NWSL. Julie played a total of 11 seasons, retiring 2 years before Kristie and getting her own induction into the Pillars of Excellence back in 2025. Those two players, Kristie in the midfield and Julie on the backline, were quite literally the backbone of the Boston Breakers for over a decade. They were the players who provided the continuity from one era to the next and were a big reason that the Breakers were almost always a competitive playoff team. Truthfully, after Julie and Kristie, no-one was sure who else might merit the ultimate honor of joining the Pillars. Rose Lavelle and Abby Smith would be the next up for consideration in terms of talent but they had both changed teams in recent years and that was always a challenge when it came to retiring numbers and hanging them in the rafters. Those were worries for another day though. Ashlyn watched with pride as Kristie, her family - including her 6-month old baby girl Ellie and her beloved younger sister Sam, raised her banner and her #19 up high for everybody to see forever more.

There were eight Pillars of Excellence now and it made the keeper happy that the last four, including herself, had come during her time on the team. As full and busy and complete as her life now was, Ashlyn knew she would never be able to completely escape the pull of the pitch. Just standing on it as she did that day in May stirred up so many feelings and memories. It had been a tremendous part of her life and of who she was at her very core. A soccer player. Almost the entire first half of her life had been dedicated to her soccer dream and she was incredibly proud of her success and achievements and awards. But if the past 5-1/2 years without soccer were an indication of what the second half of her life was going to be like, then she knew she would be more than satisfied with the trade-off. Nothing could ever mean more to Ashlyn than her wife and her children and their lives together. But she knew in her heart that soccer was a close second. She had poured everything she had into her sport and her body and her teams and her career and it had rewarded her handsomely. There wasn’t one part of her life, now, that would exist without everything that soccer had given back to her. Would she always regret not making the USWNT? Absolutely. Would she always wish she could have played two or maybe even three more years? Most definitely. But aside from that, the keeper didn’t really have any regrets about her soccer life. She would always be grateful for every part of it. And she would always be a little extra thankful for a certain season ticket holder who also happened to sell windows and doors.

Chapter End Notes
I wonder if I'll get my money back for the 2018 season tickets I already bought...
The Women’s World Cup was still THE event in the women’s soccer world. The only thing that even came close was the Olympic Games. This year, 2027, there were 6 groups of 4 teams each and the group games would all be played during the first 10 days of the WWC tournament. The top 2 teams in each group advanced to the knockout stage, along with the 4 best 3rd place teams from the group stage. Each group played their three group games in different East Coast cities in the USA. Starting in the North and moving South, the host cities were Boston, New York City, Washington DC, Raleigh-Durham in NC, Atlanta, and Orlando. In a surprisingly astute effort to cross-promote the NWSL, the games were all being held in the cities on the East Coast with the bigger stadiums. The Washington Spirit being the last team to get with the program and complete their new stadium just two months earlier – barely in time for the beginning of the NWSL season in April. DC was supposed to host the Tournament Final but FIFA moved the game to nearby North Carolina because they weren’t sure the new DC stadium would be completed in time. It was embarrassing for the Spirit, but everybody in women’s soccer appreciated the fact that the tournament was working for instead of against the goals of expanding the NWSL in the USA. The Round of 16 games, the first of the knockouts, were played in Boston, DC, NC and Orlando the following week. Then the Quarterfinals were played in NYC and Atlanta; the Semifinals in Boston; and the Final in NC. The entire rest of the country was furious about having all of the games on the East Coast but the organizers simply pointed out that it was no different than having all of the Olympic Games back in 2024 played in Los Angeles. It was all about keeping the tournament efficient while bringing it to as many fans as possible.

The USWNT was coming off of their historic back to back tournament wins from the 2023 WWC and the 2024 Olympics. No team had ever won those two premier tournaments in back to back years before and the USWNT had been riding the popularity high for 2-1/2 years as they worked towards this year’s WWC. The biggest story coming in to this tournament was the roster and the big names who weren’t on it anymore. Laura Harvey was still the head coach and had made some gutsy moves in her 6th year leading the team. The veteran leaders from the 2024 Olympics, Julie Ertz, Crystal Dunn, Morgan Brian, Abby Smith, Lynn Williams and co-captains Sammy Mewis and Morgan Brian were all 34 and 35 years old now. The only two from that group who made the WWC 2027 squad were Sammy Mewis and Abby Smith and they didn’t crack the starting line-up anymore. Abby Smith was fighting for the starting goalkeeper spot but Jane Campbell won that battle. Both Sammy and Crystal Dunn had been fighting like hell to make the team, knowing that Harvey could probably only bring one of them along. Crystal had been devastated not to make the cut. She said this one hurt even more than when she was the last player cut before the 2015 WWC.

The veterans on the team now were Rose Lavelle, Andi Sullivan, Mallory Pugh, Jane Campbell and Jessie Scarpa, all of whom were between 29 and 32 years old. The youngsters from the 2024 Olympics, Ashley Sanchez, Brooke Bingham, Jojo Harber, Becca Hamilton, Karina Rodriguez, Madison Haley, and Frankie Tagliaferri, were all in their mid-20s now and playing really well together. Those 14 players were the core of the team with Sammy Mewis and Mallory Pugh the co-captains. Ashley Hatch had made the USWNT right after the last Olympics at the ripe old age of 29
and had managed to hold onto her spot now at age 32. The other 8 spots were filled by younger players, aged 22-25, who were just as eager to do their part and make their claim on a spot for next year’s Olympics at the same time. It was as competitive as ever on the USWNT, which only made them all better. Ashlyn and the rest of the four families were particularly thrilled for Kayla Duran, 22 years old, who had been coached at Buckingham, Brown and Nichols by Niki Cross, then gone on to be a star at Boston College, and was now routinely getting call-ups to the senior USWNT team. She had played for the U-20 team two years earlier and made the leap up to the senior national team this year. She was a feisty, hard-working midfielder who was playing in her second year in the NWSL for Kansas City and quickly helping to bring that team back to relevance in the league. She didn’t figure to get much playing time in the WWC unless there were some major injuries but Ashlyn picked her as one of her ‘dark horses’ to watch anyway. She knew Duran had been well-coached and if she did get into one of the games she would represent Niki, BB&N, BC and the New England area well.

The USWNT won their group, defeating Australia in NYC on Monday, June 7th; followed by losing to the Netherlands in Boston on Friday, June 11th; and then defeating Colombia in NC on Tuesday, June 15th. Ashlyn wanted to take her whole family with her to NYC and NC but the Kriegers settled for cheering their hearts out in Boston as the USWNT lost to the Netherlands 2-1. Overall, the team looked good. They had suffered some nerves in the first game and they were lucky to get the win against a very good Australian team. The Netherlands, still climbing after their excellent showing at the 2025 EUROs, got a bit lucky with a crazy bounce off the crossbar for their winning goal. The US had played better soccer and deserved that win. But they righted the ship against Colombia with an impressive 4-1 victory to close out the group stage. Proof that their group had been tough came when three of the four teams moved on to the knockout rounds, only Colombia not making the cut.

Ashlyn flew home after the Colombia game and everybody gathered for sweet Josie’s 6th birthday party on Saturday June 19th. Ali aced the number 6 shaped cake, her confidence at an all-time high after getting the number 5 cake right last year for her oldest girl. This year’s 4 and 8 for the twins and Drew were both pretty easy so she was feeling like Betty Crocker herself when the 6 turned out perfectly too. School had just gotten out two days earlier and the two moms had picked up Drew and Josie from school again and taken them out for ice cream and then to the latest kid movie that had just come out as the end of school treat. On top of all of that, The Academy started on Sunday, June 20th as well. June was the busiest month of the year for the Kriegers in 2027 but it was also one of the very best. The kids, even Dodge and Lily, were excited about the WWC and looking forward to their Thursday afternoons and evenings up at the Academy for the weekly cookouts too. Year 3 of The Academy was shaping up to be the very best yet. Whitney was bummed because she was going to miss most of it again with her baby due at the end of June. And Ashlyn wouldn’t be able to spend much time there until after the WWC ended on July 4th. She would join the invitational 4th week of Camp which she was really looking forward to, because that was the only week that Meg could attend again. The 15-year old only had one more year after this one before she aged out of The Academy completely and Ashlyn was eager to spend more time with her on her goalkeeping skills.

Both Ashlyn and Ali wanted to expose their kids to the WWC, just as they did the Olympics three summers ago. Ali remembered, vividly, attending the iconic 1999 WWC final in Pasadena, California with her parents and brother when she was two weeks shy of her 14th birthday. The third and final Group game for the USWNT back in 1999 had been played at Foxboro Stadium, the old home of the New England Patriots in Foxboro, Massachusetts, and Ken Krieger took his family to that game at the end of June as well. Ali already loved soccer by that time, but seeing those incredible women playing their hearts out and representing their country so valiantly moved the young teen immensely. That 1999 WWC experience is what made Ali believe she could play
professional soccer. It focused her life on soccer and helped make her the person she was today, even though she never realized her dream. Who knew if one of their children might dream even bigger than their moms and achieve that ultimate athletic goal of representing their country at a major world event, like the World Cup.

“Do you think she had a good day?” Ashlyn asked her wife as they tidied up the first floor of the big old house that Saturday night in June.

“I do” Ali nodded and smiled to herself as she thought back over the birthday party they had hosted for 12 of Josie’s friends from school and from music class. “Did you see her and Kayla doing that ballerina routine? I hope to God somebody got that on video” she laughed.

“At first I thought they were trying to go off and just practice it for themselves” the keeper held out the trash bag as her wife dumped plastic cups and napkins and cheese stick wrappers into it. “But then I realized they were just doing it to do it and they didn’t care if anybody was watching or not” she shook her head and grinned. “Until they saw that they had an audience...”

“Yes, then it was stars on parade” Ali laughed again as the image of Josie and her best friend Kayla twirling around in two of the tutus from the basement playroom dress-up bin danced before her eyes. “She is such a ham-bone sometimes.”

“I loved how they didn’t even need to have any music. They just danced to their own.”

“Good thing it was the same song” the brunette joked and they both laughed. “I think she had a great day and I think her friends did too.”

“When are the bounce house people coming to pick the castle up?” Ashlyn asked, tying the garbage bag up as Ali did one final scan of the front living room for any trash or recycling they might have missed.

“Tomorrow at 9am” the brunette smiled when she felt her wife’s hands loop around her waist from behind and her lips press into the back of her neck.

“Oh good, that means we can still go have our own grown-up time in the bounce house” Ashlyn wagged her eyebrows and moved a hand up to cup one of Ali’s breasts while she dragged her lips up her neck and behind her ear.

“Mmmmm...everything about that sounds nice except for the bounce house” Ali giggled and tilted her neck so Ashlyn could reach more of her skin. She put one hand on top of her wife’s as it held their bodies close together at Ali’s waist, and she reached back with her other hand and ran it up the back of the keeper’s thigh. “Do you even watch what goes on in there?” she teased. “No amount of disinfectant would be enough for you babe.”

It had been a long day for both of them but they were missing each other a lot. Ashlyn had been travelling for 10 days covering the USWNT while Ali held down the fort at home and there hadn’t been much quality wife time. And, as often happened when they hosted some sort of kid party at the big old house, they had been tuned into each other all day long, watching from afar or across the room or yard to see if the other needed help with whatever kid or party emergency had just popped up. It was almost like a dance that they did and, more often than not, it created a low-level buzz between them that got stronger as the day wore on. Their own little ballet that they danced around kids and relatives and dogs while carrying trays of pizza or plates of cake or armfuls of juiceboxes in and out of room after room. They stayed spread out, working the whole space and making sure their guests had what they needed. But every once in a while they came together, however fleetingly, to confer about a scenario that they hadn’t anticipated or to find out where the
bandaids had been moved or where the matches had ended up. Those moments felt like a rush as they touched each other lightly, almost in passing, as instructions were passed along and answers given. They were never long enough or intimate enough or frequent enough to do anything other than stoke their longing for more. They both knew what their focus should be on and never wavered from the birthday girl’s or partygoers’ needs. But in the back of their minds they were both aware of that buzzing. There was nothing like wanting something you couldn’t have.

“So, no send-off sex in the bounce house. Got it” Ashlyn giggled against her wife’s neck and began fondling the breast in her hand.

“Oh man, you haven’t called it that in a long time” Ali laughed her short, loud shout of a laugh and turned her head around to see her wife’s goofy grin. “And does it even qualify?”

“Well, I am leaving again tomorrow” Ashlyn shrugged as her dimple appeared on her left cheek.

Ali turned all the way around to face her beloved keeper and smiled when she felt Ashlyn’s hands go right to her ass.

“Yes, but we’re going with you...”

“Oh, you are?” Ashlyn frowned playfully but couldn’t get her dimpled grin to disappear all the way. “I thought that was my other wife.”

“Oh that bitch again huh?” Ali quirked her eyebrow and pulled her keeper close, scratching at the back of her neck with one hand while the other wrapped around her waist and squeezed. She leaned up and gave Ashlyn a slow, deep, passionate kiss that got both their hearts racing. “Well, the choice is yours I suppose...” she flirted, breathlessly, as they leaned their foreheads together and kept their hands moving.

“She never stood a chance” Ashlyn smirked and captured Ali’s lips in another searing kiss. “God, I’ve missed you so much” she mumbled against the brunette’s lips. “Why do I do these tournaments again?” she moaned as Ali started to kiss and suck her way down to Ashlyn’s pulse point.

“Because that’s how we pay our bills” the brunette answered between kisses.

They both groaned when they heard footsteps above them, noisy little heels thudding across the floor.

“I’ll go” Ali murmured as they shared another quick but heated kiss and then pulled themselves away from each other.

“I’ll do the trash and the dogs and meet you upstairs” Ashlyn panted out, biting her bottom lip as she watched Ali’s ass walk away from her and towards the front stairs. “Goddamn, baby.”

Fifteen minutes later Ashlyn took the backstairs two at a time and almost fell on her face as she hurried into the master bedroom. She regained her balance just inside the doorway at the same time she caught sight of her beautiful brunette pulling their most recent Christmas Eve dildo out of her closet. They hadn’t actually exchanged their sexy gifts on Christmas Eve in years, but they still called them that, even if it took four or five days after Christmas to make time for it. Ali smirked at her keeper and climbed on the bed, walking on her knees towards Ashlyn’s side.
“You ok, All-star?” she chuckled and held out the deep red, vibrating dildo that they could both use at the same time, waving it at her wife.

It was a different kind of double-sided dildo than the other two they had tried before, and they both really liked it a lot. It was 16” long and flexible so you could bend it into a lot of different positions. Both ends were identical and vibrated at one of three speeds, operated by a button in the middle section where the batteries went. It wasn’t the perfect size for either Ali or Ashlyn but the vibrating feature made up for it, and then some. Ashlyn bought it for Ali that Christmas in her never-ending quest to find a toy that would help them both come at the same time, and in each other’s arms. That was the keeper’s dream and this red silicone dildo was the closest they had come to it.

“I’m fucking awesome” Ashlyn practically drooled as she took the toy from the brunette and let Ali pull her in for a hot kiss. She deepened it and they both got lost in it for several minutes, making out and tugging at each other’s clothes to get to bare skin wherever they could. When they finally broke for air, Ashlyn exhaled her wife’s name like a prayer, her eyes still closed and the dildo still in her hand. “Ali...”

“Wash that while I get everything else ready” the brunette whispered into her wife’s ear, nibbling on her lobe and pinching her nipple through her t-shirt and bra at the same time.

“Jesus” Ashlyn whispered back, opening her eyes. “I’m already dead and I still have all my clothes on...” she swallowed hard.

“Hurry up” Ali kissed her again and then gently pushed her back away from the bed and towards the master bathroom. “I’m already dripping for you.”

The brunette put on one of their sexy time playlists and lit a scented candle on the fireplace mantel before returning to the bed and pulling the covers all the way to the foot of it. She got the bottle of lube out of the toy box and took off all of her clothes. She turned her light off but kept Ashlyn’s on – they both liked to see each other while they had sex, and then laid down in the middle of the bed to wait for her sexy keeper.

“Fuck me” Ashlyn muttered under her breath when she came out of the bathroom a minute later, her eyes wide at the beautiful sight in front of her.

She dropped the dildo on her side of the bed and quickly stripped, never taking her eyes off of Ali as her hand moved lazily from her chest down to her mound and from hip to hip and back again. Ali bit her bottom lip and felt more passion gush between her legs as she watched her wife’s gorgeous body being revealed to her. Damn, Ashlyn was so fucking beautiful it made her breath catch for a second. The keeper crawled over to Ali and hovered above her body for a minute, trying to take in all of her favorite spots and sights and failing as her desire took over.

“You’re so gorgeous Ali” she breathed out before taking her lips in a slow and passionate kiss.

The brunette pulled Ashlyn’s body down on top of hers and moaned as all of their skin melded together and made every nerve-ending in her body come alive.

“Mmmmmmm...fuck babe...Mmmmmmm, you feel so good...” she mumbled as Ashlyn worked her lips down her neck and to her breasts, spending some time working up both nipples until they stood at attention. Her hands wandered up and down Ali’s body, ghosting touches and then dragging her fingertips against the smooth skin of Ali’s thighs and hips and sides. “Shit, yes...” the brunette moaned as she clutched at the keeper’s back and ass, using one hand to hold her blonde head close to her breast while she worked on the nipple.
Ashlyn slid her knee between Ali’s legs and pressed her thigh up against her pulsing core, soaking wet already. The pressure at her pussy spurred the brunette into action and she flipped them over so she was on top of Ashlyn, making the keeper groan with want.

“God, why is that so fucking sexy?” she wondered aloud as Ali lowered her head and took one of her nipples into her warm mouth, sucking it and flicking it until it was stiff.

“Fuck Ash, I want you so bad...” she mumbled as she moved her mouth to the other breast and started gently scratching at her wife’s mound.

Ashlyn felt for the dildo, knowing it was near the edge of the bed, and found it after a minute. She didn’t think they’d need any lube but didn’t want to risk it so she reached over to Ali’s side of the bed and grabbed the bottle with her other hand. She moaned as she felt a wave of pleasure spread out across her chest from her wife’s magic mouth.

“Christ...I don’t think I can wait anymore” she tilted her head up so she could see what she was doing with the lube and the dildo, squeezing some of the clear gel onto the toy while Ali worked her mouth lower and lower. “Fuck Al...”

Ashlyn repeated her efforts on the other end of the dildo and bent both ends up so it made the shape of a ‘U’. She bent one knee up, the other still stretched out underneath her sexy brunette, and pushed one end of the toy into her own drenched entrance.

“Somebody’s in a hurry” Ali purred as she watched, her head at Ashlyn’s hip, one hand on the keeper’s breast and the other on her prone thigh. She felt another pang deep in her core as the red silicone disappeared inside her wife’s pussy. “Shit babe...that’s so fucking hot...”

“I can’t wait” Ashlyn shook her head as her desire continued to climb rapidly. “Come on” she tugged on her wife’s back. “I want to hold you while we fuck.”

The lust in her voice made Ali all kinds of crazy and she let Ashlyn guide her up so she was straddling her keeper, hovering just above the other half of the dildo that was sticking up and waiting for her to take it inside her throbbing core. Ashlyn held onto her wife’s hips, using all of her willpower not to force her down onto the toy in her eagerness.

“Come on baby, I need you...”

Ali wasn’t trying to tease her keeper. She was trying to get control of herself because she felt like she might come as soon as she took the dildo inside her eager center.

“I’m here sexy, I’ve got you” the brunette leaned down and kissed Ashlyn’s lips while she guided the tip of the dildo through her folds and into her wet and waiting pussy. She felt her walls quiver as she took the 6 inches in and bent the toy up farther so she could lie down on Ashlyn’s body. “Oh fuck...” she groaned as she got into position and felt her keeper’s arms wrap around her waist and back, her large hands moving slowly across her skin and making everything tingle.

“Fuck yes, I love this” Ashlyn mumbled against her wife’s neck as she sucked and nipped at it. “I love you so much.”

They were both extremely turned on and wet and ready. They had each other in their arms and were kissing and moving together, rocking their hips and moaning into each other’s ear. Ashlyn reached down to the underside of the dildo, the part that was between their bodies, and got ready to press the button to start the vibration.

“Are you ready?” she nudged Ali’s head with her nose and kissed her cheek, loving the way the
Brunette was sucking on her neck. Ali knew just the spot behind her ear that made Ashlyn lose her mind.

“Mmmmm Hmmmm” the brunette nodded, pulling her face back so they could see each other. Her eyes were so lidded it was hard to see how dark they had become. She looked into her favorite tawny hazel eyes, just as dark and full of desire, and nodded again. “Do the pulse one first” she requested breathlessly and rolled her hips in anticipation.

“Anything you want, sexy” Ashlyn gasped into her wife’s face when she pushed the button twice to get to the pulse setting and felt the dildo come to life inside of both of them. She closed her eyes and pressed her head back into the pillow when she heard Ali moan at the sensation they were both enjoying. “Fuck that’s hot.”

They spent several minutes pulsing together while their hands grabbed at asses and breasts and pinched and tugged and scratched. Every once in a while Ali’s hip roll would time perfectly with Ashlyn’s thrust and their clits would hit each other and send a fantastic jolt through both of them. They adjusted their rhythm and tried to press their sensitive buds together every other time. They climbed fast, kissing and rubbing and squeezing each other as their bodies danced in time. The delicate ballet from earlier in the day had turned into a hot and sexy kizomba dance with every inch of their bodies pressed together and moving as one. When they were both breathing heavily and their kisses had become sloppy and their heads were dizzy with lust, Ashlyn reached down and pressed the button again and felt her wife grab her tightly as the slower pulsing vibration turned into a faster, stronger, steadier sensation that made them both whine and squeal at first. The keeper rolled them over so they were on their sides, legs intertwined, as they rode the faster pace of the dildo they shared. She saw her wife’s eyes roll back into her head and knew Ali wasn’t going to last much longer. Truthfully, Ashlyn was relieved because she needed to come in the worst way. Having Ali grinding and rolling all over her like that had made her crazy and the ache in her clit was almost painful.

“Jesus...Ashlyn...oh my God...”

“Yes, baby...fuck you feel so good...kiss me...”

When they were panting and sweating and drowning in desire and need, Ali slid her hand between their bodies and started to rub her keeper’s clit, holding her breath when she heard Ashlyn’s mangled cry of passion.

“Fuck Al...yes...mmmnnmmmmmm...” Ashlyn practically writhed as her beautiful brunette worked her tender nub perfectly. She forced herself to focus for another minute and reached down to do the same for Ali, circling her throbbing clit and then rubbing it fast and hard. “Yes...baby, yes...don’t stop...” she whimpered as she felt her orgasm getting closer and closer.

Ali used all the will-power she could muster to keep her fingers moving back and forth across Ashlyn’s clit. She was holding off her own orgasm as long as she could, even backing away from Ashlyn’s hand just a bit, until she could get her keeper off too.

“I’m there baby” Ashlyn groaned. “I’m there...”

“Oh God...fuck, Ashlyn...oh God...” Ali moved back into her keeper’s strong fingers and in another five seconds felt her whole body explode as she came hard. “Yessssssssssssssss!!!!!!!”

“Aaaaaaawwwwwwwww!” the keeper cried out as she followed her wife over the edge.

They held onto each other as they thrashed and shook and spasmed, sweaty skin sliding over scars
and spiderwebs and across dark ink. Ali managed to hit the button two more times to shut the vibration off and they held each other, gasping for breath, faces both covered in soft brunette locks. Neither of them said anything as they lay there, legs tangled, arms holding tightly to one another, and chests heaving. Their playlist continued, the low thumping beats filling the room as the scent of their passion flooded their senses, making the candle obsolete. They didn’t use this double-sided dildo to pound into each other, but it was still extremely satisfying in a completely different way. It was more subtle and required more build-up and more patience and more effort in some ways to reap the benefits. They only used it occasionally or after they’d already shared an orgasm or two. But something about that night, and the slow build-up of the day and the longing for one another from Ashlyn’s travels, had made it just the right toy. By the time they had made it upstairs it felt like they had been using the ben-wa balls for hours already, which they still often did when they knew they had more time to themselves. Every kind of sex Ali and Ashlyn had always felt incredibly intimate, that had never changed a bit for them. But something about the teamwork involved in getting off with this particular toy made them both love it in a different way.

“You know, I’m not sure we could have done that before” Ashlyn admitted shyly as she brushed her favorite chocolate hair off of her wife’s face, both still waiting for their breathing to completely settle down again.

“What do you mean” Ali smiled serenely and kissed her keeper’s lips now that she could see them again.

“This...” she reached down and tilted her hips back so she could pull the end of the dildo out of her own body, “this is different and it takes...practice, no that’s not the right word...”

“Take it out” Ali lifted her leg just enough so her wife could pull the whole toy out of both of them and drop it on the bed. “No, I want to taste you” she whined but somehow made it adorable and sexy.

Ashlyn felt her clit jump when she heard the sultry words and she picked up the double-sided dildo again and moved it up between their chests, so the ends were pointed up near their mouths. She watched, enthralled, as Ali pulled their bodies tight together again and moved her strong tongue in one long stroke up the toy in her hand, never taking her eyes off of her sexy keeper.

“Shit, baby...” she swallowed hard and squeezed the brunette’s ass with a moan.

“This is me” Ali giggled, low in her throat, eyes dark brown and focused on the toy for a minute as she turned it around and switched ends with her wife.

“Sorry” Ashlyn shrugged and smirked.

“It’s ok babe” the brunette returned the smirk and leaned in to kiss Ashlyn’s lips, slipping her tongue into her mouth and moaning. “I love the way I taste when I’m on your lips.”

She pulled back and moved her tongue back to the end of the dildo she was craving, licking it slowly several times and moaning as if it was the best ice cream cone she’d ever tasted. Ashlyn joined her, after watching the sexy show for a minute, and eagerly cleaned up Ali’s end of the toy with her own moans of approval.

“So what do you mean about practice with this?” the brunette nodded at the dildo a few minutes later, after they had both finished their dessert, as she tossed it towards the foot of the bed. “Do you mean we couldn’t have done it when we were younger because we weren’t used to each other yet?”
“Yeah, I guess” Ashlyn shrugged again as they started exchanging soft kisses and caresses, still in their tight embrace and worked up from the flavors they had just enjoyed. “Something like that. I mean, the way we use this one, we have to know what our bodies are going to do and what they need and then we have to, you know, move our own body to make that happen. It’s not about thrusting harder and faster, you know?”

“I do” Ali nodded and kissed her beautiful keeper again, this time a little deeper as her hips started to move against Ashlyn’s ever so slightly. “And you’re right. There’s no way this would have felt good before because this needs coordination and...synergy” her forehead was pressed against her wife’s and they were breathing the same air. “It would have just been like having a dildo inside that didn’t move while I waited for you to touch my clit or something. It just would have been there but not really doing anything for me” she chuckled at the thought. “Which takes me back to my college days, now that you mention it” she laughed.

“Ugh” Ashlyn groaned and rolled her eyes. “I was just starting to feel the...synergy again and you had to go and ruin it with that image” she grumbled and pulled her head back when Ali tried to kiss her again.

“Aww, honey” she cooed. “We all had to start somewhere” she giggled softly. “I’m just lucky I saved the best for last.”

“Such a smooth-talker” Ashlyn grinned, unable to help herself against the sweet and sappy sentiment. They both knew it was true though, for both of them. “If it wasn’t the truth I’d call bullshit” she barely finished the words before the brunette captured her lips again, her hips still moving against the keeper’s.

“Totally true my love” Ali kissed her wife’s lips once more. “And now I’m gonna need some of that thrusting you were talking about...” she purred as she started to work her lips across Ashlyn’s jaw to her ear and then down her neck. “And then I’m gonna eat you up until you pass out.”

“Mmmmmm...that sounds awesome” Ashlyn grinned again and felt her body responding to her wife’s ministrations already. “But we should get some sleep baby. We’ve gotta get everybody ready for our flight tomorrow morning...”

“Shhhhh...” Ali pressed her finger to the keeper’s lips to stop her from talking. “Don’t make me talk about the kids right now” she quirked an eyebrow and tried not to laugh when she saw the apologetic and regretful look flood her wife’s face instantly. “We’re going to enjoy our send-off sex” she smirked and replaced her finger with her lips again. “You asked for it, you got it.”

The USWNT beat Brazil two days later, Monday, June 21st, in Orlando, with most of the Kriegers and Harrises in attendance. It had been a close game, much closer than anyone thought it should have been, and a lot of the soccer pundits were sounding the alarm. As so often happened in the hectic and grueling schedule for the major tournaments, there were some injuries that changed the starting line-up for the USWNT. They hadn’t adjusted well enough and had barely won, 2-1. Ashlyn and her family stayed with Tammye and Carol for a few days before the keeper flew to Atlanta for the Quarterfinal game against England on Friday, June 25th. This game saw another injury take a player out early in the second half and Sammy Mewis, the oldest player on the team, filled the spot in the midfield. She was 35 years old and not the player she once was, but she was still smart and tough and relentless. She got the game-winning goal from distance when a deflected shot cleared all the way back outside the top of the box where she happened to be waiting for it like the wily veteran she was. She one-timed it and gave the USWNT a 3-2 victory to carry them into the semi-final match four days away. As the injuries piled up a lot of attention was turned to the
defense and the high number of goals the US backline and keeper had given up. Nobody liked to point fingers, and defense was a team priority all over the field, but the backline was just not cutting it. They were playing without their usual starting centerback and defensive QB because of injury, but they’d had two games to get the kinks worked out of the communication and it just wasn’t working. There were a lot of nervous fans wringing their hands over the rematch with Sweden coming up in the semi-finals up in Boston.

The USWNT had beaten Sweden in the very first group game of the 2024 Olympics in Los Angeles and hadn’t seen them in tournament play since then. The two teams hadn’t played each other in the 2023 WWC in Australia, with Sweden losing to France in the Quarterfinals as the US defeated Brazil on their march to the Championship victory. Sweden and the US didn’t face each other in the 2020 Olympics in Japan either. The US had defeated Sweden back in the 2019 WWC in Paris, in the Quarterfinals before losing the gut-wrenching Championship Final to France. But if you went back to the 2016 Olympics in Rio you would remember, painfully, how the US lost to Sweden in the Quarterfinals, not even making it to the medal rounds for the first time in the history of the USWNT and the Olympics. The USWNT hadn’t lost to Sweden since then, enjoying almost eleven years of victory whenever they faced the team in friendlies or tournaments. Ashlyn warned everybody not to get too cocky.

“I’m just saying, I spent a lot of time watching this Swedish team play in the EUROs two summers ago and they’re going to be tough to beat. They lost in the Semi-finals to the host team Germany who went on to win the tournament” the keeper cautioned from her place at the Fox Sports analyst desk in the days leading up to the big game.

“And we hear you have some insider intel too” Alex Morgan teased from the seat next to Ashlyn.

“That’s right!” Aly Wagner’s eyes went wide from her seat in the host’s chair. “Caroline Seger is up in Boston right now getting ready to help out at your soccer camp, right?”

It was true, but Ashlyn would rather die a million deaths than use her gig at the WWC to promote The Academy. Both Caroline Seger and Birgit Prinz were in Boston to attend the WWC Semi-final games, then enjoy a week of vacation and celebrate the 4th of July, and then coach at the invitational, fourth week of The Academy. The keeper looked visibly uncomfortable for perhaps the first time ever while doing her soccer analyst job and viewers and colleagues alike could easily see it. She glanced quickly at Aly Wagner and gave her a hint of the glare that she really wanted to send her way.

“Ooooh, somebody’s not happy her secret is out” Alex Morgan tried to laugh it off and lighten the mood, but she had missed the point.

“No, there’s nothing secret about it” Ashlyn started to explain slowly, trying to steady her breathing and her nerves. “Caroline is a friend of mine and she tells me the Swedish team is every bit as good as they look” she shrugged and tried to smile. “I just...I don’t like to talk about The Academy...”

“Your soccer camp” Aly Wagner nodded at her as she clarified.

“Right, yes” Ashlyn took a deep breath and continued. “I don’t like to talk about my soccer camp here...on this platform” she looked into the camera, sincere as ever. “I don’t want to use this or the World Cup, the greatest soccer tournament in the world, to try and promote anything other than these games. That’s all” she smiled sheepishly into the camera, feeling awkward and not really sure where she was going with this little speech. “I’m sorry” she nodded into the camera one last time and then turned back to face her colleagues.
“Good for you” Alex Morgan praised her with a bright and sincere smile. “Your investors are probably swearing at you right now” she chuckled as she patted Ashlyn’s arm on the desk. “But that’s why everybody respects you so much Ash. Your love for the game is pure. Just as it always has been.”

The semi-final was played in Boston on Tuesday, June 29th at 8pm and it was a wild, raucous crowd that cheered the home team Americans on. Germany had already defeated The Netherlands in the earlier semi-final, another close game decided by only one goal. Everybody was pumped up and the atmosphere was electric. Coach Harvey started Kayla Duran, the former player of Niki’s and local star, at midfield as she shuffled the starting line-up to deal with and manage injuries. Sammy Mewis, another local Massachusetts hero, had been the savior of the last game but the idea of starting her and having her play a full 90 plus made the coach uncomfortable. She wanted to save her for the second half when she could be fresh and more impactful on the pitch. The game was very evenly matched throughout the first 45 minutes and both teams went into the locker room scoreless at halftime. Kayla had done very well but Niki was losing her mind because she could tell how conservatively she was playing. The youngster was playing ‘not to make a mistake’ instead of playing her game. That approach might not cost the US the game, but it certainly wasn’t going to win it for them. Frankie Tagliaferi, the hero of the last Olympics, finally broke through and scored a beautiful goal off a set piece corner kick to get the scoring started. The inexperienced US backline couldn’t keep the Swedish forwards at bay for much longer though as they scored three quick goals in the span of twenty minutes. The last goal came at a price too. Jane Campbell, the US starting goalkeeper went down after colliding with a Swedish player and a couple of her own teammates right inside the box. Abby Smith, the second-oldest player on the team at 34 years of age, took her place and looked surprisingly calm and focused. The US had just under ten minutes to score the equalizer and they went right into attack mode to try and get it. The crowd roared when Sammy Mewis subbed in for those last ten minutes, Harvey clearly wanted her tall, powerful body in front of the Swedish goal as one of the primary targets. The Swedes bunkered and crowded their defensive third of the field, daring the US to try and score. It was almost like a practice that was focused solely on set pieces and crosses as the US launched ball after ball into the box. Twice the Swedes cleared the ball long and got threatening counter attacks down the pitch, but Abby Smith was up to the challenge. She stopped both powerful shots, one of which was a one on one against Sweden’s top striker, and sent the ball back down the pitch for more target practice. Mewis got her head onto one ball with under a minute left and it squirted into the back of the net, making the whole stadium explode and cheer their hearts out. But it was called back because of a very questionable off-side call on Mallory Pugh who had to be restrained by her co-captain before she got a red card for saying terrible things to the referee. That call was soul-sucking for the USWNT and the whole crowd as well as Sweden could feel it. As the final seconds ticked away everyone knew the USWNT just didn’t have enough that year. The injuries had come to just the wrong players at just the wrong time and they couldn’t quite overcome them. They showed great heart and tremendous courage and they never gave up, not even for a second. Even after the off-side call they managed to get three more shots off, but they were desperate and not well-taken.

It was a crushing defeat, losing on home soil like that in a game that had been so close. None of the fans wanted to leave either. They stood or sat in the stadium with looks of disbelief on their faces while watching the players cool down and congratulate each other on a good, competitive game. Then they watched the Swedes celebrating in their bright yellow jerseys while the USWNT milled around consoling one another.

“Do you think a healthy US team would have won this game Ashlyn?” Aly Wagner asked as they got ready to end the broadcast after watching their colleagues interviewing distraught players and frustrated coaches down on the pitch.

“Well, it doesn’t matter because they weren’t healthy and they didn’t win the game” the keeper
replied with a bit of bite. Fans that had watched her over the years knew she hated those ‘what if’ questions and she usually refused to answer them, politely of course. “But yeah,” she paused for a second and nodded thoughtfully, “Yeah I do. I’m really proud of this team and America should be too.”

As if to further prove the point about their gutsiness and never say die attitude, the severely depleted USWNT went on to win the runner-up game against The Netherlands team down in NC on Sunday, July 4th by a score of 4-3. When they were interviewed after the game, almost all of the players answered questions with the same sort of answers about owing the country a big win and wanting to win on the 4th of July no matter what state of health the team was in. Ashlyn got emotional at the end of that broadcast too, moved by the determination and pride of the players. She spent a good five minutes talking, without preparing anything, about several of the players and their individual sacrifices and achievements. She revealed some details about players who were playing through injuries without being officially designated as injured. Everybody who had wondered about why Jessie Scarpa only scored three goals for the whole tournament learned that she had been playing with two busted up ankles that had been heavily taped before the game, then iced and re-taped at halftime so she could even take the pitch. And she made special mention of her old friend and former teammate Abby Smith playing so well in what was sure to be her last game ever with the USWNT. Half of the country was in tears as Ashlyn finally finished talking about the brave women down on the pitch and how proud she was of them. Aly Wagner wisely knew that nothing else needed to be added and solemnly thanked her colleagues and signed off the WWC 2027 for good, Ashlyn’s patriotic words ringing in everyone’s ear.

Chapter End Notes

So I'm trying not to get too excited about the potential last-second new ownership that's supposed to maybe kinda be trying to pull itself together today to take over the Breakers...but the tiny kernel of hope is alive in my heart.
Whitney Flanagan didn’t make it to the semi-final game on Tuesday evening with the rest of the four families and extended Krieger clan. She was busy giving birth to her son, Thomas Engen Flanagan, and couldn’t have cared less about soccer on that day. Her water had broken Sunday evening and then she and Ryan had gone to the hospital Monday mid-morning after working through early labor at home. Ryan’s sister and parents had come up for the weekend, and the soccer game, and were taking care of Becca, calling Ali occasionally if there was something the 2-1/2 year needed that they couldn’t figure out. Ali spent a lot of time with the little girl, because Whitney brought her to the daycare at Knight-Harris, and knew many of her routines. Whitney labored and pushed and fought all afternoon Monday, through the night and most of the day Tuesday before Dr. Comello finally told her it was time to do a C-section. The lawyer had tried so hard to avoid that, so hard in fact that she was practically passed out on the birthing table. Ryan admired and loved his brave wife’s commitment to her birthing plan but he was starting to get worried about her. If Thomas was anything like his sister Becca he would be a big baby and the delivery was still going to require a lot of strength and stamina, neither of which his wife had any left.

“Whitney, I know you don’t want to give up” Dr. Comello took her patient’s hand and held it as she moved up next to her so they could talk. “You’ve worked so hard and I know you want to keep going, but, as your doctor, and as your baby’s doctor, I have to tell you that it’s time to go to plan B. You’ve been incredibly strong, all this time, but your own health is becoming a concern at this point. We need to do the C-section and I’d like to do it right away.”

“Is there something wrong?” Ryan asked, his face exhausted from being with his wife every single step of the way and now full of fear.

“No, not yet” Patty set her mouth in a grim line. “But this is the time that things start to go wrong. Trust me, please” she entreated the couple. “The longer we wait the more we’re putting your son at risk too.”

She knew that would get them and she hated to use that one in her talks with the patients if she didn’t absolutely have to. There was nothing worse than preying on the parents’ anxious minds at a time like this. But the doctor knew it was time to cut their losses before there was a real loss of some kind, or a complication.

“Whit, baby, it’s time” Ryan kissed his wife’s sweaty forehead. “It’s my fault and I’m sorry” he squeezed her hand and kissed her lips as the doctor moved back to the foot of the table to give them a moment. “If my babies weren’t so damned big you would have crushed this delivery, just like you did Becca’s. I’m so sorry honey.”

Hearing her sweet, stoic husband taking the blame for something that really didn’t need any fault assigned in the first place snapped the lawyer out of her haze.

“I love you Ry” she smiled weakly at him. “And I love our boy. I think it's time we finally got to meet him.”

Thomas was indeed bigger than his big sister, and that was saying something. The C-section went smoothly and quickly and by 6pm Tuesday evening the Flanagans were a family of four. Ryan texted the good news to Ashlyn and Ali, knowing the keeper was on national television at the time because the first semi-final game was on in the visitor’s lounge just down the hall, and then went to find his parents who had come to the hospital once he told them about the C-section. Both
mother and son were healthy, but Whitney slept like the dead every single time her son took a nap, with Ryan waking them both up for feedings. It was after midnight when the new father stepped out of the room to send some more texts and find some more coffee. He turned the corner and saw Ashlyn at the nurse’s station, trying to talk her way into her best friend’s room. The coach knew it had killed her to not be able to be there for her best friend, especially knowing how difficult Whitney’s labor had been. Ashlyn and Niki had been at the hospital Monday afternoon and taken turns again until Dr. Comello finally told the keeper that the baby wasn’t coming anytime soon. Ashlyn would be picking Whitney’s parents up at the airport later that day, Wednesday, but she couldn’t drive all the way back up to the big old house without stopping to check on her bestie that night.

“It’s alright” Ryan smiled as he hugged Ashlyn. “She’s as close to family as you can get. She can come in.”

“I just need to see her and make sure she’s ok” Ashlyn spoke quickly and quietly as they walked the short distance to the room. “I won’t stay more than a minute...I just couldn’t drive by the exit without...”

“I know” he smiled and patted her on the back. “She’s really out of it. She’s been asleep every time he goes down and I don’t want to wake her up.”

“I promise” she gave him her most serious look. “She won’t even know I’m here. She should be exhausted.”

As they walked into the dark, quiet room Ashlyn could smell the slight antiseptic smell of hospital rooms, even though it was disguised by baby wipes and baby powder. She let the door close behind them and waited a few seconds for her eyes to adjust, standing still at the foot of her best friend’s bed. The baby was asleep in his bassinette just to Ashlyn’s right but she hadn’t even looked his way yet. The keeper flashed back to how frightened Ali had been that long night when Sydney struggled to deliver Cassius. She hadn’t quite understood how that had felt until this very night as she sat helpless while someone she loved in such a strong and unique way was suffering. Ashlyn was almost glad for the distraction of the semi-finals, except that she caught her thoughts drifting to the hospital delivery room instead of focusing on the first game in front of her. She was grateful that she wasn’t doing the live call of either game. That might have been a disaster for her in such a distracted state. But she had been able to focus when she needed to and even managed a small shoutout at the end of the pre-game section of the USWNT game. She didn’t want to use any names or give away anything so she just added in a quick ‘way to go wee’ as Aly Wagner was taking them to commercial. Ashlyn didn’t use the nickname very often because Whitney absolutely hated it, her cousins used to tease her with it when they were little. Whitney Elizabeth Engen’s initials spelled wee, which was why the lawyer had never owned a single monogrammed anything in her life. Ashlyn knew Whitney wasn’t watching at the moment, or she hoped she wasn’t anyway, but she just had to let her know that her heart was with her.

After a minute staring at the sleeping mother, Ashlyn turned her attention to little Thomas who was really not so little. Becca had been eight pounds and eleven ounces and Thomas was nine pounds and ten ounces. Ouch. But he looked absolutely perfect.

“He’s beautiful” she whispered and grinned at the new father. “Way to go Ry” she gave him a side hug. “So I’m around until Saturday, tell her to call me all the time, any time she has a question, no matter what time it is...and we’ll be in to see you guys tomorrow too. We’ll bring you real food, whatever you want.”

“Ok Ash, I got it” he turned the rambling woman towards the door with a quiet chuckle and a soft
squeeze. “I’ll tell her.”

She stopped him before he opened the door with another serious look on her face.

“Do you remember what we talked about last time?”

“Umm, oh yeah, I do” he cleared his throat quietly. “I still have those notes” he blushed but Ashlyn couldn’t see it in the dim light.

“Well all of that still applies, but now she’s going to go crazy because she won’t be able to pick the baby up, or Becca” she quirked her eyebrow at the man she was entrusting her best friend’s well-being to. “I know from experience it will drive her insane and piss her off. So just be ready for that. And remember the pillow for her to hold over her incision...”

Ashlyn spent ten more minutes giving Ryan the rundown of the most important parts of caring for your wife who had just had a C-section and Ryan, just like last time, diligently punched notes into his phone. They hugged again and he walked her out the door a few feet before calling her name as she started to walk away.

“Thank you” he swallowed, surprised by how emotional he felt in that moment. “For loving her so much.”

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The Academy continued to get better and more popular and year 3 was the best one yet. High-caliber guest coaches kept coming to spend a week or sometimes two at the camp and everything was finally falling into place financially. With all the big-name guest coaches and the hysterical social media posts from most of them and their time at the camp, advertisers and investors and sponsors began asking to be involved. Nike stepped up right away with clothing, gear and equipment. The Breakers were smart enough to work part of their development academy through The Academy and even US Soccer was starting to monitor the camp’s success and popularity. This would be the second year that part of the official USWNT training staff attended most of the eight weeks of the Academy and that was a great sign that Ashlyn, Whitney, Cat and the rest of the crew were doing something very right.

When the NWSL schedule changed in the middle of July to make up for a rained-out game between the Houston Dash and the New York Power, both Kealia Ohai and Crystal Dunn had to back out of their commitment to coach week 5 of The Academy. The former Tarheel teammates had arranged and planned their coaching week together when they found out their NWSL teams had the same bye week that season. Both women were playing in their final NWSL seasons at 34 and 35 years old, respectively. Both were happily married and not willing to wait any longer to start their families.

“Well now we’re fucked” Ashlyn sighed as she slumped down into the chair at the end of the nook table in the big old house and picked up the bottle of beer she had been drinking before the phone call had pulled her away.

“Still no luck?” Nathan asked, well aware of the scheduling problem at The Academy.

It was late Wednesday afternoon, July 7th, and the keeper had only been home from her WWC Finals duty in North Carolina for two days. She had a week and a half to find two, or at least one, guest coach to fill in for Kealia and Crystal and she had exhausted every avenue she could think of. Kyle, Nathan, Edgar, Cristina and Peaches were visiting for their week of summer vacation around the July 4th holiday again. They had decided to make it an annual thing, as long as Deb and Ali
were ok with them crashing at their condo and house every year. Both women were thrilled with the idea.

“No” Ashlyn groaned and sighed heavily. “I’ll fill one spot but Whitney can’t do the other...”

“Right” Nathan nodded and took a swig of his own beer, “she just had the baby.”

“Exactly.”

The mudroom door opened and then closed quickly and the keeper heard her wife’s adorable little yelp as she hopped quickly into the mudroom to get out of the pouring rain. Beach vacations weren’t very fun when the weather didn’t cooperate. Luckily, the rain was only supposed to last for the day and the NYC Kriegers could get back to the ocean tomorrow. Ali put her briefcase down and shook off her lightweight trench coat, greeting the two dogs and one puppy at her knees cheerfully.

“Hey sugarplum” Ashlyn smiled as she watched her wife walk towards them, wiping some rain from her forehead with the palm of one hand while the dogs and puppy followed her in their own little caravan.

“Hi babe” the brunette leaned down and pecked her keeper’s lips, hands on her shoulders from behind, before smiling at Nathan. “Hey Nate. Where is everybody?” she asked as she helped herself to her wife’s beer.

“Kyle and Grandma are playing board games down in the playroom” he grinned.

“With everybody?” she raised her eyebrows.

“Yes. But we had to keep the dogs up here so they wouldn’t walk all over everything and wreck it” he chuckled.

“What’s with the long face?” Ali turned her attention back to the keeper and cupped her cheek when she saw the distress there.

“I can’t get anybody to coach week 5 and there’s nobody left to ask” she exhaled. “And even if I could find somebody who might be interested, it’s too short notice. They’d never be able to get their schedule cleared and be here in a week and half.”

“Aw, I’m sorry honey” the brunette frowned and moved her hand down to Ashlyn’s shoulder, giving it a squeeze. “I’m going to go change, but I’ll be right down...” she started to move towards the backstairs, frustration mounting.


“Nate” Ali shot her brother-in-law an aggravated glance, turning back towards the table where Ashlyn’s back was to her.

Coaching at The Academy was something the brunette very much wanted to do. She and Ashlyn had talked about it back when the keeper first told her about her dream of making the soccer camp a reality, before she had even gotten pregnant with the twins. But somehow between then and now the subject had never come up again. Neither woman wanted to push, each unsure if the other really wanted it to happen, so they still hadn’t talked about it. Ali had confided in her brother how much she wanted to join her wife at the soccer camp so they could finally share soccer, even if it was just for a week or a month or a summer.
“Al?” Ashlyn turned around in her chair so she could face the brunette. “I’d love for you to come and coach...if that’s something you want to do...?” she asked more than spoke as her eyes searched Ali’s face.

“You know I want to coach with you...” a flash of anger filled Ali’s whiskey-colored eyes. She glanced over Ashlyn’s shoulder to where Nathan was sitting, unaware of the rift he had just innocently caused. “Just forget it” she shook her head and turned to go up and change her clothes.

Ashlyn followed, sighing as she got up from the table. She knew this conversation was going to happen eventually but she had hoped it would begin better than this.

“Ali, sweetheart” she started as she closed the master bedroom door at the top of the backstairs behind her. “Can we talk about this? Please?”

Ali was already half undressed, hanging her suit up in her closet by the head of the bed on her side. She looked quickly at her wife and then right back down at the buttons on her blouse that she was undoing. She tried to stay calm but her emotions were all over the place. She was angry with Ashlyn for not asking her before now. It was the third fucking year of the Academy and she still hadn’t asked her. And she was embarrassed that she was so upset about it anyway. And she was frustrated with herself for not being strong enough to bring the subject up with her wife in the first place. She had always been the one to broach the difficult subjects with the keeper. But this time she really wanted, or needed, Ashlyn to take the lead. This time the brunette’s lack of confidence had kept her from making the first move and that had left the ball in her wife’s court.

“I’ve been waiting three years for you to talk to me about this” she said with a little heat, despite telling herself to chill out, as she continued to get undressed and change clothes.

“What do you mean?” the keeper’s voice sounded anxious and confused as she moved around the foot of the bed to get closer to the brunette, as if that would make things clearer. “Al, I’ve been waiting for you to be ready...I’ve been waiting for you to say something...”

“Ha” Ali laughed derisively and shot an annoyed look at the blonde. “I told you the very first time you talked to me about The Academy how much I wanted to share that with you...how much I wanted to coach there with you” she shook her head as she took in the surprised look on Ashlyn’s face, as if it was the first time she was hearing this information. “Don’t tell me you don’t remember. We talked about it a lot.”

“I do remember” Ashlyn dropped her head and took a deep breath. “We were on vacation in Costa Rica. It was the year you did every wonderful thing you could think of for me before I got pregnant with the twins, including a surfing vacation” she smiled at the memory. “I was nervous to tell you about my dream...about The Academy but you couldn’t have been more excited about it. You believed in me, and it, from the very first minute I told you about it. And you told me that very night that you wanted to coach with me there...”

“So why are we just talking about this again now?” Ali raised her voice as she pulled a tank-top over her head and put her hands on her hips to stare at the keeper.

Ashlyn tilted her head and did her best not to smile too big or chuckle at the sight of her feisty wife standing there with nothing but her panties on her bottom half. This was serious and it was important and even though she had been trying not to pressure Ali into anything having to do with soccer, she had ended up hurting her instead. Ashlyn had pushed her wife into helping at one of her soccer clinics in the past and it had nearly broken the brunette.

“I was afraid baby...I’ll never forgive myself for pushing you back into soccer too soon
“Ashlyn...” Ali interrupted with another frustrated sigh.

“I know!” the blonde yelled, surprising her wife. “I know” she sat on the bed and rubbed her face with both hands. “I know you’re past that and I know you think it was a good thing because it made you realize you really did want to try and love soccer again...I know honey...”

“So I don’t get it then” Ali sat next to her wife, taking her hand into her lap and rubbing her arm. “If you knew that then why...”

“I just thought you’d ask me about it when you were ready” Ashlyn shrugged and met Ali’s confused and worried eyes. “It seemed like the best way to handle it, you know...just in case you had changed your mind.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?!!”

“No” Ashlyn felt her temper flare when Ali yelled at her. “Why haven’t you said anything for three years??!” she yelled back.

They sat there on the edge of the bed for a few minutes, both trying to understand the other’s reasoning behind the misunderstanding. They didn’t touch each other or look at one another as they sat and thought and regretted.

“I thought...maybe you wanted to keep The Academy for yourself” Ali finally admitted, her voice quiet and shy, almost apologetic. “Like maybe you wanted something that was just yours, and that I didn’t insert my way into...”

“Ali, baby, what are you talking about?” the keeper squinted at her wife as she tried to understand her words.

“It’s just that I’m already working with you at Knight-Harris, and I’m your agent, and you’ve been dreaming about The Academy for so long, way before you ever even knew me...I just thought maybe you didn’t want me to be involved and, you know,” she shrugged and started to blush a little, “you were just too nice to say anything about it. It would be ok if that’s how you felt” she added quickly. “I’d totally understand. I’d be disappointed, I can’t lie, but I’d get it. I don’t want to smother you Ashlyn.”

“Sweetheart” the keeper scooted closer and took Ali’s hand in both of hers. “I promise you, the only reason I haven’t asked you to coach with me at The Academy is because I’m afraid you’d only say yes because you know it’s important to me.” Ashlyn dropped her eyes for a second and took another deep breath before looking back up again. “I thought maybe you had changed your mind about it and I was afraid to bring it up.”

They looked at each other for a couple of minutes, both of them recognizing the truth the other had just shared for the very first time.

“Ughh, we’re such idiots” Ali bent her head forward and leaned her forehead into Ashlyn’s bicep. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly as she felt her anger and hurt fading away. She felt her keeper’s hand rubbing her thigh softly, waiting for whatever was next. “I can’t believe we still do this to ourselves” the brunette groaned.

“I’m so sorry” Ashlyn turned her head and kissed the top of Ali’s, still leaning against her arm. “I should have just asked you. You told me you were ready five fucking years ago...” she chuckled ruefully and rolled her eyes as Ali sat up to look at her. “You don’t say you’re ready if you’re not
“I should have just talked to you about it” Ali offered meekly, moving her hand to the back of Ashlyn’s neck and playing with the short hair there.

“Why didn’t you?” Ashlyn turned to look into her wife’s pretty face. “I mean, I’m not blaming you or anything” she spoke quickly, hoping to better explain herself before she pissed Ali off again. “It’s just not really like you to let something like that go without calling me out on it.”

“I don’t know” Ali shrugged again. “I really needed this to come from you this time. I think just because it’s your baby, your dream, and I didn’t want to intrude or something.”

Ashlyn didn’t say anything, she just brought their lips together in a sweet and tender kiss as they wrapped their arms around each other. They rested their chins on each other’s shoulders and continued their embrace for another long few minutes as their hurt feelings mended.

“Alexandra, will you please come and coach with me at The Academy? Whenever, and for however long, you fucking want to? Pretty please?”

“Ow, no pinching” Ashlyn squealed as she tried to intercept and hold her wife’s hands and arms. “Ok, ok, I give up” she laughed and finally leaned back on the bed in an effort to escape. They were both quiet for a minute, chuckling and catching their breath as they looked into each other’s eyes full of love and forgiveness and relief. Ashlyn took her wife’s hand and held it to her chest as she lay on the bed looking up at her. “Will you please bail my ass out for week 5 and then coach whenever the fuck you want? Pretty please?”

“With whipped cream on it?” Ali smirked and straddled her wife’s hips, still holding hands.

“With whipped cream on it” Ashlyn added. “The good kind, not that low-fat shit that tastes disgusting.”

Ali laughed her short, loud shout of a laugh and bent over to kiss her wife’s lips. “And a cherry on top?” she mumbled against them, grinning.

“And two cherries on top, with the long stems so you can tie them into knots in that amazing mouth of yours” Ashlyn wagged her eyebrows and grinned back.

“Weeeeelllll” Ali teased, stretching the word out as she sat back up on her keeper’s hips. “As long as we promise to stop doing this to ourselves…”

“I promise Al” Ashlyn’s tone was serious and she squeezed Ali’s hands to emphasize it. “Next time we’ll just talk about it like normal people. I promise.”

“Then yes, it’s a deal” Ali smiled and then chuckled when she felt Ashlyn move her hands to her butt that was still just covered by pretty purple panties.

“Yesssssssss!” Ashlyn grinned and her dimple appeared.

“Incoming!” a voice called out from the bottom of the backstairs.

“You’d better put some pants on woman” Ashlyn enjoyed one last squeeze of the sexiest ass in the
world. “We’re about to be invaded.”

“Mommy!” Josie yelled as she burst through the door, excited to see Ali after her day at work.

Drew and Dodge were right behind her and both moms knew they had probably fought at the top of the stairs about who would open the door, giving Josie the chance to make her move. Lily brought up the rear, leading the dog parade that quickly marched through the master bedroom.

“Hi guys!” Ali greeted them after pulling on her shorts and kneeling on the bed.

In a matter of seconds, there was one big pigpile of Kriegers rolling around on the queen-sized bed, laughing and giggling and squealing in delight. Both Ashlyn and Ali were disappointed with themselves but relieved that they had finally smartened up and gotten the issue put to rest, once and for all. Ashlyn was surprised that her wife had been so shy and timid about bringing the subject up with her. Ali was surprised to learn that her keeper had let her concerns and regrets about having Ali work at one of her earliest soccer clinics influence the way she handled the idea of the brunette coaching with her at The Academy. Both women had been uncharacteristically tentative about it and they had suffered because of it. As angry as Ali was at her brother for telling Nathan what she had confided in him, she was grateful that her brother-in-law had brought the issue to a head and basically forced she and Ashlyn to deal with it once and for all. She was still going to kill Kyle though.

The rest of the NYC Kriegers visit was peaceful and fun and relaxing. This year they stayed at the big old house with Ali and her family and the two moms were careful not to surprise either Edgar or Cristina with any big, bold or loud physical contact. The foster kids had been improving by leaps and bounds and it was hard to remember just how terrified they had both been 16 months ago at that first Easter gathering. Both kids had bonded with Ashlyn, easing into her first because she didn’t look like a typical mother figure. They played with her in the ocean and on the beach and in the backyard. All of the grown-ups in the room celebrated silently when Cristina crawled up into Ashlyn’s lap one evening before bed and snuggled into her arm to finish watching whatever show was on tv. Edgar had been easier than Cristina for both women to get close to and Ali had been satisfied with the progress made there, even though she longed for Cristina to feel comfortable enough to snuggle with her as well. Edgar found Ali more than willing to kick the soccer ball around with him and that little bond had led to working on puzzles together and taking the dogs for a walk together, among other things. Both kids were still seeing a therapist at home in NYC and probably would for a long time to come. Their wounds were deep and needed trust and time and love to heal them. They had found the trust and love in their foster dads and were just waiting for the time part of the equation to kick in. Staying together under one roof facilitated a lot of familiarity and cohesiveness among the cousins and aunts and uncles that week. Ali and Kyle had been nervous to try it but both Ashlyn and Nathan thought it was an important step to take. Nobody wanted to coddle the Guerreros, but nobody wanted to cause them any undue pain or suffering either. It was a delicate balance that they struggled to achieve.

“So what do you think?” Ashlyn’s eyes darted from one man to the other as she waited anxiously for a reply.

“Wow Ash, I don’t know” Kyle looked at Nathan and then back at his sister-in-law.

Nathan shrugged his shoulders and let out the breath he was holding as he considered Ashlyn’s suggestion.

“I understand the risks” he said, slowly. “But help me understand why it might be a good idea.”
“Nah, never mind” she shook her head and looked down, picking at the seam of her joggers as they all sat together on the big couch in the front living room. “It’s a stupid idea.”

“Nobody said that babe” Ali reached over and rubbed her hand across her wife’s bowed back. “Just tell them what you told me, help them understand.”

“I know I didn’t lose my parents like they lost their mom, permanently” she began slowly and carefully, leaning forward with her elbows on her knees as she tried to explain. “But I lost them to alcohol and addiction, just like they lost their mom to drugs and who knows what else.” She swallowed hard and kept going as both Kyle and Nathan listened intently. “I just...I thought it might help them to know that you can grow up strong and have a good life with a nice family and people who love you, even if you start out with addicts for parents. The shitty way their mom made them feel every time she chose drugs over them...I want them to know that they don’t have to feel like that anymore. I want them to know that their mom treated them like...that...and it really had nothing to do with them at all. I know what it felt like to never be enough...to never be good enough to get them to stay, to get them to love you as much as they loved drinking, or doing drugs like their mom did.”

“I’ve talked with them a little bit about what it feels like to be an addict” Kyle offered quietly. “Well, mostly Edgar because Cristina’s still so young it’s hard for her to understand. Our family counselor says it’s good for them to try and understand why their mom was that way, why she was abusive. She was sick. She was an addict and it made her do terrible things.”

“I think it would be great for you to have that conversation with them Ash” Nathan spoke up after Kyle’s voice went soft and then quiet. “If they don’t get it now, at least they’ll know they can talk to you when they do have questions about it or when they’re ready to talk more themselves.” He gave her a warm smile. “Are you sure you don’t mind doing it?”

“It took me a long time to figure out that there was nothing I could have done to make things turn out differently. I beat myself up for years thinking if I had just been...better at everything, they would have given up drinking and stayed home with me and Chris like normal parents. If I can help Edgar and Cristina figure that out faster or easier...well, I’d do anything to make that happen.”

They waited until they were just more than halfway through their 10-day vacation for Ashlyn to have the conversation with the Guerreros. They were all comfortable with each other and there was still time left to fix something if anything went wrong during the talk. Ashlyn thought they should do it at the beach because both kids loved being there and she hoped the comfort they found there would help them hear what she was going to try to say. Kyle and Nathan sat up by the beach blanket in folding chairs and tried to act nonchalant as they watched the keeper sitting in the surf with Edgar and Cristina in a close little semi-circle. They watched as Edgar, sitting in between Ashlyn and his sister, turned his face up to the keeper and listened attentively. He asked a few questions now and then and looked over at his sister, seemingly trying to keep her involved in the conversation too. Cristina kept her head down the whole time as she dug with her hands in the rough sand on either side of her. The whole thing only lasted about twenty minutes and then Edgar and Ashlyn shared the goofy little handshake they had come up with earlier in the week and turned their faces out to the sea. They sat like that for another few minutes before Ashlyn looked up to Kyle and Nathan and gave them a thumbs up. Whether the kids needed it that day or if they wouldn’t need it for another few years or more, they had someone in their corner who had a little bit of an idea of what their world had been like before. It was a tremendous gift that Ashlyn had given them that day in the surf. She had given them hope and possibility and a living example of someone who, with the help of her grandparents, had grown up to become a good and decent human being despite the limitations placed on her by her addict parents. She had shown them that, with the help of their foster dads, they could do the exact same thing.
By the end of July Meg had completed, and excelled in, her week at The Academy’s invitational 4th session. She was 15-1/2 years old and improving at a rapid pace. She had aged out of the standard weeks of camp which were for girls aged 9-14. Niki and Cat Whitehill couldn’t stop talking about the improvement the girl had shown since the summer before. Ashlyn attributed it to Meg’s decision to apply herself more and practice more and fuel her body better. She would be embarking on her sophomore year of high school in two months and, despite her ‘runaway’ difficulties 16 months ago, she was maturing right before everyone’s eyes. Meg had her heart set on winning the starting goalkeeper spot at school that year and was willing to sacrifice almost anything to achieve her goal. She spent most of her summer down in DC attending different basketball and soccer camps in the area. She would be joining the Kriegers for their August vacation with the four families this summer and it would be hard to say who was more excited about that – Meg or Ashlyn.

The week right after Meg’s visit was the 5th week of The Academy and Ali went up with her wife and four children and worked the camp like she had been wanting to for three years. She was nervous at first but the environment was so welcoming and familiar to her that she felt at ease pretty quickly. She had been to hundreds of soccer camps in her youth and this, really, was no different at its core. It turned out to be one of the very best weeks of Ali’s life and she was sad to see it end. Having her wife and best friend there with her as fellow coaches, as well as Niki and Cat Whitehill and other strong women that she knew and appreciated, had been uplifting and enlightening and empowering. It had also been a shit-ton of fun. The kids loved every minute of it too, even when Ali and Ashlyn worried about them not getting enough sleep as they all piled into a coach’s bunk house together. If Ali had her druthers she’d coach all eight weeks of that camp every summer. But she had her own job to do back at Knight-Harris and she knew her coaching gig was going to have to be limited. The brunette told herself that it would only make the time she could coach up there that much more special.

“So are you glad you’re here?” Ashlyn asked quietly the first night, Sunday, of week 5. They were snuggled into bed together, having pushed two of the single bunk beds together, side by side, and then laying their air mattress across it to make their own double bed. “No regrets?”

“None” Ali smiled and squeezed her wife as she nestled into Ashlyn’s side. “Except maybe drilling that ball into Syd’s ass” she chuckled softly. “She’s gonna make me pay for that.”

“Yeah she will” Ashlyn giggled and kissed her wife’s head. “I’m so glad you’re here, don’t get me wrong, but you’re kind of ruining it for me.”

“What?” Ali pulled her head back to look up at her keeper’s grinning face.

“Well, now it’s going to suck being here without you when you’re not here” she winked and giggled again.

“Ugh, you’re the worst” Ali playfully smacked her wife’s chest and then kissed her lips. They were both quiet for a few minutes, settling down and getting ready to fall asleep. The kids were all asleep in their bunks around them, exhausted from their busy day at enjoying everything else at the camp. “I’m really proud of myself” the brunette whispered, as if it was too much to say out loud.

Ashlyn could barely hear her and it took her a couple of seconds to make sense of what her wife had confessed. She squeezed Ali tightly under her arm.

“You should be baby. I’m glad you finally said it” she kissed the top of her head again. “I’ve been saying it for years and it’s nice to have someone to say it with now. I’m so fucking proud of you
Al. Thank you for being here. I love you.”
Ashlyn was excited to get the 7th week of The Academy started because her brother and his family were coming up for the same week of vacation. Beth and Ali had planned it and both families had been looking forward to it since the plan had been hatched right after Christmas during the Krieger’s annual Florida trip. The keeper’s plan was to go to The Academy Sunday and welcome the new campers, stay the night and get the ball rolling Monday morning, then go back to Gloucester and hang out with her brother and his family until Thursday. Then she and Ali would bring everybody up to The Academy so the Harrises could see it and hang out for the Thursday end of week cookout and party.

“What do you mean he’s not there?” Ashlyn’s voice was filled with confusion as she spoke to her wife over the phone late Sunday afternoon.

“Babe...your brother didn’t make the trip. He’s at home in Satellite Beach” Ali spoke quietly and quickly because she didn’t have a lot of time with 6 excited kids running around. “Beth hasn’t said much yet...I just thought you’d want to know...”

“Yeah, thanks honey. I appreciate it. I’m gonna call him now and find out what the hell’s going on. Love you.”

But she didn’t find out much at all. She called Chris, then her father, and then her mother but they all said the same thing – the surf shop was busy and he couldn’t get the time off like he thought he could. Beth had told Ali the same thing Sunday evening as they got dinner ready for the kids but something about Beth’s delivery seemed off. The two women had always gotten along well and communicated easily together, but Ali didn’t want to push it. She could feel Beth’s unease. Instead, they focused on the kids and getting everybody settled for the week. 10-year old Johnny slept in Drew’s room and 7-1/2 year old Lizzy did the same in Josie’s room while Beth took Meg’s guest room up on the third floor. Drew was excited to have his cousin share his newly redecorated bedroom which had just been finished the week before. Gone was the ‘under the ocean’ theme and the ‘big boy’ shark bed. Now he had a regular twin bed to match the one already in there, and freshly painted walls of red, black and then a huge mural of a distant planetary landscape from one of his favorite video games covering the entirety of the interior wall by the second-floor hall. He had posters of Spiderman, Ironman, and other superheroes, mixed in with posters from video games and some science fiction movie heroes too. The twin bed on the black painted wall had a red comforter set on it and the one on the red painted wall had a black comforter set. Somehow, the ‘little boy Drew’ had turned into an ‘8-year old kid Drew’ who sometimes seemed like he was about to turn 16 any day now. Both his moms took solace in the fact that many of his stuffed animals still adorned both beds. All four of their kids loved their stuffed animals and they were dreading the day Drew outgrew his. So far, so good.

Ashlyn came home Monday afternoon and they all went about the business of having a nice vacation at the beach while Ali went to the office to work. Business at Knight-Harris was booming and they had a slew of new clients signed up as well as several new agents and support staff to help them handle all the new business. Whitney was out on maternity leave and wouldn’t be back to work full-time until the very end of December. She would start working a bit from home in October but Ali tried to be around more when the lawyer was away from the office. Both Ashlyn and Ali had been spending more time at the Flanagan’s house to try and help Whitney and Ryan...
figure out how to take care of two kids instead of just one. Ryan’s Boston Cannons team was doing well this year and had an excellent shot at making the playoffs. As much as Whitney wanted her husband’s team to do well, a playoff appearance meant that Ryan would have to miss most of, if not all of, the 4-family vacation in mid-August. That was a bridge they would cross when they came to it, but Ashlyn had already warned her friend that they weren’t taking no for an answer from her. They all told Whitney to bring Becca and Tommy up to the lake house so they could all help her and get their baby fix at the same time. The lawyer wasn’t making any promises but she was very tempted to take them up on their offer.

“So, are you going to tell me what’s going on?” Ashlyn asked her sister-in-law as they sat together in the family room Wednesday night. Ali was still up with Lily who had an ear infection and was particularly fussy that night. When a minute had gone by and Beth was still focused on the tv show they had been watching, the keeper spoke again, softly and sincerely. “You know, just because he’s my brother doesn’t mean I don’t think he’s an idiot.”

Beth closed her eyes and sighed heavily. She shook her head slowly as her mouth set in a firm line while she tried not to cry.

“Oh Ash, I don’t really know what to say” she turned her watery eyes to the keeper. “I think everything’s fine but...” she shrugged and looked so sad that it made Ashlyn want to cry. “I also thought he was coming with us on this vacation, so what the hell do I know?”

“Is he drinking again?” the keeper cut to the chase and asked the question that had kept her awake every night that week, her voice low and shaky.

“No, I mean, I don’t think so” she met Ashlyn’s concerned eyes and then looked down into her own lap. “He’s so worried about Malcolm...”

One of Chris’ best friends, Malcolm, was fighting a tough and seemingly losing battle with an aggressive form of cancer that had surprised everybody. Malcolm had been the guy who tried to help wrangle Beth’s horrible sister, Ann, at Chris and Beth’s wedding. He had also been the emcee and comic relief at their wedding shower. He was a nice guy who worked hard and had learned to stay out of trouble so he could take care of his wife and young daughter. Ashlyn had known him most of her life and had been devastated to hear the news about his illness earlier in the year.

“Yeah, we spend more time talking about him than our own kids most of the time these days” Ashlyn admitted and then started thinking about how infrequent her calls with her brother had become that summer.

They were quiet again as Beth watched the tv and tried to quell her rising fear. The keeper’s thoughts went back to her relationship with her brother. Ashlyn and Chris were close and would always be close, but the bulk of the communication between the two families was done by Ali and Beth. It had been that way for the past several years as the two family organizers did what they do best – organize and communicate. Ashlyn and Chris had been relying mainly on text messages to check in with one another, letting their weekly phone call routine drift back to monthly, or longer, instead.

“It’s awful...Malcolm’s situation” the keeper clarified as she stumbled nervously over her words. “But it’s no excuse. I won’t let him fuck everything up Beth. I won’t let him.”

“You know just as well as I do that neither of us can do a damned thing about it if he decides to start drinking again” Beth sounded tired and defeated as she spoke. “I’m hoping this week was just something he needed to do for himself, you know, like he just needed some time to be still and quiet and get his mind right again.”
“Yeah, I’m sure that’s what it is” Ashlyn nodded her support. “Big dummy” she said quietly, affectionately. She took a beat and then continued. “I’m here for you Beth. I hope you know that. If you and the kids need anything...I’m here. Ali too. Don’t ever doubt that or forget it” she smiled at Beth and rested her hand on her shoulder, rubbing it just a bit.

“Thanks Ash” she returned the warm smile. “I won’t.”

The next afternoon they all went up to The Academy so Beth and the kids could check it out. Up to that point, only Tammye and Carol, from the Harris side of the family, had seen Ashlyn’s dream come to fruition and the keeper had really been looking forward to showing it to her brother. She fought off the disappointment and the anger, which she had only admitted to Ali, and instead focused on giving Johnny and Lizzy an afternoon and evening they would enjoy and remember. It was the end of the 7th week of camp, the high school teams week, and Ashlyn had pulled out all the stops for the cookout that evening. Only Niki knew the big surprise the keeper had in store and the coach had made sure Molly and the kids and the rest of the four families were there for that particular end of week party. The original plan was for the surprise to be the following week, the last week of camp, but Ashlyn moved it up when she learned her brother and his family were going to be visiting and she couldn’t move it back on such short notice.

Johnny and Lizzy ran around and enjoyed all of the activities the camp had to offer, from the lake to the big recreation deck in the middle of camp where everybody congregated when they first arrived and walked through or around the main dining hall building. Drew was more than happy to show his cousin around because that meant that Noah and Cash, the two older boys, didn’t get to claim the visiting newbie. Johnny and Cassius were only three months apart in age and had always gotten along pretty well. The Harris kids didn’t visit very often so they were really only comfortable with their cousins, for the most part. But by the end of whatever visits they did make, both Johnny and Lizzy would play easily with any of the other four-family kids.

The guest coaches that week were another group of UNC Tarheels and Ashlyn was excited to spend more time with them as well. Heather O’Reilly was putting in her second week of camp that summer and Megan Klingenburg, Tobin Heath and Allie Long were all making their first and only trips of Year 3. Tobin was going to visit her family in New Jersey for vacation after her week at The Academy and she had her wife, Christen Press, and their 9-month old baby boy meet her at the camp that Thursday afternoon so they could travel to NJ together that weekend. Tobin and her little family were going to stay at the camp through Sunday and enjoy some quiet time on the lake. There were no bridge campers that weekend because there was no way to do both weeks in a row. After the 6th week the bridge campers disappeared which was nice for the coaches and the rest of the staff so they could actually relax without any camper interruptions whatsoever. Whitney had to be pressured into joining the fun, but when Ashlyn told her that Yael was already on her way down to pick the Flanagans up she couldn’t refuse. The lawyer was having a tough time that summer with Ryan being so busy with the lacrosse team. She couldn’t imagine what she would have done with 2-1/2 year old Becca and 5-week old Tommy if her mother hadn’t been able to come and stay with her for 6 weeks. Kim Engen was flying back to California next week and Whitney was terrified. But between her four-family and Tarheel friends there was no way she was missing the party that Thursday afternoon and evening. She got her mom and her kids moving so they’d be ready to go as soon as her old friend and teammate, Yael, showed up at her door.

When a group of Tarheels got together like that it was truly a spectacle and Ali was always happy just to hang back and observe. She was very close with Whitney, Cat Whitehill, and Yael Averbuch. She was pretty close with Tobin and HAO. And she was still getting to know Allie Long and Meghan Klingenburg, but she liked them both very much. They were a good, loyal group of friends and the brunette was thrilled that Ashlyn had such support and friendship in her life. Truthfully, she was jealous as hell about it. Ali had always been conflicted about her college years.
Was she a Penn State alum or a Boston University alum? She had never fully embraced either one, although Sydney told her that she had to be loyal to BU because that was where she had ultimately graduated. The brunette appreciated the logic of her best friend’s argument but there was still a big part of her that was devoted, despite the painful memories, to the Nittany Lions. As she sat there holding Tommy Flanagan in her arms and watching all those Tarheels sharing their stories and catching up on their busy and full lives, she wished for a simpler past that had fewer detours in it. She knew it was a foolish waste of energy to even think such a thing, but that was how she felt in that moment.

It was a wonderful gathering and everybody seemed to enjoy themselves and make themselves comfortable. Ashlyn took all 6 of the Krieger and Harris kids off of Ali and Beth’s hands so the two planners could relax a little bit. The keeper was no fool though. She promptly enlisted her Tarheel sisters to help her wrangle them for the duration of the evening. Every child that could walk was out running around with the gang of college friends and four-family friends, including Cat’s three kids who were now 11, 8 and 5 years old. Ali’s mom and Whitney’s mom were out there too, keeping an eye on things and laughing together at the antics of the women and the children there. That left Ali, Beth, Christen Press, and Kristie Mewis as the baby brigade who sat together on a big blanket with all the diaper bags and kids’ bags and mini coolers around them like a protective barrier. Kristie’s baby girl had been born just a couple of weeks before Christen and Tobin’s baby boy, last November, and the two busy little 9-month olds were absolutely adorable. Ali was touched that Whitney trusted her with her not-so-tiny baby boy and reveled in the scent of his new-born perfection. Ali still sometimes marveled at the world she had married into. The fact that she was sitting there with one of the best women’s footballers to ever play for the USWNT, and her little baby, really threw her for a loop if she let it. But then she would hear Ashlyn’s voice in her head reminding her that Christen was just Tobin’s wife, just one of the Tarheel gang like she herself was. Ali knew Christen probably felt just as outsider-y as she did as they sat together watching their Tarheels do their thing. She caught her keeper looking over at her every so often and they exchanged grins and winks from afar. Ali knew her wife was in her absolute glory. All, or most, of the people she loved best, gathered together in a place that had existed, for so long, only in her dreams. The brunette could feel the happiness and joy emanating from Ashlyn, even though she was sad that her brother wasn’t with her to share in the celebration.

“How you doing baby?” the keeper knelt down behind her wife on the blanket and whispered into her ear, pressing a sweet kiss to her cheek as she did so. “Everything ok?”

“We’re good” Ali smiled warmly as she turned to look at her keeper, baby Tommy asleep in her arms. “Do you need me to get up and help?”

“Nah, everything’s fine” Ashlyn grinned. “Although Dodge may never let Kling go again” she chuckled. “He’s found his long lost best friend and saying goodbye is gonna suck.”

“Oh geez” Ali rolled her eyes and giggled. “Make sure she lets him down easy. He’s got his Mama’s big heart and I don’t want to see it get crushed so early on” she tilted her head up and puckered her lips for a kiss.

Ashlyn obliged and gave her another sweet kiss, rubbing her hand across the brunette’s back at the same time she palmed Tommy’s still-bare head with her other hand.

“You think so?” she cocked her head at Ali, still keeping her voice quiet so they didn’t wake up the baby. “You think he’s got my heart?”

Ali couldn’t help but notice the slight look of concern in her wife’s eyes as she asked the question.

“I do” she stole a quick kiss from Ashlyn who hadn’t moved away yet. “And I’m happier about
that than even the dimple” she blinked up at her keeper, reassuring her with just that one look.

Ashlyn smiled broadly, relieved to hear that her wife wasn’t sad or worried about Dodge having such a big heart that could be so problematic as he navigated his way through life. If Ali wanted him to have his Mama’s heart even more than she wanted him to have her dimple, then that was really saying something.

“I’m glad then” Ashlyn gave Ali her own dimpled grin as she stood up again. “I love you.”

After some time spent at the lake and then gathered around the picnic tables nearby to enjoy their cookout dinner, everybody made their way back up the hill towards the rec deck area again as the sun began to set. This is where they would enjoy a smaller campfire, roast marshmallows, and talk and laugh the last couple of hours away. The sugar from the smores kept the kids relatively happy and helped fight off their exhaustion. The parents had gotten pretty good at timing things so they could just load up their sleeping, or about to be sleeping, children, drive them home and carry them up to their beds. Some would sleep another night at the camp and drive home the next morning instead. When you were in good with the owners and founders of the camp you had some options available to you.

The group was all spread out and sitting at picnic tables and on benches near the rec deck and close to the small campfire as the kids made their smores, or burnt their marshmallows to a crisp, and brought the treat, or flaming remnant, over to one of their parents or other adults. Everyone was full and mostly happy as the evening started to wind down. Some sleepy kids were cuddled up next to parents as they watched the activity around them. Sydney and Maddox sat on the blanket next to Kristie and baby Ellie, with Ali and Beth and Christen Press still in their spots with baby Zane and baby Tommy. Ali looked over by the fire and saw Ashlyn there with a gaggle of kids around her, some of whom were hers and some of whom weren’t. Most of the Tarheel women were there too, standing close and sharing the moment and the smores. Ashlyn, Tobin, HAO, Whitney and Allie Long were the five closest together, whispering and giggling and goofing around. The brunette had a flashback to the first year of The Academy when they were at the end of summer party for everybody who had helped build or coach or support the camp. Ali had long been perturbed by how touchy Allie Long was with her wife. The two blondes were great friends and Ali knew there was nothing going on between Ashlyn and Allie except for devoted friendship love. She still didn’t like the way Allie was constantly touching her keeper. The feeling didn’t recede as she watched Allie playfully smack Ashlyn’s butt and then give her a sidehug and kiss her cheek, all the while giggling and nuzzling with her as they talked with HAO and Tobin and Whitney. Ali took a deep breath and tried to fight the urge to go over there and claim her woman. It didn’t matter that Allie wasn’t a real threat. She didn’t want another woman’s hands on her sexy keeper like that. Not ever.

“I’m glad to see she does that with your wife too” Christen said quietly, leaning over towards Ali so nobody else could hear her.

Ali blushed and her eyes went wide as she turned to face an equally blushing Christen Press who ducked her head shyly but then gave the brunette a little wink.

“Oh yeah” Ali giggled and playfully rolled her eyes, feeling like she was in high school again for a second. “All the time. Has she always been like that?”

“Pretty much” Christen shrugged. “Only with certain people though” she leaned closer again. “Have you ever seen her do that with Kling?”

“No...” Ali squinted as she thought. “But I don’t get to see them that much so I never know.”

“Well, she doesn’t. It’s just our wives and Alex Morgan. As far as I’ve ever seen anyway” Christen
shrugged and smiled. “I try to take it as a compliment.”

“Girl has great taste, that’s for sure” Ali giggled again. “Are she and Bati having trouble? She’s not...”

“Oh geez, no” Christen shook her head and giggled.

“Oh, I don’t know” Ali blushed harder and gave Christen a sheepish look. “I’ve never even met him.”

“No, it’s ok” Christen reached out and patted Ali’s forearm. “I just mean I don’t think she’s ever been interested in women, that’s all.”

“Well, neither was I, until I was. You know?” Ali chuckled and made Christen laugh out loud.

“Same, same” she nodded, still giggling. “What’s that great quote?” she paused, thinking hard for a second. “‘Even spaghetti’s straight until it gets wet’.”

Both women laughed again, loud enough to make Tommy fuss so Ali had to pick him up and switch his position. After a minute they were quiet again and the baby had gone back to sleep.

“I wouldn’t trade it for the world though” Christen added, looking over at her wife and beaming.

“Amen sister” Ali agreed, and let her own eyes find her gorgeous keeper. “Amen.”

It wasn’t long after that, maybe only fifteen minutes, that Ashlyn, Whitney and Tobin made their way over to the blanket to join Ali and Christen and the babies. The Krieger and Harris children were still spread out, sitting with Deb and Kling and Allie and HAO. Kim Engen had Becca curled up in her lap and Ali wished she had a free hand to take a picture of the beautiful moment.

“We should get going babe” Ali said as her wife sat down next to her and took Tommy from her, only to have Whitney take him into her own arms.

“Boy’s gotta eat” the lawyer winked at the sad puppy dog face her best friend was making at her.

“Fine. But I want him back” she quirked her eye at Whitney and then turned her attention back to her wife. “We’ll go soon. Just a couple more minutes...”

Ali was about to question what they were waiting for and argue the point about how much easier it was to get everybody packed up and in the minivan before they had the breakdowns and the hissy fits that they both knew were coming from their busy day and late night, when she heard a loud bang and then a whistle from down by the lake. Everybody heard it and they all focused their attention down the hill, wondering what the hell was going on, when the sky above them suddenly lit up into a sea of red, blue and purple streaks.

“Fireworks!” Ali gasped with a big grin on her face. “Babe, you got fireworks for tonight?” she turned to see Ashlyn’s beaming face, lit by the next firework that exploded in the sky.

“Yes!” She leaned over and kissed her wife on the lips. “Do you like ‘em?”

“I love them! Oh Ashlyn” she got choked up as her emotions flew around inside her.

“I love you too honey” the keeper gave her another quick, grinning kiss.

The sound of children and adults oohing and aahing in excitement as they watched the dark sky sparkle and radiate colors above them, filled the air.
“Surprise!” Ashlyn spoke loudly and then laughed. “Fireworks tonight, just for us. Well, and anybody within a 5-mile radius” she laughed some more. “I love you guys all so much. Thank you for being here and for all your hard work and support. Enjoy the show!”

It wasn’t a huge show like the professional displays from the 4th of July or even the Epcot fireworks. But nobody expected it to be. Fireworks were legal in the state of New Hampshire and Ashlyn had hired a local company to put on a medium-sized display that night. She had just realized that summer that she could have done this the previous two years as well and had kicked herself for missing that opportunity. She was used to living in Massachusetts where fireworks were illegal so it never crossed her mind until that summer. She had been talking to Niki Cross and their old friend and teammate Joanna Lohman, from their Washington Spirit days, in June when the retired midfielder had been a guest coach at The Academy. They were talking about Ashlyn and Ali’s wedding for some reason and the keeper was saying what she always said when talking about her wedding. ‘The only regret I have is that I couldn’t get fireworks for Ali on our wedding night, and I don’t mean in the bedroom’. Niki had pointed out how cool it would have been to have the soccer camp to come to for their wedding night because they could have done fireworks in NH. And that was how the fireworks show they were currently enjoying had come to be.

No sooner had Ashlyn sat down again, and pulled her wife down so they were laying side by side on their backs, then Lily came over in tears and plopped herself right down onto Ashlyn’s chest. It was times like that when both moms wondered about the whole breastfeeding connection that had been established between each of them and one of their four children. Ashlyn had breastfed Lily and here, now, the little 4-year old had had her choice of two equally available chests to flop onto and she had chosen Ashlyn’s without any hesitation. Similarly, they both knew, that if Drew was ever upset about anything he would always go to Ali first for comfort. Both Lily and Drew would settle happily for their other mother, of course, but their first choice would always be for the woman they had shared that very first connection with. Josie and Dodge had both been bottle-fed so it was never an issue with either of them. They honestly didn’t seem to care which mom helped them feel better and just went to whomever was closest. Both Ali and Ashlyn had tried to compensate for this over the years, often without even realizing they were doing it. But eventually they understood what they were doing and why and even made conscious efforts to help achieve it. If Ali ever had her choice about which child she had given birth to she was going to carry when the kids were younger, she always chose Josie. Ashlyn did the same thing, choosing Dodge instead of Lily because he was the one who hadn’t breastfed and shared that connection with her. It was their own way of nurturing the bottle-fed babies. They had no idea if it mattered or not and they hadn’t found any research one way or the other about it, but it made them both feel better. And as the kids got older it didn’t matter as much because they didn’t get carried around anymore. But every once in a while if they were all snuggling on the couch to watch a movie or a soccer game or something, the two moms would look at each other and grin when they saw the way the snuggling positions had worked out. They would always wonder if it had been a conscious decision, by whichever kid, or not.

“Thank you for the fireworks honey” Ali spoke quietly to her wife once Lily had settled down and shifted positions so she could watch the show in the sky. The little girl had rolled over and parked herself right between her two moms, laying on top of their arms where they held hands between their bodies. “I love them. And I love you.”

Ashlyn turned her head and looked at her beautiful brunette, locking eyes with her for a few seconds.

“These are our fireworks baby. Always, just for us” she whispered and met her lips with a quick kiss before turning back to watch the rest of the display.
“God I’m a lucky woman” Ali whispered back, watching Ashlyn’s face turn back up towards the sky and fill with a huge grin. She made herself stop staring at her keeper and move her own eyes to enjoy the beautiful show above them. “So fucking lucky” she whispered again, as if she was talking directly to the brightly colored streaks above her.

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A week and two days later, Ashlyn and Ali loaded the four young Kriegers and Meg into the minivan, which was packed to the gills, and made the drive up to the big house on the lake they rented in NH for the annual four-family vacation. Ali took pity on Meg and let her have the front passenger seat instead of the worst seat in the minivan – the hump seat in the middle of the back row. Depending on which kids were on either side of the seat, the ride could be absolutely horrible or pretty bad or just a little awful. Ashlyn and Ali still rotated the kids among the four different seats in the minivan according to who could be close to each other without causing trouble. Some days it was slim pickings, for sure.

“Are you sure babe?” Ashlyn asked, wincing, as she watched her wife hunch over and work her way back to the seat between Drew and Dodge. She tried to look away from her favorite ass before she got caught staring but was busted when whiskey-colored eyes levelled her with a quirked eyebrow and a half-smirk. “Ummm...” she felt herself start to blush as she busied herself with checking Lily’s seatbelt before closing up the sliding door on that side. “Ok, well it’s only for a little while I guess” she swallowed hard and got into the driver’s seat.

Whitney had agreed to come and bring both kids with her, even 7-week old Tommy. Ashlyn and Meg had gone down to the Flanagan house in Winchester the night before to help her get everything packed up and ready for the trip the next day. The plan was for her to meet the Kriegers at the first rest-stop in NH so Ali could get out and drive with Whitney the rest of the way. The brunette had offered to drive the minivan and let Ashlyn ride up with her best friend, but the keeper really wanted to spend time with Meg this vacation. They all sensed it would be the 15-year old’s last time making the trip with them. Nobody talked about it, but it just hung there around them like a fog. It was heavy at some times and then light and barely there at other moments. Whitney understood too and welcomed Ali into her SUV, happy for the companionship and extra pair of hands in case they were needed during the rest of the two-hour drive up to Squam Lake. The brunettes legs were longer than Ali’s now and the seat back there in the minivan was tiny because of Dodge’s carseat and Drew’s booster seat cramping the space on either side. It just made sense for the shorter woman to take it.

“Thanks Ali” Meg grinned at her, turning around to face the back of the minivan and reaching down to pick up the little bag of fruit gummies that Josie had dropped while she was struggling to open them.

“You’re welcome honey” Ali smiled back at the teen as she held Dodge’s arm down with her hand. She gave him a kiss on his chubby little cheek. “Listen mister, I’m excited to be sitting back here with you guys too, but the rules still apply. Keep your hands to yourself” she fixed him with a serious look. “Do not hit me again. Understand?”

“Ah-huh” he grinned the apologetic, toothy grin he always did after he hit somebody or did something wrong. He didn’t mean to hurt anybody, he just got excited and couldn’t contain himself. He was sort of like a puppy. Neither mom accepted that excuse though. He was still responsible for his own body and, at four years and three months old, he needed to learn to control what his arms and legs and head did to people. “Sor-ryyyyy Mommy” he leaned his head back into his carseat and gave Ali his best puppy dog eyes, stretching the ‘sorry’ out until it was impossible to stay upset with him for another second.
2-1/2 hours later both vehicles pulled into the lake house they had been renting for the past several years. The Dwyers and Crosses were already there and Dom and Molly were still unloading their minivans as they waved to the new arrivals. They all laughed when Maddox came running around from the back of the house, by the lake, completely naked with Sydney chasing after him, swimming trunks in her hand. Maddox was 3-1/2 years old and potty trained, although he still needed his bum wiped. Molly stepped out and scooped him up, surprising him as he squirmed and squealed in her arms.

“Wow” Meg’s eyes went wide at the sight.

“Yep” Ashlyn chuckled. “You’re gonna wanna watch out for him and Becca this week. Keep your head on a swivel. They’re fast and always grabbing at something you don’t want them to have.”

Meg had seen some of the 4-family kids during her week at The Academy, but not all of them. As they settled into the rental house and got unpacked and ready to hit the lake later that afternoon she marveled at how big everybody had gotten since she had seen them all last Christmas.

“How old is Noah now?” she asked as they rode the pontoon boat headed out into Big Squam Lake for the afternoon. Ashlyn piloted the pontoon boat while Niki handled her friend’s motorboat behind them. “10?”

“He’ll be 12 this December” Ashlyn grinned, enjoying the look of shock on the teenager’s face.

They talked about how all of the kids had grown so much and how the twins were almost the exact same size as their big sister Josie now. Lily and Josie could share clothes if they wanted to, and sometimes did. Cash Dwyer was almost 10 years old and Penny Cross and James Dwyer were fully formed humans who spoke in complete sentences with a big vocabulary at 5-1/2 years old. It was remarkable to drop into this crazy bunch of people once a year, if Meg was lucky enough, and see all the growth and change that was happening everywhere she looked. No better place to spot it than in bathing suits on a lake during vacation.

“Everybody says the same thing when I remind them you’re 15” she chuckled and patted Meg’s shoulder as she steered the boat through the narrow connecting canal between big and little Squam Lakes. Once they were in the bigger lake and getting close to where they wanted to drop anchor, she turned and looked at the redhead. “Do you wanna drive for a few minutes?”

“Can I?” Meg’s face erupted in excitement.

Meg hadn’t even started driving a real car yet but the time was coming. Hannah and Ashlyn had both spoken about getting the teen behind the wheel for some practice driving once she turned 16 and got her learner’s permit in March. Sitting behind the wheel of the pontoon boat was a big step for Meg and she appreciated the trust Ashlyn had shown in her to allow it.

Ali, sitting next to Sydney and surrounded by children in the row of seats that curled behind the driver’s seat almost encircling it, watched the interaction as her heart pounded. Sydney nudged her elbow, spurring the brunette to get her phone out and record the momentous occasion. Whitney looked over from her seat, more to the side of Ashlyn, and winked at Ali. They were all watching the keeper, who was nervous as hell, help Meg get a feel for the steering wheel and the speed they were travelling at. The teen was sitting on Ashlyn’s lap with her eyes focused intensely ahead of the boat. She hadn’t even hesitated or given Ashlyn a chance to get up and out of the seat before she plumped herself down onto her lap. For all the ups and downs they had gone through the past year and a half, Ashlyn and Meg were on the same page now and it made everybody who loved them very happy.
The week raced by and the friends enjoyed beautiful weather and relatively well-behaved kids. There were only minor skirmishes instead of some of the bigger battles that usually ensued when all 13 children got together under one roof. They all loved having Meg there, each little group of kids vying for her attention. Meg hadn’t been on the 4-family vacation since the Olympics back in 2024 and a lot had changed since then. Whitney was exhausted and, after putting up a fight the first day they arrived, had welcomed her friends’ help with baby Tommy and 2-1/2 year old Becca. Somebody always stayed at the house with her while the rest of the crew took off on the pontoon boat for the afternoon. Maddox Dwyer was still napping, but wouldn’t be for too much longer, so Sydney often spent the afternoons with the lawyer while he napped with Becca. Molly took a turn, as did Ali, both craving time with baby Tommy like a drug. One afternoon both Molly and Ali stayed behind so Whitney could have her own nap. When the lawyer joined them down by the lake she was still groggy from her nap but feeling better than she had in days. She had cleared her 6-week post-partum appointment but was still feeling tender at her incision if she picked up anything heavier than Tommy. He was a big baby and her incision was bigger than most C-sections. Everything was fine, she was just still feeling some of the effects from giving birth 7 weeks ago.

“Hey sleepy-head” Ali smiled up at her as she made her way to one of the empty chaise lounges next to the two women.

“How is he? Ok?” Whitney asked as she gave a tired smile to both Ali and Molly and sat down gingerly.

“He’s perfect” Molly grinned as she held baby Tommy in her lap. “Absolutely perfect.”

They were quiet for a few minutes, then exchanging idle comments about nothing consequential for several more minutes after that. They sat in a semi-circle, facing the lake, with Molly and Tommy in between Ali and Whitney. After another couple moments of silence the lawyer, still waking up and a little drowsy, spoke.

“So, Ash never told me...” she paused to correct herself with a tilt of her head and a tired chuckle. “Well, she might have and I just can’t remember. This might be worse than pregnancy brain ever was” they all laughed. “How did your July ultrasound turn out...was the shadow still there?”

Ali blinked, face frozen as it stared back at Whitney, looking past Molly whose eyebrows were up and her mouth pursed as they both waited for Whitney to recognize the awkward tension that had invaded their space.

“Oh fuck” the lawyer groaned and sat up straight, wincing as the sudden movement tugged at her incision. “Al, I’m so sorry...I just...wasn’t thinking...” she looked like she might cry.

It took the brunette a few seconds to snap out of the shock of having her secret shared without her permission. The ovarian cancer watch wasn’t something she and Ashlyn told too many people about. Ali had given her wife permission to confide in whomever she needed to so she could deal with her own anxiety about it and Ashlyn had told Chris and Beth and Whitney. Ali told Sydney and Kyle and they had both told their parents. But that was it. And that was plenty, as far as the brunette was concerned. It wasn’t that they didn’t love or trust Niki and Molly, it was simply that Ali didn’t want anybody else worrying about something that hadn’t even happened yet. She felt like the girl who cried wolf sometimes and it made her uncomfortable and self-conscious to think that there were people whom she loved that were worried about whether or not she might, someday, get ovarian cancer. And now, Whitney had let her sleep-deprived tongue loose in front of Molly.

“Ummmm...” Molly’s eyes were wide as she looked slowly from one woman to the next. “I can just pretend I didn’t hear that” she offered sincerely. “I’ll just take him inside...” she uncrossed her
legs and started to get up from the chair.

“No, Mol, that’s ridiculous” Ali stopped her with a heavy sigh.

“I’m soooo sorry Al” Whitney pressed her hand against her lower abdomen and waited for the brunette to look at her again.

“It’s alright Whit” Ali gave her a weak, but sincere smile. “Really, it’s ok.” She paused for a few seconds before telling Molly the story and trying to explain why they hadn’t told very many people about it.

“I get it” Molly nodded solemnly and then turned her face into a huge grin when Tommy whimpered up at her. “Honestly, don’t worry about keeping it to yourselves...if that’s what you’re worried about. I mean, my feelings aren’t hurt or anything. Jesus,” she rolled her eyes and sighed. “Please tell me you know what I’m trying to say.”

“I do” Ali chuckled. “Are you sure?” her voice was hesitant and apologetic.

“Totally. We’re here if you need us for anything, but I get it. Just do what you’ve gotta do Al.”

They were all quiet for a moment, all settled back comfortably into their chairs with Tommy now asleep in Molly’s arms. It was almost time to get Becca up from her nap and Ali was surprised that Maddox hadn’t already woken up from his.

“So...” Whitney began slowly, tentatively. “What happened with the shadow...was it gone this time?” she asked carefully, still wanting to know the answer to the question that had launched them down the uncomfortable path they had just spent an hour on.

“I’m so glad you asked that Whit!” Molly’s face showed all the anxiety and relief she was feeling in that moment. “I’m dying to know too...” she looked towards Ali, “if that’s alright?”

“Oh God, I’m sorry guys” the brunette sighed with a small smile and rolled her eyes. “I didn’t mean to leave that part out, I swear” she chuckled. “It’s still there, the shadow. But it’s not any bigger, that’s good news. And it shifted a bit...which is also good news because that means it’s, whatever it is, it’s not fixed to one place.”

“So, like, it could just keep on moving all the way out?” Molly squinted, trying to understand.

“Yeah” Ali nodded. “Or it could still be just a shadow” she shrugged. “And maybe next time it’ll be gone.”

“I vote for that one” Whitney exhaled, not realizing she had been holding her breath as Ali spoke.

“Me too” Molly agreed quickly.

“Me three” the brunette smiled at the two women next to her who loved her and cared about her and would support her no matter what happened.

Ali knew in that instant that if the worst ever did happen, as much as it destroyed her to even consider, that Ashlyn and their children would be surrounded by these women and the rest of their incredible four-family group. It certainly wasn’t what Ali wanted to happen, ever. But, if the worst ever did happen, she took some comfort knowing that the loves of her life would be in those good hands.
So the Breakers are officially gone. Thank you for the messages and comments - you guys are really sweet and I appreciated every one. <3
“Mama, am I a big boy now?”

“You sure are Dodger” Ashlyn leaned into the bathtub from her kneeling position next to it and tested the temperature of the water. Her youngest son had been sitting in it for a while now and she was sure it must be getting cool. “You don’t think we let little babies go to school in this family, do you?”

“No” Dodge’s face broke into a giant smile and he excitedly kicked his little legs in the water as if he was practicing his swimming technique.

“Easy boy” Ashlyn leaned as far away from the splashing water and the tub as she could, laughing at her rambunctious son. “Let’s keep the water in the tub now. You know the rules.”

“Sorry Mama” he looked at Ashlyn with such sweetness and innocence that the keeper felt a lump rising in her throat.

“Come on” she released the drain and kissed him on top of his wet head. “Let’s get you out of there before you wrinkle right up.”

It was Sunday night, August 29th, and for the first time ever, all four of the young Krieger children would be going to school the next morning. Labor Day was late that year so school started a week before the holiday, which both Ali and Ashlyn thought was horrible. It should be a national law or something – no school before Labor Day. Deb and Ken and Vicki had all come over to the big old house for the afternoon and stayed for dinner to celebrate the end of summer and the impending first day of school. Ken and Vicki had left after some playtime but Lily had asked for Deb to give her a bath that night so Grandma stayed. The kids had mostly moved on from bathtime to just taking showers each night, assisted by their moms as usual. But out of the blue, the youngest Krieger had made her request, which, of course, made Dodge want a bath too.

Ali and Ashlyn were so emotional and nostalgic that whole day and night that the twins could have asked for almost anything and they would have complied. They weren’t walking around weeping or anything. The kids didn’t notice anything different about their moms’ behavior or demeanor. But the other grown-ups could see it, could recognize the complex feelings that had engulfed both mothers.

Ali had been hurt for a moment when Lily had chosen Grandma and then Dodge had quickly asked for his Mama to help with their baths. But several other emotions swept over her in fast succession so she couldn’t really dwell on any one of them for too long. Ashlyn had looked at her intently, wordlessly offering to switch places, but the brunette had just smiled and told the big kids they were going to get to shower in the big shower that night instead. It didn’t make any sense. The square, glass shower in the master bathroom was the smallest shower in the three full bathrooms, but Drew had started calling it the big shower years ago and it had just stuck. Ali assumed it was because the two glass walls of the shower extended much higher up towards the ceiling than the shower curtains in either of the regular tub and shower combos did. But who knew how kids’ brains came up with things sometimes. Drew and Josie were excited at the special shower and, for
the next half hour, everybody was happy and feeling extra loved.

“You doing ok?” Ashlyn asked as she walked into the master bedroom from the second-floor hallway, catching sight of her wife changing into a dry t-shirt by her dresser just inside that bedroom door. Deb was downstairs on the front living room couch, surrounded by her grandchildren as they watched one of their shows before storytime.

“Yeah” Ali turned and smiled sadly as her wife wrapped her up in a side hug as soon as the brunette’s arms were through the armholes and down by her sides again. “Eww, you’re all wet” she giggled. “Get away, I just got dry” she pushed her keeper back and Ashlyn released her with a laugh.

“That’s not usually how the words go in that sentence” she wagged her eyebrows and grinned wickedly at her wife.

“Ha ha, very funny” Ali giggled and glanced down at her once dry t-shirt to see if she needed to change for the second time in two minutes.

She looked up again just in time to see Ashlyn standing there topless, except for her bra, as she pulled a dry t-shirt out of her own dresser. How in the hell were they getting ready to send four children to school the next morning when Ashlyn’s body still looked like that? Drew was 8 years old and going into third grade. Josie was 6 years old and going into first grade. And the twins were 4 years old and starting preschool and Meg was a sophomore in high school this year! How the fuck had that happened? How the hell had Ali turned 43 in July and how the hell was Ashlyn about to turn 42 in October? They had just celebrated their official 10-year wedding anniversary four days earlier. It was all happening too fast and both women desperately wanted someone to hit the brakes on all of it. Unlike the last couple of years, neither woman was freaking out this time. They weren’t sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing yet. They also hadn’t actually watched Dodge and Lily go to preschool yet – there could very well be two breakdowns tomorrow morning. This year felt different. It was still an odd mix of joy and sorrow, but it felt more...right. The difference was in the attitudes of the two moms, whether they realized it or not. Instead of being melancholy about their kids growing up and going to school and needing their mothers less and less, they were proud of what good little humans their children were growing into. Ali and Ashlyn had always been proud of that, but this year, without the extra baggage of turning 40 and all of the other things that life had thrown at them to complicate the issue, they were able to accept the passage of time better and let that pride shine through. But tomorrow morning could be a whole different story. Maybe they weren’t as ok as they thought they were and both moms would lose their shit at Dodge and Lily’s drop-off. They wouldn’t really know until they were at the preschool doing it.

“That is the look that usually goes with those words though” Ashlyn teased her wife again with a smirk when she caught Ali staring.

“Oh stop” the brunette blushed a little bit and pulled her wife into a hug, standing on her toes to rest her chin on Ashlyn’s shoulder and loving the feel of her warm skin. “Just hold me” she commanded softly.

“I sure am glad we held off on starting the new book for storytime until tonight” Ashlyn said cheerfully. They were about to start the next book in ‘The Little House on the Prairie’ series and everybody was eager to continue hearing about half-pint Laura and her big sister Mary. “It was tough with just the shorter books the last couple of nights but it’ll just make tonight more special...”

“I know you’re trying to distract me, and I appreciate it, but just...hold me for a minute” she whispered.
Ashlyn smiled softly and squeezed her wife tight, happy to feel the embrace returned just as powerfully.

“I love you so much baby” the keeper nuzzled the side of her head against Ali’s and felt the brunette stroke the back of her neck.

“I love you too.”

The first day of school hadn’t been so bad for the beleaguered moms. Drew acted like it was old hat as he held Josie’s hand again and walked them both into the front door of the elementary school. For the first time, Josie would be part of the regular student body and not a kindergartener with shortened schedules and loosely structured ‘classes’. To say the little redhead was excited would be an understatement. Her moms both worried about the increase in teasing their girl would receive because of her birthmark and maybe even because she had two moms. Things had changed a lot in the ten years that they had been married, but there were still people who didn’t approve of gay marriage equality and all of the liberties it afforded. Luckily, the younger generations had always been more evolved and open-minded and as those younger generations grew up and started having their own children the world had become much more welcoming to everybody. The bullying incident in the stands of Drew’s flag football game two years earlier had never left either mother’s mind though and they were both ready to defend their children and their lifestyle whenever necessary. Josie, and all the kids, seemed unfazed by it as the possibility that kids, or adults, might be mean to them because of the way their family was constructed floated high over their heads.

Dodge and Lily were eager to go to school. They had watched their big brother and then big sister do it for all of their lives and were excited to finally join their ranks. It was hotter than hell that day, New England was experiencing a late-season heat wave, and all the parents were worried about all of the children sweltering to death in the un-air-conditioned schools. The parents had all received emails and phone calls instructing them to make sure their children came to school dressed for cool and comfort during the heat wave. So that’s how it came to be that the very first ‘first day of school’ picture ever taken of Dodge and Lily outside the preschool in Gloucester, MA showed them in shorts, tank tops and summer sandals with big, goofy grins on their faces. Dodge had his arm slung around his sister’s shoulder and Lily’s hazel eyes shone extra brightly in the morning sun. It was a beautiful picture with both kids beaming back at their mothers, full of excitement and possibilities.

Deb had kept to her word, no matter how many times both Ali and Ashlyn told her she was being silly, and let the young family have its own space that morning. She would come over in the afternoon and stay for the evening again, returning to Miami and her husband the next day. As the two moms walked, hand in hand, out of the preschool after watching their two youngest children scamper off to join the other kids, there was a surprising calm mixed in with the sadness. Maybe it was because they both trusted the preschool teacher, Ms. Moran, so much. She had always been there for both Drew and especially for Josie with the show & tell she arranged to teach her students about the little girl’s birthmark. Dodge was a handful and Lily was still mumbling and stuttering a bit, even though she had improved leaps and bounds during the past year or so that they had been working with her on it. They were both very good kids who had, and used, good manners far more often than not. When they were attending a big group event like a birthday party at the Little Gym, for example, Dodge was a wonderfully attentive listener. He was usually one of the first, if not the very first, kids to pay attention to the leader’s instructions and then follow them. Other kids would be laughing or talking with each other instead of listening to what they were supposed to do next, but not Dodge. He whipped his little head around and focused on the young man or woman
standing in the gym and pointing at the next piece of equipment they were going to use or explaining the rules of the next game they were going to play. Both Ali and Ashlyn worried about their energetic little boy and were hoping that he would remember his manners and his listening skills in his new classroom. Conversely, they worried about Lily being too shy and quiet because she was self-conscious about her speech challenge. It was an odd sort of twist to the complex personality of the little blonde girl. She had always been the fussiest and loudest complainer and crier of the kids, and now here she was being the quietest for a change. The moms knew, as they walked towards Ashlyn’s Jeep, that they would have to trust their kids. They had to trust that they would help each other as the twins so often did. They had to trust that Ms. Moran would continue to be as engaging and caring as she had always been for their older children. They had to trust that Dodge would help Lily come out of her shell and that she would help him remember to not be such a madman all the time. They had to trust that all of the hours of love, attention, instruction, punishment, encouragement, celebration, education and adoration that they had given those kids all their lives was going to be enough. It just had to be.

When they got back to the big old house that morning their nerves were raw and jangly. It had been an emotional evening and morning and both women were feeling slightly out of sorts as they tried to deal with all of their different emotions. They had held hands the whole, short ride home and hugged for a very long time in the mudroom as the dogs both came to greet them and try to make them feel better. Marisol, the woman who had been cleaning their house for them every Monday and Thursday morning for the past five years, since Mrs. Riley had retired, was upstairs and would soon be finished and on her way to her next house. She arrived at 8am and was usually done in a couple of hours. Ali and Ashlyn went to the kitchen together and cleaned up the mess they had left from breakfast, staying close to one another without realizing they were even doing it. Ali was the only one who knew how Ashlyn was feeling and vice versa. They had replied to all the texts from friends and family sharing first day of school pictures but they really just needed some time together to get themselves right. Ali had planned to go in to the office for a couple of hours and then come back home early to go with Ashlyn to pick everybody up from school. The twins got out at 2pm and that meant she would have to leave Cambridge no later than 12:30pm to make sure she got home in time. School started at 8:30 and it was already almost 10am.

“Are you really going to the office?” Ashlyn asked as they sat next to each other on the couch in the family room. Their arms and legs were entwined and they were both feeling clingy and needy. “You’ll only have about an hour in there before you have to turn right around again” she pressed a gentle kiss into Ali’s temple.

“I was just thinking the same thing” the brunette sighed and laid her head down onto her wife’s shoulder while she moved her arms around her torso to give her a seated side hug. “It’s silly to go in now. I’ll just call Marcy and let her know. I feel bad though, we’ve got a lot going on with the Open.”

Knight-Harris had become very popular with a lot of female athletes over the years. Not only did it make the women athletes feel good on a karmic level to give their business to K-H and support other women, but the agency and the agents were really good at what they did. The more popular and powerful they became, the better deals they were able to make for their clients. The biggest influx of new clients over the past few years had been the WTA, Women’s Tennis Association, and the US Open tournament was being played in NYC over the last week of August and the first week of September, as usual. Whitney Flanagan was still on maternity leave and Ali had been working hard with Marcy and Jared to make sure K-H made the most of their time and exposure during the Open.
“You’ve got it all running smooth though babe” Ashlyn soothed as she petted her wife’s head, softly playing with her dark brown locks. “Marcy will call you if something comes up. There’s nothing you can’t handle from here” she nodded her head towards the garage and kissed the top of Ali’s head sweetly.

“Yeah, you’re right. I know you are” she sighed again. “I just feel bad...”

“Because we just got back from vacation two weeks ago and you haven’t been there enough...” Ashlyn interrupted and finished her sentence for her.

“God, yes” Ali giggled and rolled her eyes. “Have I been droning on about it that much?”

“You never drone darling” Ashlyn giggled and gave her wife a hug, pulling her body even closer as the brunette offered no resistance.

“Cute, very cute” Ali poked her wife’s side while Ashlyn pulled her in even more.

Ali swung her leg over Ashlyn’s lap as the keeper pulled and found herself straddling the blonde as they continued to hug. It was another one of those times when there was nothing sexual about the move, they just wanted to be as close together as possible. Ali put her chin on her wife’s shoulder and Ashlyn did the same, neither saying anything else for several minutes as they just sat there breathing and thinking together.

“Oh! I’m so sorry” Marisol spoke loudly, surprised to find the couple where, and how, they were, as she walked into the family room from the dining room with her bucket of cleaning supplies in one hand. She dropped her eyes and stopped, unsure whether it would be faster to keep going through the family room and into the kitchen or just to back up into the dining room and cross over to the mudroom through the front hall by the bathroom. “I didn’t know you were still here” she apologized again, a little breathlessly. “I’m so sorry.”

“Oh, no” Ashlyn laughed as Ali slid off her lap and onto the couch next to her again, understanding what Marisol thought she had walked in on. “We’re just being babies because we took Dodge and Lily to preschool for the very first time today. Nothing going on here but two moms feeling sorry for themselves” she explained with a shy smile and a little blush.

“Oh, ok” Marisol smiled and looked incredibly relieved. “It was so quiet I didn’t think anybody was home” she chuckled and started walking through the room again, making her way towards the kitchen.

“Did your kids start school today too?” Ali asked, never sure exactly how old her children were or where they went to school.

Marisol was a single mom with three young kids. That’s how she had been described and introduced to Ashlyn and Ali by Mrs. Riley and that’s really all the further they had ever gotten with the woman. Marisol was excellent at her job and exceedingly patient with the kids and dogs when they were in her way, but she was also very quiet and private. She had a warm and friendly face and demeanor and you could tell by the way she interacted with the Krieger kids that she was comfortable with children and had her own, but she always kept her life to herself. Both Ashlyn and Ali had respected that over the years and they had maintained a very professional and courteous relationship with her. The kids called her Miss Marisol, or Miss Mari when they were younger and couldn’t quite get her whole name to come out, and had accepted her presence in the house without question or complaint. The dogs liked her too so the moms knew she was a good person. Ashlyn, who was usually the one around to see her in the mornings if anyone was going to, gave her a Christmas bonus every year with their family Christmas card and whatever gift they were giving to
the neighbors. The house cleaner gave them a sweet and sincere thank you note the following week and that was that.

“Yes, they did” Marisol turned to answer, her face smiling at the thought of her kids in spite of herself. “But not for their very first day” her smile grew. “That’s a tough one” she nodded knowingly towards the couch and then moved into the kitchen and the mudroom.

Ali and Ashlyn shared shy smiles with each other, embarrassed at being caught in what certainly looked like a compromising situation. They were holding hands and sitting close when Marisol stuck her head back in the room next to the big two-sided fireplace.

“I’m all done. I’ll be back Thursday” she nodded and waved and then returned to the mudroom.

“Thank you!”
“Bye Marisol.”

They both called after her and then heard the mudroom door shut behind her. They looked at each other again and began giggling. The interruption had shifted the mood and broken some of the melancholy in the room.

“Man, it’s been a long time since somebody walked in on us” Ashlyn chuckled as she pulled her wife back onto her lap again.

“We weren’t doing anything” Ali protested playfully as she straddled her wife’s lap again. “It’s not walking in on us if we weren’t doing anything.”

“It sure felt like she walked in on us” the keeper giggled and tried to pull Ali in closer so they could hold each other again.

“Hold on babe” Ali resisted and reached behind her to grab her phone from the coffee table. “Let me call Marcy real quick.”

Ashlyn pouted as she watched her wife talk to her right-hand woman at the office. She kept her hands on Ali’s thighs, gently squeezing them and loving the fact that the heat wave had prompted the brunette to wear a thin, cotton skirt with a subtle but pretty floral design and a white sleeveless shirt. Her tanned arms looked extra dark compared to the cool white cotton of her blouse and every time she smiled or laughed as she spoke into her phone, Ashlyn was dazzled by her perfect, white teeth. This was one of the keeper’s favorite things about her beautiful brunette. Ali hadn’t gotten dressed up that morning. She had just thrown on a simple skirt with a simple blouse and some sandals and taken her kids to school. Yes, she had showered and done her make-up with the intention of going to the office after a quick change at home, but she looked like a million bucks in whatever clothes she put on, no matter what. Ashlyn could probably count on one hand the number of times that Ali looked like she should have spent more time choosing her outfit. The keeper was pulled out of her thoughts when her wife ended the call and put her phone back on the coffee table.

“Everything good?”

“So far. Keep your fingers crossed” Ali replied, turning back to face her patient wife and giving her a sweet smile. “Sorry about that.”

“Somebody’s gotta work around here” Ashlyn teased, making light of her own work from home situation that often made her uncomfortable and self-conscious.

“You work just as hard as I do honey” Ali leaned down and gave her lips a soft kiss. “I know you do. Don’t ever doubt that” she kissed her again and yelped in surprise when Ashlyn pulled her hips
all the way into her own and held her close again.

“That’s better” the keeper grinned against her wife’s lips before kissing them again, this time deepening it after a minute.

“Mmmmmm...” Ali moaned into her wife’s warm and inviting mouth, loving the way their tongues had begun dancing together.

Neither woman had planned for things to escalate or get heated between them. They were just going to sit together and be mopey about the twins’ first day of school for a little while. Just long enough to make themselves feel better. But as so often happened with them, one thing led to another and then another and then, before they were even aware it had happened, they were too far gone to stop. They both attributed the sudden change in their dynamic to their highly emotional states that morning.

“Fuck baby...” Ashlyn panted after their long, sensual make-out session.

“Is this...why you...wanted me...to stay home?” Ali asked, breathlessly, and then giggled as they continued to move their hands over each other’s body.

“Always” Ashlyn smirked as she worked one hand up underneath the back of her wife’s blouse, towards her bra hook. “But I really had no idea this was how our morning was going to go” she brought her lips to Ali’s neck and began nibbling down towards her pulse point as she unhooked her bra with one hand.

Ali was just as surprised as her keeper at the turn of events but she didn’t really feel like analyzing it right at that moment. She sat up straighter and lifted her blouse and bra up above her breasts, loving the way her wife’s eyes darkened even more at the sight. Ashlyn palmed both breasts with her hands as Ali arched her back and pressed them into the contact with another moan. The noises and sounds the brunette made when they had sex had always driven Ashlyn wild and that morning was no different. She leaned forward and placed more hot kisses to Ali’s pulse point and neck, wishing her shirt was all the way off of her beautiful brunette. She kept her hands moving on both breasts, rubbing them and squeezing them and softly pinching her nipples.

“Jesus” Ali exhaled as she felt her body respond to her keeper’s touches, everything coming alive and her pulse and heartrate quickening. “You’re a terrible influence” she chuckled, low in her throat and then sucked in a sharp breath when she felt Ashlyn bite down on her neck. “Fuck, Ashlyn...” she groaned and tugged on the bottom of her keeper’s t-shirt, trying to lift it up and off of her.

They paused long enough to pull their own shirts over their heads and remove their bras. Ali crashed their lips together in a searing kiss as soon as their arms were free, grabbing a fistful of Ashlyn’s short hair at the back of her head and cupping her breast at the same time. Ashlyn moved both of her hands to Ali’s ass, squeezing it and then trying to find their way underneath her skirt without success. The brunette stood up on her knees so her wife could pull the skirt out from underneath her thighs, never letting her lips leave Ashlyn’s. The keeper quickly brought one hand under the skirt and the other one to Ali’s bare breast. She caressed her wife’s ass, frustrated by the panties that were still in her way, and reached down to the wet crotch of those panties and pressed her fingers against Ali’s entrance from behind. The contact made them both moan loudly and the brunette immediately began to grind down against her wife’s hand.

“I love how wet you get for me” Ashlyn husked out when they finally broke their steamy kiss for air. “Fucking makes me crazy” she growled and used her long, strong fingers to push the panties aside and tease Ali’s drenched folds. “Shit, baby...”
Ali groaned and yanked her wife’s head back before attacking her exposed neck with kisses and sucks and nips. She kept her hand working on Ashlyn’s breast as she enjoyed the feeling of her keeper’s fingers sliding back and forth between her legs.

“Please babe…” she mumbled against Ashlyn’s soft neck. “I need your fingers inside me…please…”

The hair pull had gotten Ashlyn’s attention and she was more than ready to take things to the next level. She was more than willing to forget that they were sitting in the middle of their family room, in broad daylight, with two dogs wandering around wondering what all the fuss was about. They hadn’t been privy to Ali and Ashlyn having sex in a long time and weren’t sure what to make of it at first. Ashlyn played with Ali’s breast, scratching lightly at the skin and pinching her nipple hard as it stiffened under her touch. She contemplated moving her other hand to the front of Ali’s body and taking her panties off so she could move her hand around easier between her legs, but she couldn’t wait. Before she had even made her decision, she pushed two fingers up into Ali’s throbbing core from behind, letting her own guttural moan escape her lips.

“Yeah, babe…mmmhhhhmm…so good…” Ali moaned and started rocking her hips as she continued to grind.

“You like that, sexy? That feel good?”

“Faster baby” Ali purred and whined. “Faster…”

Ashlyn obliged and started to pump her fingers up and into her wife’s dripping pussy as best she could. Ali got up on her knees again so her wife had better access, shoving her breasts into her keeper’s face at the same time. She grabbed another fistful of Ashlyn’s short hair and pressed her head against her chest, loving the way the blonde moaned at her rough tactic.

“God I love your boobs” Ashlyn mumbled, almost impossible to hear, as she sloppily licked and sucked the beautiful mounds in front of her. Ali’s nipples were both hard as rocks and ready for all the action Ashlyn was giving them. “Gorgeous…delicious…” the keeper slurped as she kept thrusting her fingers into her wife’s pulsing center.

“Christ…oh…unnnhhhhhh…” Ali moaned again as her body moved along with those strong thrusts between her legs. “Fuck yes, babe…God that feels good…”

Ashlyn held the brunette close, with her free arm wrapped tightly around her waist, grabbing and squeezing her ass when she could. She felt Ali’s breathing start to speed up as her chest started to heave. The brunette’s free hand was moving quickly up and down Ashlyn’s side, clutching at the side of her breast and her arm and her shoulder while Ali felt a tingling start deep in her belly. Her motions, dropping her hips down onto Ashlyn’s pumping fingers in time with her keeper’s rapid and powerful thrusts, began to get less coordinated as she started to get lost in the sensations spreading throughout her body. Everything felt good. Everyplace she could feel her keeper’s skin against her own was sparking and tingling with pleasure. She had her eyes closed and her head tilted back as she held Ashlyn’s head firmly against her chest. The keeper’s stiff nipples felt incredible as they dragged past her ribcage with every single bounce onto Ashlyn’s fingers. Ali could hear her wife’s groans of pleasure, muffled slightly by her own breasts in her mouth, and they thrilled her and made her dizzy with lust and want. The brunette was so close to her release. She squeezed her hand between their bodies and pinched Ashlyn’s nipple, hard, making the keeper gasp and shudder.

“Fuck babe…so…unnnhhhhhh…fucking…hot…” Ali moaned and continued playing with her wife’s stiff nipple.
“Touch your clit” Ashlyn commanded in a strangled voice, forcing her head back away from Ali’s chest for a second to make sure she could be heard. “Come for me gorgeous...come all over me...”

The sound of desperation in her keeper’s voice made Ali’s head spin and she quickly followed the instruction. She reached down to her aching clit and began rubbing it fast and hard. It was already wet from all of her own passion that was soaking her folds as well as Ashlyn’s lap. Knowing she had made such a mess that her keeper would need to get a clean pair of shorts when they were done turned Ali on even more. She growled, low in her throat, as she started to chase her pending orgasm.

“Ash! Fuck! Unnnhhhh...mmmmmmmm...oh God...oh God...baby...yes...yes...yes!!!!!!!”

The orgasmic pleasure exploded from her core all the way up to her scalp and then down through her toes, zipping through her body like a live wire. Ali pulled her hand away from her sensitive clit and wrapped it around Ashlyn’s back as they held onto each other tightly while the brunette shook and convulsed. Ashlyn turned her head so her cheek was flush against her wife’s chest while she came hard in her arms. She felt Ali’s juices gushing over her fingers and hand as she slowed her pace down to slow, easy movements. Ashlyn loved feeling so close to Ali as she enjoyed her release, she was literally in her arms and all around her and it was awesome and so satisfying for the keeper. She felt Ali scratching lazily at her back and pressing kisses into the top and sides of her head as she came down from the ride. They stayed like that for several minutes, waiting for their breathing to even out but not wanting to move. Ashlyn’s wrist was killing her but she knew her wife liked to feel her inside for a little while longer.

“I can’t believe your legs didn’t give out” Ashlyn smirked and Ali could feel her lips curl against the skin of her chest.

“I think they did but you just held me up” she chuckled and pressed more kisses to her keeper’s head. “Mmmmm that was incredible” she let out a long, satisfied sigh. “Definitely did not see that happening this morning” she laughed softly and started to sink down onto Ashlyn’s lap.

The keeper laughed with her, enjoying the feel of their breasts, and stiff nipples, sliding over each other as Ali sank down farther. She pulled her fingers out of the brunette and brought them to her own lips with a whimpering moan. Ali leaned back, her hands on top of Ashlyn’s shoulders and linked behind her neck, and rested her forehead against her keeper’s as their breathing started to get back to normal again.

“Damn, you taste sooooo fucking good” Ashlyn closed her eyes as she enjoyed licking her wife’s passion off of her fingers. “Here, lie down so I can clean you up” her eyes lit up at the idea.

“No way babe” Ali chuckled and started to scoot back away from her wife towards her knees. “It’s my turn now and I’m gonna eat you all up” she licked her lips and fixed Ashlyn with a sexy stare.

“Well it won’t take long” the keeper chuckled and moaned again as she finished licking her fingers. “I’m so fucking turned on right now...Goddamn that was hot” she enthused, her eyes still dark and full of desire.

“You’re hot” Ali purred as she knelt on the floor, pushing the coffee table back a bit and dragging her hands down her wife’s chest. She was surprised to feel her skirt pooling around her knees – she had forgotten she was still wearing it. She pinched and tugged at her nipples along the way. “So fucking sexy...mmmm...” she felt her own core twitch as her hands moved down to Ashlyn’s shorts and into the wet mess she had left there. “Whoa, I soaked you babe” she chuckled again. “Look what you make me do...” she purred as she reached for the waistband of her wife’s shorts.
Ashlyn lifted her hips and swallowed hard as she met her wife’s darkening eyes. She held her breath as goosebumps broke out on her abdomen when Ali’s fingers barely touched her skin while she pulled her shorts and underwear down past her hips.

“I’m not kidding” she shook her head slowly, never taking her eyes off of Ali’s. “Don’t breathe too hard or I’ll come. I...you...fuck...” she closed her eyes to try and get control of herself as her wife started placing hot, open-mouthed kisses up her thigh after dropping her shorts and underwear on the floor. Ali pushed Ashlyn’s knees apart as she worked her mouth up the thigh, closer to her keeper’s core. She had planned to repeat her efforts on the other thigh but when she got a whiff of Ashlyn’s passion she couldn’t resist the urge to bury her face between her legs. “Holy shit babe...mmmm...Jesus...” Ashlyn groaned at the sensation and dropped her head back against the back of the couch.

The brunette pulled Ashlyn forward, closer to the edge of the couch and moaned her approval when the keeper put her feet up on the coffee table, legs still spread wide. Ali let her mouth do exactly what it wanted, hungrily licking and sucking all of Ashlyn’s sweet flesh until the keeper was a moaning, writhing mess. She pressed her face into the blonde’s slick folds and moved her head from side to side, breathing in her keeper’s intoxicating scent with another loud moan. Every time Ali moaned or hummed her hunger, the reverberations sent a thrill through Ashlyn’s throbbing core and right up the rest of her tingling body. By the time the brunette thrust her tongue into Ashlyn’s hot pussy the keeper thought she might pass out from being over-excited.

“Al, God...please baby...fuck that’s good...”

Ali licked and sucked and worked her tongue inside and out, finally pushing her nose up to bump Ashlyn’s swollen clit and loving the low, guttural moan her wife made in response.

“Ohh...are you ready, sexy?” Ali asked in a sultry drawl as she pulled back to look up Ashlyn’s quivering body towards her flushed face. “You sure look ready” she bit her bottom lip as her keeper’s eyes finally focused on her. Ali kept both hands moving slowly up and down her wife’s thighs, teasing her entrance and her mound as she stared and spoke. “You look fucking gorgeous Ashlyn...I can’t wait to make you come...” she smirked and shoved two fingers deep inside her keeper’s throbbing pussy before lowering her mouth down onto her aching clit.

“Fuck! Yes!” Ashlyn shouted her approval and began tugging on her own nipples as she quickly started climbing towards her release.

Ali pumped her fingers hard and fast, enjoying the way her wife’s body shook and bounced along with her. She put her hot tongue to work, circling Ashlyn’s clit several times before flicking it and making her keeper cry out again.

“Shit! Unnnhhhh...Jesus, yes...”

The brunette could feel Ashlyn’s smooth walls tightening around her fingers and knew she didn’t have much time left. She brought her whole mouth down over her clit and sucked hard on all the flesh there, moaning loudly as she did so. She looked up and saw her wife squeezing her own breasts and pinching her perfect pink nipples and felt her own core twitch again at the sexy sight.

“Mmmmmmm...yeah baby...so sexy...Fuck you’re so beautiful Ashlyn...” she moaned into her wife’s clit as she released it from her powerful mouth and started flicking it fast and hard with her tongue.

The brunette looked up and appreciated the gorgeous woman in front of her and it almost took her breath away. Ashlyn bucked her hips up hard and brought Ali’s attention back and the brunette...
upped the pace and pressure of her thrusting fingers while she brought her other hand to take over rubbing Ashlyn’s clit.

“Don’t stop...right there...unnnnghhhhh...don’t stop...” the keeper panted out instructions as every part of her body moved and rocked to Ali’s rhythm. “Harder! Fuck! Unnnhhhh...yes...mmmmmmmmm...fuck Al...yes!!...Ali!!!!!!!”

The brunette groaned as her own body reacted to her wife’s orgasm. She watched as Ashlyn’s muscles contracted and twitched, making her whole body shake. The keeper squeezed both breasts and pushed them together as her eyes slammed shut and her mouth dropped open with more moans. Ali hugged her wife’s thigh, wanting to feel her as she came, keeping her fingers moving slowly inside her to try and stretch out the pleasure. When the biggest thrashing was done, she bent down and placed soft, gentle kisses to the top of Ashlyn’s mound. She worked her way down the thigh she was holding onto, keeping her eyes on the beautiful display in front of her the whole time. She saw Ashlyn let go of her breasts and reach down to still her own hand. Dazed hazel eyes gazed back at her as they smiled at one another. Ali moved back between Ashlyn’s legs and bent over her in a hug, resting the side of her face on her keeper’s chest and tenderly kissing the side of the breast in front of her. She groaned when she felt Ashlyn pull her hand up to her lips and lick all of her own juices off of her fingers. Why was that so fucking sexy? It made a jolt run right down to Ali’s core again. They stayed there for several minutes and the brunette could hear Ashlyn’s heart rate starting to slow back down as they held each other close. A few tremors shook through the blonde’s legs as they caught their breath, making Ali chuckle and nuzzle into her chest even more.

“You good babe?” she asked softly, not moving her head while she continued stroking her keeper’s arms and sides.

“Wow” Ashlyn chuckled. “I guess we had some stress built up about this morning or something.”

“You think?” Ali giggled and pressed a warm kiss into the valley between her wife’s breasts and then looked up at her smiling face. The dimpled grin that greeted her felt like pure love washing over her and Ali relished in the sensation. “Best stress relief exercise ever” she giggled again.

“Don’t know why Mattie hasn’t recommended that one before” the keeper joked and they both laughed.

“Hel-loo...” they both heard loud and clear as the mudroom door opened. “I brought lunch. I thought it might cheer you both up today...” Deb’s jovial voice rang through the first floor as she walked into the kitchen from the mudroom.

The first open counter you could reach when you walked into the kitchen was the one on your left, right next to the refrigerator. The coffee maker was there and that’s where Ashlyn often left her keys and phone when she was in a rush and forgot to put them on the shelf in the mudroom where they belonged. From the end of that counter, if you looked up, there was a clear view of the family room through the open passway before the big, two-sided fireplace. You couldn’t really see the nook back in the corner unless you stepped into that opening before the fireplace, but you had an excellent view of the couch and coffee table area. Perfect, really.

Deb placed the bag on the counter next to the refrigerator as she finished speaking and looked up when she saw movement in the family room. Her mouth dropped open as she watched her daughter finish pulling Ashlyn’s t-shirt down over her own head and then plop herself on top of Ashlyn’s lap in an attempt to cover her naked body, still sitting on the couch – but in a panicked, upright position instead of the slouch it had just been in. Her skirt did a good job covering the keeper’s legs but there was no mistaking what the two women were up to.
“Oh...Oh girls, I’m so sorry” Deb blushed deep red and literally turned herself around in a circle, twice, while she tried to find a way to evaporate into thin air. “I’ll just...I’ll just go...” she turned and moved quickly into the mudroom but had to turn right back around again to get her car keys that she had left on the counter next to the lunch she had brought.

“Mom! Wait!” Ali called out as she watched her mother retreat again to the mudroom, her own deep blush still stinging her cheeks. She quickly wiped her face but knew she still had an awful lot of her wife’s sweetness there. “Don’t go!” She looked anxiously at Ashlyn who just sat there, frozen and mute and pale as a ghost. The clock on the tv cable box said 11:45am and the brunette couldn’t believe that they had spent so much time on that couch like that. It felt like Marisol had just left at 10:20am! “Just, wait a minute Mom, please” she pleaded.

When it was obvious that Deb wasn’t going to come back into the kitchen anytime soon, Ali got up off the couch and hurriedly put her own bra and shirt back on.

“Go” she urged her wife and nodded at the backstairs.

Ashlyn gathered up her own clothes and ran across the family room and up the backstairs almost in a state of shock. She prayed that Deb wasn’t looking into the kitchen while she sat in the mudroom waiting. She got an excellent shot of the keeper’s naked form dashing towards the foot of the backstairs if she was looking. Ali walked quickly to the half bath in the hallway and washed her hands and cleaned up her face as fast as she could. She looked at herself in the mirror and groaned. Her lips were still pink and swollen, her hair was a mess and some of her mascara had smudged when she had gotten carried away with her face between Ashlyn’s legs. On top of all of that, she was still blushing furiously. She took a deep breath and took the three short steps into the mudroom where her mother had done as she asked and waited for her. Deb sat there on the bench, purse in her lap and keys in her hand, looking towards the mudroom door. She alternated petting Fred and then Persey who had both come to visit with one of their favorite humans. Ali felt awful. Besides embarrassed, she felt selfish and thoughtless. It was her mother’s last day up North and, if Ali had been a good daughter, she would have invited her mother to lunch herself. Instead, Deb had been her usual kind and thoughtful self and brought lunch over for the two moms who she knew would be having a rough morning after sending the last of their kids to school.

“Oh my God Mom” she began nervously as she stood in the door way from the front hall to the mudroom, next to the desk. She was afraid to get too close in case she smelled as much like sex as she thought she might. “I’m soooooo sorry. I...I don’t even know what to say. I don’t know what happened” she shook her head as she spoke fast and waited for her mother to look at her – which Deb hadn’t done yet. The older woman brought her focus to Persey’s soft head as she kept petting her. “We were sitting there being sad about the twins and then Marisol came in and then I talked to Marcy on the phone and decided to stay here instead of going in to the office...”

“Alex, you don’t need to explain yourself” Deb cut her off, knowing her daughter was on a nervous ramble that would never end on its own. “This is your house and I should have knocked or rang the bell. I’m sorry honey” she replied, her voice even and calm. Deb’s face was still red and she had still not looked at Ali yet. “Ok? So I’ll just go and come back when the kids are home from school” she stood up and put her purse over her shoulder. “Or, maybe you should just call me when you want me to come over...” she added quickly, but kindly, not wanting to impose.

The hesitant, shy sound of her mother’s voice broke Ali’s heart.

“No, mom, please. Ugh, please let’s not make this weird” Ali’s voice was high and anxious and Fred came over and stuck his nose right into her crotch, pushing the thin skirt between her thighs as if it wasn’t even there. “No, Fred, cut it out” she reprimanded the dog and pushed him away,
blushing again when she realized why he was probably smelling that area in the first place. He came back and tried again, getting the same reprimand and result. On his third attempt Ali lost what little was left of her composure. “Oh my fucking God” she closed her eyes, exasperated and embarrassed beyond belief.

Deb chuckled, she couldn’t help herself. She didn’t mean to laugh at her mortified daughter but the more Fred tried to explore the new smell, the more flustered Ali got and the funnier it became to her mother. Soon she was laughing so hard she had tears in her eyes. When Ali finally led Fred by the collar to the side door of the family room and let both dogs out into the backyard, Deb got control of her laughing fit.

“Oh, well I’m going to die now, so I’m glad you got a good laugh in first” the brunette complained when she reappeared in the doorway to the mudroom again, but she couldn’t keep the beginnings of a smile off of her face even though she had her eyes trained on the floor in front of her.

“Oh baby girl, I’m sorry” Deb wiped the tears from the corners of her eyes after putting her purse and keys back down on the bench next to her. “That was just too perfect” she chuckled as she stood there, trying to focus on her daughter but still bleary eyed from her laughing tears. “Whew, leave it to good ol’ Fred to break the awkward tension.”

It was true. Just like that, the vibe between them was back to normal, or pretty close to normal. Ali was still freaked out and embarrassed, but Deb had recovered nicely.

“Oh, so” Ali tugged nervously on her fingers, head still down. “Can we just pretend that didn’t happen and keep everything normal?” she chanced a glance at her mother who just grinned back at her.

“That depends” Deb made her face as serious as possible, “how much did Marisol see? I might have to compare notes with her...”

“Oh, Mom!” Ali whined and rolled her eyes. “It’s not funny” she tried to level her mother with a stern look but couldn’t quite pull it off. “Marisol didn’t see anything. There was nothing to see. Well, not when she was here anyway...” she caught herself mid-ramble and shook her head as her mother giggled at her. “Stop laughing. It’s not funny” she tried again but giggled herself, unable to keep a straight face while her mother’s was one big laughing grin.

“Come on honey” Deb cleared her throat. “Let’s eat lunch. Maybe you’ll think it’s funny when you’re not hungry” she teased some more as she took a step towards her daughter to hug her.

“Umm, yeah, I’ll be right back” she backed up and away from the hug. Something about hugging her mother when she could still feel the stickiness between her legs was just not sitting right with her. “But please don’t go.” She took a deep breath and looked seriously at her mother. “I love having you here, we all do. And I don’t want that to change. Not one part of it. I don’t want you ringing the doorbell or any of that” she quirked her eyebrow for emphasis. “We, ah, um...” she looked down, embarrassed again. “We never do that...” she paused when she saw her mother give her an incredulous look. “We don’t. Not anywhere but our bedroom. For this exact reason” she rolled her eyes.

“Alex, it’s ok” Deb smiled warmly at her daughter. “I know you and your wife have sex.”

“No, I mean, yes, obviously, but never like this” she blew a long, frustrated breath out and tried again. “I’m just telling you this so you don’t have to worry about this ever happening again. Because it won’t. This is the first time in 11 years and it’ll probably be another 1100 before it happens again. It just figures...” she shook her head in frustrated disbelief, “The one time...we do
“You get surprised by your mom” Deb chuckled again but took pity on her poor daughter.
“Alright. Well, it’s a big day and you had a tough morning and...” she shrugged and smiled,
sometimes these things happen. But it’s ok. I’m ok if you’re ok” she paused and waited for Ali to
meet her gaze again. “Ok?”

“Yeah, ok” the brunette gave her mom a relieved smile. “So, I don’t know what happened to
Ashlyn” she chuckled at the thought of her wife frozen in her panic-stricken pose on the couch.
“She may never come downstairs again” Ali giggled. “But I’ll be down in a few minutes” she
reached out and squeezed her mom’s hand before turning around and jogging up the front stairs.

Fifteen minutes later Ali led Ashlyn down the backstairs after taking a super quick shower and
changing clothes. She had found the keeper upstairs sitting in the gliding chair in their bedroom,
freshly showered and changed herself.

“What are you doing up here? Mom’s still here. Everything’s ok. She brought lunch and we’re
going to go down and eat with her” Ali explained as she jogged into the master bathroom, stripping
as she went, and hopped into the shower.

“I can’t go down there” Ashlyn replied as she watched her wife get dressed in shorts and a tank top
after her shower. “I can’t talk to your mother ever again” she said, her voice flat and serious.

“Babe, come on” Ali rolled her eyes at her as she combed out her wet hair. “Technically, she didn’t
see anything, except maybe my chest before I got my shirt on. It’s not like we were in the middle
of...anything” she giggled.

“My shirt” Ashlyn corrected.

“What?”

“You took my shirt...”

“And then I covered you up with my skirt and my self and are you really thinking about whose
shirt I grabbed first?” she chuckled.

“No, I just...”

“Come on Ash” Ali bent down and kissed her wife’s lips, playfully smacking her cheek to get her
attention. “Time to snap out of it” she stood back up and reached her hand out for her keeper to
take. “Life goes on.”

“Sure, it’s easy for you” Ashlyn gave her wife a pleading look. “She’s your mom...”

“Are you kidding me right now?!” Ali’s voice rose a little but there was laughter in it. “Are you
forgetting that we were interrupted, in the middle of things no less, by your sweet Grandmother?”

“Oh, yeah, right” Ashlyn chuckled lightly at the memory. “I forgot about that.”

“Well, I had to go and face everybody in our lives after that” she tugged her keeper up out of the
chair. “The very same damned day and Kyle teased the shit out of me, remember?”

“I do” Ashlyn giggled. “I remember you almost took the skin off of him with the hose in the
backyard when you’d finally had enough.”
“Ok, so, this doesn’t even compare to that so I don’t want to hear it” Ali gave her a stern look and stopped at the closed door to the backstairs. “It’s her last day here and we’re not letting this ruin it. She’s fine with it and we’re going to be fine with it. Got it?” she quirked her eyebrow and then kissed Ashlyn’s lips after the blonde nodded affirmatively. “Good, let’s go. I’m starving.”

As soon as Deb saw the two women enter the kitchen at the foot of the backstairs she smiled from her spot at the little two-person table there.

“I wasn’t sure where you’d want to eat, here or in the nook…”

“Nook” Ali replied, releasing her wife’s hand and moving across the kitchen to the fridge. “I’ll get the drinks. Ash, you carry the food over.”

Ashlyn swallowed and picked up the bag of food from the table in front of her mother-in-law with a small grimace, avoiding eye contact with the woman.

“Oh oh, somebody didn’t get the memo that everything’s ok” she teased. “Alex, did you forget to tell her that we talked it out?”

“No, she knows” Ali giggled. “She’ll be weird for a little while but then she’ll be alright” she explained as she carried the beverages into the family room and put them on the nook table as Ashlyn and Deb joined her. “Right babe?” she winked at her wife as they took their seats.

“I don’t know what you two are talking about” Ashlyn perked up and rubbed her hands together in anticipation of enjoying the food she had just pulled out of the bag. “Nothing happened here today and absolutely nothing either of you two do or say will convince me otherwise” she smiled.

“Ah, we’re going the ‘pretend it didn’t happen’ route” Deb nodded. “Ok, I can work with that. But then I can’t tell you about Fred making me laugh so hard I cried” she smirked at her daughter-in-law as they began to eat their favorite salads from their favorite restaurant up in Rockport.

Ashlyn looked from one woman to the next and took in the look of utter embarrassment on her wife’s face. She took a beat and considered it.

“Nope. Still don’t know what you’re talking about” she shrugged and stabbed sweetly at her salad. “Thank you so much for bringing lunch Deb. This is great. Just delicious” she smiled as she chewed.

“Yep” Deb chuckled and shared a smirk with her daughter. “Tastes like denial.”
“What in the world?” Ashlyn sighed and held up a 2” leg from one of the kids’ miniature action figures. It was green with a black boot and the keeper was guessing Robin was missing his left leg – the boy wonder never got the respect that Batman did. “Are you kidding me?” she muttered and then chuckled a minute later and then followed that up with a disgusted “Ewwwww...what is that?!” and a triumphant “Ha! So that’s where that disappeared to.”

After several more minutes of emptying the two dirty laundry hampers from the boys’ bathroom and the girls’ bathroom, Ashlyn had collected the usual amount of random and sometimes disgusting things that did not belong there. You never knew what you were going to find in a dirty clothes hamper when you had four young children. The most common things found in the different pockets of children’s pants or shorts or skirts or sweatshirts were food or candy wrappers and seemingly random rocks or twigs or leaves from the yard or the playground at school. Ali and Ashlyn had taught their children to use their pockets for their wrappers if they didn’t see a trashcan nearby. You had also taught them to use their pockets for their hands if they were visiting somewhere with things they weren’t supposed to touch.

“Hands in your pockets please” one of the moms would call out and the kids would stick their hands into their pockets and leave them there until they were allowed to remove them.

It hadn’t been too necessary with Drew because he wasn’t always sure he wanted to touch everything when he was younger. He was a careful kid who didn’t like to touch anything that might feel gross. But Josie was curious about things and often reached out to touch something and investigate. And then Dodge and Lily had taken it a step further, just of their own personalities and accord, and actually picked things up that they wanted to check out. It was all completely innocent but, after so many dropped and broken things at the stores they accompanied their moms into, Ali and Ashlyn had to make the hands in your pockets rule before they went broke paying for things they didn’t want, need or even get to take out of the store.

And all of the kids went for different things. Drew, as he got a little older, started to appreciate money and so when he saw a penny or any other coin on the ground he was quick to pick it up. Josie liked things with pretty colors, like a rock with a stripe through it or even a piece of glass that had been dulled over time by the elements. Dodge was drawn to weird things from nature and Ashlyn would never get over the time she reached into his little pants pockets and found a slug inside. Honestly, she still had nightmares about it. One time it was a short twig, about 1”, with a medium hard ball of tar stuck to it. But other times it was a brightly colored leaf, or what was left of the leaf it had once been, from a tree that was just starting to turn colors in the Fall. Lily was interested in it all. Her pockets were the most entertaining because you never knew what you would find, and, big plus, it was hardly ever gross. Although sometimes the tiny bird feathers qualified as gross to both moms.

The kids were allowed to keep some of their little trinkets, depending on what it was and where they had found it. Each child had a shoebox in their room where they squirreled away their approved finds, although the moms did have to inspect the shoeboxes occasionally to make sure unapproved items hadn’t found their way inside. Lily was the biggest offender here but, luckily, she had never been any truly disgusting items discovered. Dodge put an earthworm in his shoebox once which was when the random inspection rule had begun in earnest. To make any of
these collectibles possible, the kids had to have clothes with pockets. That was never a problem
with the boys, but many of the girls’ clothes out there didn’t have pockets. Ali was careful to buy
things that did have pockets, and, as time went by, even some of the leggings that the girls wore
started to come with pockets. There was no way to enforce the ‘hands in your pockets’ rule if Josie
and Lily didn’t have pockets to begin with!

Lily also had a penchant for losing her own little things that she had insisted on bringing with her
for whatever excursion the family made. Starting at about at 3, she began picking out two or three
things from her room that she wanted to bring with her to the store or to Grandpa’s or to the soccer
pitch to watch Drew’s game. They were tiny little things, sometimes trinkets from her shoebox.
Adorably, she liked to hold them in her little hands, which meant, right off the bat, she gave the
third item to one of her mothers to hold for her. What started as a cute, innocent thing turned into
an absolute nightmare though. Invariably, one or usually two of the three things she brought with
her would get lost and all hell would break loose as the whole family tried, and failed, to locate the
missing trinket. Lily would ball her eyes out the whole time and then have an absolute fit when the
determination was finally made that the object had been irrevocably lost. Ali and Ashlyn began
limiting what she could bring with her and finally, after several more fits and episodes, the rule
became that Lily could only bring one trinket with her and if she lost it then that was just too bad.
It was up to her whether she chose to accept the risk or not. What ended up happening was that she
left the trinket in the minivan and her moms ended up tearing it apart to locate it when they got
home. Also not ideal.

When Ashlyn was finished sorting the kids’ dirty clothes and had started the load of darks, she
took care of the crap she had found in pockets. The empty cheese stick and candy wrappers went
into the trash along with the piece of chewed bubble gum that had been half wrapped up again and
was still sticky. Robin’s leg and the one tiny Matchbox car wheel went into the junk drawer next to
the fridge in the kitchen. Sometimes those things could be saved and sometimes they could not.
Periodically, the two moms went through the junk drawer and made some harsher decisions about
the pathetic collection of bits and pieces deposited there. The smooth white stone, the two random
Lego bricks, the four coins of loose change and the mini nun-chucks from the Michelangelo
TMNT toy figure all went into the front living room in Ashlyn’s open palm. Technically, anything
that the kids didn’t take out of their pockets and put away could be thrown away. But both moms
were lenient when enforcing that rule. It was mainly there to cover their butts in case something
got destroyed in the washing machine.

“Hey, look what I found” she enthused as she stepped into the room holding up a player’s piece in
the shape of a wizard from ‘Labyrinth’, the board game Drew currently loved, in her other hand.

It was a Sunday morning in mid-September and nobody had to be anywhere until the Breakers
game that afternoon. Ali was in the middle of a serious wrestling match with all four of the kids
and was on her hands and knees with both Josie and Lily draped across her back like saddlebags.
Somehow the game had become boys against the girls and the object was for Dodge and Drew to
remove their sisters from their mommy’s back. All five of them were laughing and giggling as the
brunette kept her sons at bay, thankful that they hadn’t yet figured out how to attack her at the
same time from opposite sides. Brave, or just lazy, Fred looked on from the dog bed nearby while
Persey curled up on the couch, safely out of the fray. They all looked up at the keeper, intrigued by
the excitement in her voice.

“The red wizard!” Drew yelled and jumped over to take it from her hand. It was his favorite
playing piece and he had made a scene last night when they tried to play the game and found it
missing. “Yes!”

“It was in somebody’s pocket” Ashlyn quirked her eyebrow and cocked her head. “That’s not cool
guys. Keep the stuff with the games they belong to or we won’t be able to play any of them. Right?”

“Wee took it, didn’t she?” Drew gave his little sister an accusatory scowl.

He was right but Ashlyn didn’t need any sibling justice to ruin their morning.

“I don’t know whose pocket it was” she shrugged and winked at her wife, still in position with the girls on her back. “Why don’t you put it away before we lose it again” she nodded toward the boxed-up board game on the shelf next to the toy box.

The keeper looked at her wife to try and gauge whether she was ready to be done wrestling or not. They had been horsing around for a while and the kids weren’t that little anymore. Ashlyn decided her beautiful brunette could use a break.

“Whose stone is this?” she held up the smooth white stone between her thumb and forefinger.

“Mine!” Josie shouted and slid off of Ali’s back to run and take it from her Mama.

“It almost got thrown away little one” the keeper patted the back of her head as the girl grabbed the stone and hugged Ashlyn. “Take better care of your things...”

“Thank you Mama!” she called out as she turned to run up the stairs and put the stone in her shoebox.

“You’re welcome JoJo. Thank you for using your manners!” she replied with a smile before holding up the next item.

When she was done five minutes later, Dodge was putting the nun-chucks away, Drew was running upstairs to put the coins in his Iron-Man piggy bank, and Lily was on her way down to the playroom to return the Legos to their bin.

“Anything gross?” Ali asked with a knowing smirk as she sat back on her heels and redid her bun.

“Not so bad” Ashlyn considered for a second. “Already chewed bubble gum was the worst.”

“Not bad at all” Ali giggled. “Lucky” she gave her wife a playful pout.

“You know it baby” the keeper’s dimpled grin appeared. “And the laundry is the least of it” she cheesed.

Right on cue, Dodge came flying into the room and tackle-hugged Ashlyn from behind, knocking her forward a good foot before she got her balance. Josie and then Lily and finally Drew returned to the room, eager to continue playing with their moms. These were the mornings that meant the most. Kids still in their jammies, moms relaxed and not in a rush to get somewhere, life was perfect and simple and both Ali and Ashlyn knew how lucky they really were.

The garden that summer had been twice as big and twice as successful as the first one the year before. Deb’s two tomato plants produced some of the most delicious tomatoes that Ashlyn had ever tasted in her life. The kids had stayed just as excited and engaged as they had the year before, and Dodge actually chose something he liked, carrots, instead of choosing corn again just to be cute. Josie was ok letting the carrots go to Dodge this year because she took over the cherry tomatoes from Ali instead. The brunette didn’t really care what was planted in her name as long as
the kids were happy with what they were growing, so Ashlyn had given her radishes this year. Lily stuck with her cucumbers but Carol and Ashlyn had found some that grew smaller and were good for pickling. Drew tried watermelon again and they had turned out much better this year. Ashlyn planted her sugarsnap peas again and also included a couple of different kinds of lettuces and some strawberries and some herbs. She grew the herbs in their own little mini-bed, except for the basil which she grew next to the tomatoes as Carol had recommended to help keep natural pests away. Every afternoon the kids would go out into the garden with Ashlyn and sometimes Deb to help pick the produce that was ripe. They went out just before getting dinner ready so they could enjoy some of their successful crops at the dinner table. Josie swore her freshly grown and harvested cherry tomatoes tasted better than any others. Nobody challenged her 6-year old wisdom because they knew she was right.

All in all, the garden had become a wonderful addition to their daily summer lives. It was well worth spending extra time getting the dirt out from under the kids’ nails and Ali never complained once about the extra laundry and clean-up that came with having four children spending more time in and around dirt and mud. Both Deb and Carol, when she and Tammye visited in the summer, loved taking the kids into the garden and talking with them about growing things and flowers and vegetables and fruit and all of the things that went in to a successful garden, like weeding and watering. It was a great, tangible way to show the kids what could happen when you tended to something. That something, those days, was a vegetable garden in the backyard, but who’s to say what they might be able to tend to as they got older? Maybe having a garden as kids would enable them to understand what it meant to take care of themselves or of each other or of their friends or pets. Whether it helped her with her PTSD symptoms or not, Ashlyn couldn’t really be sure. But she was positive that gardening with her family had brought her hours and hours of happiness and joy over the past two summers and she wasn’t about to stop planting one anytime soon.

“Hey” Ali said softly as she hugged her wife from behind, surprising her and almost causing her to drop the three big tomatoes she held in her hands. “Geez, jumpy much?” she giggled into her keeper’s back and then inhaled deeply. “Mmmmmmm...you smell good.”

“First of all, you scared me” Ashlyn chuckled as she relaxed into her wife’s touch, her shoulders lowering and her back loosening.

She had just stood up after working in the garden for about an hour that afternoon. It was almost dinner time and Ali had come out to collect the tomatoes, probably the last of the season, Ashlyn had promised her earlier in the day. The kids were on the other side of the garden fence, running around the backyard with the dogs, boredom forcing them to abandon their mama and the garden almost thirty minutes earlier, super-powered squirt guns sending streams of water from one side to the next. It was the end of September and the weather Gods had given them a beautiful afternoon. It was hot in the sun and cool in the shade and the keeper had been sweating as she knelt next to and squatted in front of and bent over the raised garden beds in the backyard.

“Second of all, you’re crazy” she turned her head to the side to try and get a look at her wife. “I’m all sweaty and gross.”

“Nah, you smell good” Ali insisted, leaning forward to peck her keeper on the cheek. “This is how you used to smell when you were still playing” she took another sniff and squeezed Ashlyn tighter against her own front, letting one hand move down to tease the waistband of her shorts. “Dirt or grass from the pitch with a little bit of sweat...” she planted another kiss on her wife’s bare shoulder, exposed by the tank top she wore, “all heated up by the sun. Mmmmmmm...God I love that smell” she closed her eyes and leaned her cheek against Ashlyn’s back with a contented sigh.

“Ahh, that makes sense” the keeper smiled and stood there helpless and unable to use her hands to
defend herself from her wife’s roaming ones. “Hey now” she giggled when Ali’s other hand moved up towards her breast. “Control yourself woman. We’re nowhere near alone” she chuckled as she juggled the tomatoes in her hands again after another close call.

“Oh, too bad. Stupid Mr. Woods could use a thrill every once in a while. Big jerk” she rolled her eyes at the thought of their backyard neighbor who had been such a dick about the tree damage to his shed from the winter Nor’easter earlier that year. “Besides, you know seeing two hot women together is one of his secret fantasies...” she teased and then whined when Ashlyn turned their bodies towards the big old house and away from the back fence. “Aw, you’re no fun” Ali released her with a giggle, another kiss and a smack of her ass.

“Just don’t start something you can’t finish, hot stuff” Ashlyn warned with a smirk as she took a quick step away from her handsy wife. “Besides,” she grinned, “I know you’re only trying to get your hands on these tomatoes” she joked, holding the tomatoes up near her breasts and laughing out loud as she moved towards the garden gate.

Ali fixed her with a heated stare that had more than a little bit of desire in it as she started to walk towards her again. Ashlyn had miscalculated her escape plan, because she didn’t have any free hands to operate the gate and was again at her wife’s mercy.

“Need a hand there, All-star?” the brunette purred, taunting her keeper and flirting shamelessly.

Ashlyn swallowed hard when she caught the look in Ali’s eyes. Damn, what she wouldn’t give to take her upstairs and fuck her senseless right that minute. She held her breath as the brunette reached around behind her and unlatched the garden gate, slowly moving her hand and grazing the keeper’s ass and hip on the way by.

“Th-thanks” Ashlyn blushed and hurried away again.

“Mama!” Drew yelled out and aimed his squirt gun at Ashlyn, hitting her with a stream of water in her right bicep.

For the third time in ten minutes Ashlyn nearly dropped the precious cargo in her hands but managed to save the tomatoes before they fell.

“Why you...” the keeper pretended to be upset as she turned towards her son in the middle of the yard.

“Here, why don’t you let me take those” Ali laughed as she caught up to her, using the keeper as cover from the other two squirt gun streams that had joined Drew’s.

Ashlyn turned her back to the water and sucked in a breath when Ali made sure to grab both of her breasts while taking the tomatoes out of her grasp.

“We’ll pick up where we left off later, sexy” she winked at the keeper and then jogged away from the epic battle that was about to begin.

“Damn, baby” Ashlyn exhaled as she watched her beautiful brunette go. The sound of the kids squealing in excitement and the dogs barking along with them snapped the blonde out of her trance. It wasn’t easy to get her attention away from Ali Krieger’s ass, especially at a jog. “Alright, who’s the wise guy who squirted me?” she spun around quickly, making the kids jump and scream in surprise.

Ali followed the progress of the water fight from the window at the back of the kitchen as she washed the tomatoes and started to get dinner ready. The five people she loved above all else ran
around and squirted each other and squealed and laughed. That was the best sound in the world. Hearing her keeper’s laugh mixed in with that of their children was definitely her favorite thing to hear. She didn’t think anything could beat the beautiful music of The Nutcracker or the sexy, husky voice of her wife and the sloppy noisy sounds their bodies made together during their sexy times, but this laughter managed to do it. Imagine that.

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Ali had tried to make it to Mia Hamm’s charity golf event down in North Carolina but, for the second year in a row now, it hadn’t worked out. September was a busy month and the brunette felt terrible going away for a night or two when school was so new for everybody. Mia was a doll about it, of course. She completely understood and encouraged Ali to join them next year instead. What the brunette really wanted was to make the trip with her wife and turn it into a mini-vacation. Maybe they could pull that off next year. Ashlyn would have to work on her game a little bit, but she had been getting better and better. As hard as Ali tried to learn how to surf so she could spend more time with her wife, Ashlyn had done the same thing with golf. She was better than she had ever been, but still nowhere near as good as Ali. But Ali’s game had suffered over the past several years. She just didn’t have a lot of time to devote to playing 18 holes of golf. They were both hoping to turn it into more of a family fun hobby that they could all do together when the twins were a bit older. But the thought of arming Dodge with a golf club made them both more than a little anxious. They did enjoy mini-golfing as a family and had gone several times that summer. There was a dairy farm up in Middleton, MA, sort of on the way to Ken and Vicki’s house, and there was an ice-cream shop up at the front of the property, right on the busy road so people could see it and stop. Richardson’s Farm had joined forces with what used to be a small driving range on the property next to them. Over the years they had expanded and improved the driving range, added two separate mini-golf courses and several batting cages to the facility and turned it into a real destination spot. The Kriegers spent many an evening or an afternoon up there together, with Ken and Vicki and sometimes the Dwyers meeting them as well. Sometimes Ken and Vicki, and Deb and Mike if they were around in the summer, would hang out with the kids and let Ali and Ashlyn get some swings in on the driving range. The moms were actually torn about missing a round of mini-golf to get their swings in and sometimes decided just to stick with the rest of the group and smoke them with their putters instead.

By the end of September, Ali was frustrated with the NWSL playoff schedule, again, for messing up Ashlyn’s birthday celebrations. She knew Championship week was going to be in Minnesota but this year’s playoff teams were really hard to predict. Houston, Vancouver, North Carolina, Atlanta, Minnesota and Boston were all in the thick of the playoff chase. Only Vancouver, with the Supporter’s Shield all but locked up, seemed like a sure thing at the beginning of September. Ashlyn’s birthday fell during Championship week again, just as it had last year, after the runner’s up game the first Saturday and before the Championship game the second Saturday. It was on a Tuesday this year and Ali had been trying to plan a surprise trip to Minnesota so she could celebrate with her keeper. But it wasn’t easy. As always, October was a very busy time at work and she was busy coaching three different soccer teams now that both twins could finally play. Thankfully the twins played on the same co-ed team, ages 4 and 5, so Ali was only coaching three teams instead of four.

She really wanted to fly out and spend Sunday, Monday and Tuesday with her girl, just the two of them, but she knew that was impractical. It was soccer season and everybody was busy, including Ken Krieger and Sydney Dwyer and Niki Cross. If she was lucky, she could get Vicki and maybe Koty and Brianna to watch the kids for her for one night away. It was a lot to ask but Ali knew it was important for she and her wife to make time for each other and this was just the most recent example. They hadn’t been away together, just the two of them, since their 4-day February trip during their Florida vacation. They had been on dates though, careful not to skip going out at least
monthly to try and maintain their own healthy relationship. Their goal was every other week, but once a month was a bare minimum for date nights. Even though the four-family dating plan had fallen apart once the sheer number of children increased to an unmanageable amount, the friends all still tried to help each other out. Ali and Molly would go to the Dwyer’s house and babysit while Sydney and Dom went out. Ashlyn and Dom would babysit the Cross kids so Niki and Molly could escape for an evening. Sydney and Niki would come up to the big old house and wrangle the Krieger kids so Ali and Ashlyn could enjoy date night. And once the Flanagans’ world wasn’t so upside down with their new baby boy, Whitney and Ryan would jump back into the game too.

That September was the first time the twins were old enough to participate in any of the youth sports and they were both more than excited to finally join their big brother and big sister on the huge, multi-pitch soccer fields every Saturday morning. Lily was a natural and both her moms breathed a sigh of relief when they saw her out there with boys and girls her own age. She had done a good job keeping up with her brothers and sister but both moms knew it was hard to judge anything until they could see her with her true contemporaries. Both she and Dodge, much like Drew and Josie, ran hard after every loose ball and never gave up on a play. They hustled and worked hard to get back on defense – as much as any 4-5 year old co-ed player could. They had embraced and were excellent examples of the Krieger Way. Work hard, hustle, keep your mouth shut and your head up, pass the ball if you could but never be afraid to take your shot, and give it everything you had for your team. All four kids had been hearing those things their whole lives, and not just from their moms. Ali and Kyle had grown up hearing it from Deb and Ken and both grandparents kept the mantra going strong.

To no-one’s surprise, Dodge was really good at soccer. He exemplified all of the Krieger Way qualities that Lily did, and then some. There was something about him that would never go away, it would only get stronger as he got older and more coordinated, and that was the ease with which he seemed to move on the soccer pitch with the ball at his feet. The kid had been playing with a soccer ball practically since the day he could move his arms and legs. Both Ashlyn and Ali had noticed how good he was with the ball at his feet during their little backyard games and even the bigger Krieger family games they played at every possible holiday gathering. But they had no idea how much better he was than everybody else until they saw him out there with other kids his own age. Dodge was that kid that all the parents hated to see because he was just so good and there was nothing the other team could do to slow him down. It was a theme that would continue for most of his youth and on most of the teams he joined, regardless of the actual sport.

“So...he’ll be playing up a year?” Ken asked, his eyebrows up and his eyes wide as he watched his grandson at his very first ever soccer game.

“Ummm...yeah, apparently” Ashlyn answered, her own face twisted in surprise as she saw the same thing her father-in-law did. They were quiet for a minute or two. “Did you know?” she asked without taking her eyes off of the pitch.

“I knew he was going to be good” Ken answered evenly, “but not this good.”

They both smiled and waved as the first substitutions were made and coach Ali turned around looking dazed. They all cheered for the players coming out and going in and a little extra for Lily and Dodge who both stayed in. Ali praised each kid as they came out, telling them how well they had done one specific thing. Just before she turned back to the field to continue yelling out instructions she caught her wife’s eye. Ashlyn and Ali stared at each other with a look of complete and utter shock, each woman feeling better that the other was just as surprised at what they were seeing. The only time Dodge looked like he belonged out there with the rest of the little kids was when he took his turn in goal. He looked small and uncoordinated as he mistimed his moves and let the other team score a goal. What Ashlyn and Ali and Ken all saw after that was the look of an
athlete and a competitor that filled the little boy’s face. Anger, disappointment, embarrassment, determination and focus all flashed across his cherubic face with cheeks bright pink from exertion. That was a face they all recognized. That was the face of a winner. Dodge would be a winner because he hated to lose and it was apparent just from the one thing he hadn’t excelled at that morning. He had let the other team score a goal and you could almost see the feeling settle under his skin and motivate him to do better and work harder. That was how winners were born.

“I don’t know how to coach him though dad” Ali admitted a few weeks later as she and her father stood in the backyard watching the kids kick soccer balls into the small net by the garage. It was what they did every Saturday afternoon after soccer games and lunch. The kids loved it and it was always their idea. “He’s so much better than all the other kids, even the 5-year olds.”

“Having him play up will help” Ken nodded thoughtfully. “It’ll be better for him and his teammates and the teams he’ll play against. And you can’t coach him like everybody else because he’s not like everybody else” he shrugged. “You find a way to keep him motivated and engaged, even if it’s different than what you do for the other kids.”

“But I’m afraid the other parents will think I’m favoring him, or treating him better than their kids...”

“Doesn’t matter what they think Alex.” He turned to face her for the first time. “Your boy has a gift. If he keeps going the way he’s going, and you and I both know he’s only going to get better” he quirked an eyebrow at his conflicted daughter, “he’s going to have national team scouts watching him progress through these youth teams. He’ll get called into camp for the U-15 Boys National Team and they’ll want him in one of the US Soccer Development Academy clubs sooner rather than later. It’s all up to you and Ash, obviously, but you won’t be coaching him for too much longer” he smiled. “So forget about whiny parents and just do what’s best for your son. My advice is to encourage the parents to come and talk to you if they have questions. Then you can just answer them head-on without it getting all messy.”

“Dad, he’s 4” Ali rolled her eyes. “I think you’re getting carried away here. He’s played on a town youth team for a month and we’re already putting him on the national team?”

“Alex, I knew you were going to go far with soccer when you were 4 years old” he folded his arms across his chest and cocked his head. “I gave you all kinds of extra drills to do and you were only too happy to do them and come back and ask me for more. You loved it. That’s how I knew. You kept getting better and, even though you were the smallest one on the pitch, you always made an impact on the game. Every single time. Just teach him the basics and give him the best foundation you can. The rest will take care of itself. But I’m telling you right now, that kid is going to play for the USMNT someday. If he wants to.”

Ali and Ashlyn had a lot to think about when it came to Dodge’s soccer future, but neither of them really believed Ken was right. They meant no disrespect and Ashlyn even reminded her wife that Ken did this for a living. His scouting job with US Soccer was exactly the experience he was using to make his assessment of his grandson. But the boy was 4. It just seemed too far-fetched. Both moms believed in their son, unfailingly. But they didn’t want to take him off of the path he was on, playing soccer with his new little friends from preschool. They agreed to wait and see if he really was special and, more importantly, if he loved it as much as it seemed like he did. If both those things proved to be true over the next several years, then they would look into the Development Academy and start weighing the pros and cons of enrolling Dodge.

“And next year we’ll play him up and you’ll get a whole other team to coach” Ashlyn teased lightly that night as they got into bed, not sure if her wife was ready to joke or not. She knew how
worry Ali was about coaching Dodge and having her decisions second-guessed and questioned and criticized by the other parents. “Al, it’ll be ok” she soothed and rolled onto her elbow to face the brunette as Ali set her glasses on the nightstand and rested her head back against the pillow next to her. “Everybody knows you’re a good and fair coach. They’ve seen and heard you coaching for five years now.”

“Ugh, it’s stressful enough making sure everybody gets playing time and feels like they’re doing a good job” she sighed heavily and scrubbed her face with both hands while Ashlyn adjusted the covers over her chest. “All I need is a whole other area of bullshit to deal with.” She used a mocking, whiny voice to imitate the parents. “‘Why is she playing her own son so much?’ ‘When will she let someone else bring the ball up the field?’ ‘Why won’t my little brat get the chance to score a goal?’ ‘How come her kid never plays defense...’”

“Hey, now” Ashlyn interrupted with a stern face. “All our kids play excellent defense. There’s no excuse for playing bad defense. Only lazy players play bad D...” she continued, making her voice and face more serious each time, even wagging her finger emphatically to prove her exaggerated point.

“Alright, alright” Ali giggled and grabbed the wagging finger with her own hand, pulling it down to her chest and blinking up at her sweet wife. “I’ll let you be the one who explains that to them then, ok?” she giggled again and smiled into the kiss Ashlyn placed on her lips.

“Works for me” the keeper grinned as she pulled away, happy to see a small smile on her favorite face. “Anybody that thinks you favor your own kids hasn’t been paying attention” she chuckled as Ali intertwined their fingers, hands still on her chest. “You should just have a video clip ready on your laptop to send out to any parent who questions you about any of this crap” she chuckled. “Why am I afraid to ask what will be on the video clip?” she rolled her eyes and sighed but kept the smile on her face.

“I think it’ll start with the time you kicked Drew out of the game and off the sideline last year when he had his hissy fit” she nodded thoughtfully. “That’ll get their attention right off the bat.”

“Well what was I supposed to do?” her eyebrows went up to her hairline at the embarrassing memory. “He had the foul called on him, which was the right call” she emphasized by lowering her voice, “and then he was such a brat about it I couldn’t stand it.”

“You and me both” Ashlyn sighed. “I still can’t believe he kicked the ball away from the ref and then pushed that other kid as he stomped away. Totally your son...” she teased and got a playful swat from her wife. “I was so glad you sent him off though baby” she added quietly. “That’s not how we do it here and he knows that.”

“I died a little when he got to you and my dad and started to cry” Ali frowned. “But he’s lucky I didn’t make him take his team shirt off. God I was mad at him.”

“We all were” Ashlyn agreed with a sad nod. “But my point still stands. Nobody can ever think you show preferential treatment to your own kids. If anything, you’re tougher on them...”

“So are you” Ali countered quickly. “You made Josie cry in practice.”

“So we have high expectations of all our kids. They know what’s right and wrong and they understand there are consequences. It’s not like we’re mean parents or coaches...”

“Exactly” Ali agreed. “We just enforce the rules. Just because other parents let their kids get away
“with crap doesn’t mean we’re going to.”

“Right. Besides, those are the people that have, like, one kid...”

“Two, max” the brunette giggled and reached up to play with the short hair at the back of her wife’s neck. “They have no idea the chaos they’d be living in if they had more kids than that and didn’t enforce the rules.”

“My queen!” Ashlyn laughed in agreement. “Preach!”

The keeper bent down and brought their lips together in a soft but long kiss, loving the way Ali held the back of her head in place. Ashlyn snuggled up into her wife’s side and threw her leg over the brunette’s hips, pulling her in close. She rested her head on Ali’s shoulder and they lay there quietly for a few minutes, idly running their hands across each other’s back and side and arm.

“We’re not gonna screw him up, are we?” Ali’s voice was barely above a whisper.

“Who, Dodge?” Ashlyn tilted her head up to look at her wife’s worried face, surprised she was still so bothered by it. “No baby, we’re not” she assured and settled her head back into place, squeezing Ali’s torso at the same time. “He’s an awesome little dude and we’ll figure it out when the time comes. We both grew up playing soccer and making it our life. If that’s what he wants then nobody will be happier to help him with that than us. Just relax and keep doing what you’re doing and it’ll all be fine. You’ll see.”

Chapter End Notes

I can't deny it, that dispersal draft this afternoon crushed me. My poor baby Breakers. They were never as bad as their record made it seem. They played hard every minute of every match and they had some really talented players. I'm grateful so many of them were picked up by other teams. The fact that we had one season of Rose Lavelle in Boston, and she spent almost all of it injured, and now she's going to the Spirit where she will probably get healthy (although maybe not if their karma is as bad as it was last season - yeesh!) and be amazing for them - well, that kills me too. Oh well. Gotta keep moving forward. Can't live in the past. Bye Breakers. :( 
“What the hell is this?” Ashlyn furrowed her brow and studied the envelope that had come certified and mailed to the Knight-Harris office for her that Tuesday morning in the first week of October.

“See, normally, you open the envelope and then read the letter to answer that question” Whitney teased from behind her desk.

“Ha ha, very funny” the keeper glanced up at her best friend, finally taking her eyes off the official-looking envelope in her hands. “You’re awfully chipper this morning, glad to be out of the house?” she teased back as she stood in front of the lawyer’s desk.

“Yes I am as a matter of fact” Whitney replied without a glimmer of guilt. “It’s been 3 months and one week and since I started back part-time last week I thought it’d be nice to come and sit at my desk again.”

“Part-time from home, knucklehead” Ashlyn corrected with a smile. “The from home part means you don’t need to be in here...”

“Aww, leave her alone” Ali quipped as she leaned against the open door to Whitney’s office, enjoying the friendly teasing. “Don’t you remember how great it felt to put work clothes on again and go sit at your desk for a couple of hours?” she winked at Whitney.

“Hey baby” the keeper flashed a bright smile at her wife and took two steps towards the door to quickly kiss her lips. “What are you doing here? I thought you had that big meeting with the Swedes this morning?” she asked, referencing the new Ladies PGA golfer from Sweden that Knight-Harris was courting.

“On my way now, I was just stopping to say goodbye to Whit” she smiled at the lawyer. “Love seeing you back behind the desk” she winked. “But you’ve got three more months” she quirked her eyebrow and folded her arms across her chest. “Don’t be a hero. I remember loving to get away too, but just...don’t rush back, ok?” the brunette’s voice was warm and sincere.

“Got it” Whitney nodded. “But, honestly, someone needs to help your wife figure out how to open her mail” she chuckled.

“Oh shut it” Ashlyn squinted at her, waving the still-sealed envelope in the lawyer’s direction. “It wasn’t funny the first time.”

“What is that Ash?”

“Huh? Oh, I don’t even know, but it came certified and was in my mailbox this morning.”

Ali walked over to her wife and looked around her shoulder as Ashlyn finally opened the envelope. They both read, silently, for a few seconds.

“What the fuck?!” the keeper’s voice was agitated as she started to re-read the document.

“I think it’s a summons” Ali frowned, confused by some of the terminology.

“Here” Whitney leaned forward and stuck her hand out. “Let me see.”
“Fucking Dev” Ashlyn scowled as her blood pressure rose and her anger spiked. “I thought Hannah’s lawyer was supposed to be the best and the divorce was going to be settled out of court because she had so much dirt on that prick? What the fuck happened?”

“Just wait a minute babe” Ali squeezed her arm and rubbed her back as she stood next to her, patiently waiting for Whitney to say something. “Let her read it.”

The brunette could feel her wife’s heart pounding through her back while her own heartrate picked up as well. She didn’t have time for any Hannah or Dev bullshit right now. She had to be in downtown Boston in 20 minutes to try and close this deal with golf’s newest phenom.

“Whit?” she asked as calmly as she could.

“Yeah, sorry” Whitney shook her head and looked up apologetically at the brunette. “I know you have to go...in a nutshell, Dev’s lawyers are summoning you to testify as a witness against Hannah in the divorce proceedings...”

“What?!” both Ali and Ashlyn exclaimed in unison.

“Yeah, I know” the lawyer looked at the document again, shaking her head. “Let me make a couple of calls and try and find out what’s going on. Hannah didn’t mention this to you?” she glanced up at her stunned best friend.

“Not a word.”

“It’ll be ok honey, we’ll figure it out” Ali kissed her wife’s cheek and hugged her, willing herself to stay calm so Ashlyn didn’t freak out too. The brunette was irate but she swallowed her fury down because she just didn’t have time to explode right at that moment. “I’ve gotta get to that meeting, I’m sorry Ash...”

“No, it’s ok” Ashlyn smiled softly at the brunette. “Go on and kick some ass. We’ll talk more this afternoon. Love you.”

“Love you too” she squeezed her wife’s outstretched hand and then dropped it as she got to the door. “Whit...” she paused for a second until the lawyer looked back at her. “Will you represent her?” she asked timidly and hopefully, never expecting to need their friend to help them in this capacity.

“Oh shit, yeah, I need a lawyer don’t I?” Ashlyn looked expectantly at Whitney too.

“Geez guys, of course” she replied quickly. “If it’s something I can’t handle I’ll find someone who can. Don’t worry” she gave them both a reassuring smile. “We’ll handle it.”

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The first person Ashlyn wanted to talk to, after her wife of course, to get reassurance from, was her big brother. He hadn’t picked up her call and she had left him an awkward, vague message asking him to call her when he could, if he could. The keeper was a mess. She was afraid of what she was getting herself into and she was angry at Dev and Hannah for dragging her into their pile of shit. Man, what the keeper would have given to be able to talk to her Gram that afternoon. Gram would have put everything into perspective for her, calmed her fears, pumped up her courage and her pride, and shredded Hannah all at the same time. Ali had done a pretty good job of it when they had spoken again after her big meeting. But it had been rushed because Ali was back at the office getting the paperwork ready to sign their big new LGPA golf phenom from Sweden. Ashlyn knew her wife would give her all the attention she needed as soon as she could, but it wasn’t helping her
get through the stressful and agonizing afternoon. Her anxiety only rose when she heard from Whitney after her fact-finding mission. But the new mom was at home with a fussy baby boy and couldn’t talk long either.

The keeper was at the big old house with all four kids, finally back from their music lesson up in Rockport. She had about an hour before she had to get dinner ready and she was expecting Ali home by then too. Ashlyn tried to focus as she emptied the kids’ backpacks out on the dining room table, making a pile for each child with their homework and any other notices from the school or their teachers. She carried the kid thermoses and insulated lunch sacks to the kitchen sink to empty them out, hoping there were no gross surprises. When she was done with that task and unable to come up with any other busy work she dialed her brother again but he still didn’t pick up. She sent him another text, at least the fifth one in about two hours, and then called her mom. Ashlyn didn’t want to get into this with her mom just yet, but she was starting to lose her mind a little bit. She decided to keep it short and simple and not go into any details yet. She really was just hoping she knew how she could get a hold of Chris.

“Ashlyn, you can ask me four more times, I still won’t know where he is or why he didn’t pick up your calls” Tammye chuckled over the phone several minutes later. They had gone through the pleasantries and chatted about the kids as each one had ambled into the kitchen, where their mama was pacing around, to ask for a little snack or a drink or help getting some Legos unstuck. “Why don’t you tell me what’s going on sweetheart” Tammye tried gently. “I know something’s wrong, I can hear it in your voice.”

“Aw mom, nothing’s wrong” she lied with a small sigh. “I just need to talk to Chris, that’s all. I’m getting worried about him. He didn’t make the trip up here and then he’s been so hard to get a hold of...”

“You know Malcolm’s not doing very well” Tammye offered sadly.

“I know” the keeper closed her eyes and tried to stay strong and focused. “Beth told me the other day. Is Chris at the hospital or something?”

“I’m sure he’s just at work and he’s busy” Tammye answered the same way she had earlier in the conversation. “He goes to visit Malcolm a lot though, maybe that’s where he is.”

“Well, is he answering your calls and texts?”

“Yes, I haven’t noticed a difference...”

“What about dad?” the keeper’s voice was getting more and more anxious. “Is dad with the kids a lot? Does he know what’s going on with Chris?”

“Ashlyn, what is going on? You’re starting to scare me now.”

“Nothing mom...I don’t know” she admitted, breathlessly. “I just, I’m worried about him. He always texts me back and we usually talk on the phone but he’s...it feels like he’s shutting me out and I’m worried.”

Ashlyn hadn’t meant to have this conversation with her mother until she had more evidence to prove her suspicions. She didn’t want to worry her, or her father, unnecessarily if Chris really was just spending more time with his sick and dying friend. But she was so discombobulated about the divorce court summons and the Hannah mess that she couldn’t keep her shit together over the phone.
“Do you think he’s drinking?” Tammye’s voice was hollow and thin and terrified. “You tell me the truth now Ashlyn. You tell me the truth.”

“I don’t know mom. That’s the truth. But...I think Beth’s nervous too. She says he’s not drinking but that just means he’s not doing it in front of her...”

“Oh my God...” Tammye’s voice was barely a whisper.

It had happened before. Chris had fallen off the wagon and thrown his hard-earned sobriety away twice in the past. But he had been clean and sober and strong since he started dating Beth almost 13 years ago. Ashlyn and the whole family really thought becoming a husband and a father had steadied him and helped him keep things in perspective. The keeper knew how hard it was to be a parent and a spouse and she was always worried that the extra pressures might have the opposite effect on her big strong brother. All she knew was that she had to find out before it was too late, before he was too far gone again. Staying sober had always been difficult for both Chris and Mike. Mike had also given in to the temptation a few times over the years. This is why Ashlyn had been so upset to hear about him taking up with Lydia and spending so much time at the bar where she worked. She knew it was just asking for trouble - an alcoholic hanging out while his girlfriend tended bar.

Tammye had never fallen though. She always said that getting clean had been so incredibly difficult for her in the first place that there was absolutely no way she would let herself go through it again, no matter what. She went to her AA meeting every week and sometimes twice if she felt like she needed to. Ali had always been so grateful that her own brother had adopted the same mindset as Tammye rather than Chris or Mike. She really didn’t know how Ashlyn coped with the knowledge that her brother or her father were more than likely going to start drinking again at some point in their future. It was heartbreaking and infuriating and scary as hell. But both Ali and Ashlyn knew it wasn’t a choice. Tammye and Kyle didn’t just choose to be good recovering alcoholics while Chris and Mike decided to be riskier bets in their recovery. Everybody dealt with the addiction, the illness, differently. There was no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ way.

Neither Mike nor Chris attended their AA meetings religiously and Ashlyn had complained to Ali about their arrogance many times in the past. The first time Chris started drinking again it wasn’t a huge deal. He started drinking a beer with his buddies while the football game was on tv Sunday afternoons. That was it. One beer. The Sunday afternoon football game turned into Monday night football games and then basketball games and even baseball games before too long. He had been able to stop though and that gave him false confidence that he soon paid for. It was easier getting sober again that time than it had been before and he stayed sober for another couple of years. Then he fell hard and fast and deep into drinking again. It took his family almost a full year to get to him and pull him back to them. It was in this rehab cycle that he had met Beth at his AA meeting.

This time, now in 2027, he was hiding his drinking, if he was indeed drinking again. That was new and extremely unsettling to Ashlyn. The two times before he just started to casually drink again because he thought he could handle it and stop when he needed to. If he was hiding it now, what the hell did that mean?

“Mom, I really don’t know...”

“If he’s avoiding you then that means he knows you’re going to call him out on something. It means there’s something going on. You’re right honey” she paused for a couple of seconds to try and control her breathing and her fear. There was only one reason that Chris would shut out his beloved sister and Tammye knew it. “Let me call your father” Tammye spoke again quickly, her voice sounding choked. “I’ll call you back. I love you sweetheart.”
Two nights later Ali, Molly and Sarah were talking right after the Boston Beacons home playoff game at the TD Bank Garden in downtown Boston. Kamala Pierce, in her 7th year leading the Beacons, her hometown team, had played one of the best games of her career and propelled the team past their first-round opponent and into the second round of the playoffs. The Beacons swept the best of 5 series due, in large part, to Kamala who had become, as Ashlyn and Ali expected, one of the superstars of the WNBA. Boston hadn’t won the championship since 2024, when Kamala had been named the MVP as well, but they had come frustratingly close. They had been to the Finals in both of the past two years but come up empty. This year, everybody was hoping, maybe a home-court advantage in the Finals would make the difference. The Beacons had the best record in the league and would have home court as long as they survived in the playoffs. Maybe this really was the year they won it all again.

The three friends were enjoying one last drink in Kamala’s friends and family suite before heading home to their wives and children. It had been 6 years since Ali finally made peace, of sorts, with Kamala’s difficult mother, Kiki, and the evening in the suite had been fun and exciting despite Kiki’s overbearing and dramatic presence. The trio had become good friends over the past several years, starting with the random meet-up that one New Year’s Eve where the Kriegers and Crosses bumped into Sarah and Erin at a lesbian club in Boston. Molly and Sarah had become good friends and Ali was already great friends with both women so it was a natural grouping. They met in the city after work for a girls’ night whenever they could, which was only four or five times a year. Sometimes they brought their wives, or some of them, but usually they didn’t.

“Are you fucking kidding me?!” Molly’s face was an indignant blur as she suddenly moved to the edge of her seat and leaned towards Ali for further explanation.

“Wow” Sarah added, her eyes wide.

“I just...” Ali sighed and closed her eyes in a mixture of frustration and resignation. “I can’t believe it, but then again, it’s fucking Hannah so I don’t know how anything ever surprises me” she shook her head and dropped her eyes.

“So, wait...” Molly shook her own head but her intention was to clear the confusion she was still feeling out of it. “Ashlyn has to go to DC and sit in front of a judge and Hannah and Dev and their lawyers and describe her relationship with her ex-girlfriend? On the record, like, for the whole world to know?”

“No, she probably will just do a deposition at one of the lawyer’s offices, right?” Sarah frowned.

“I guess” Ali shrugged. “Hannah was just as surprised as we were. Whit’s trying to work out the details, but that’s roughly the plan. She thinks Dev is trying to bully Hannah into settling out of court for a lot less than she’s entitled to by doing this...making Ashlyn testify.”

“So, he’s going with the ‘my wife had a sex-life before me and I’m a baby about it’ defense or what?” Molly scoffed and finished her drink with a look of disgust on her face.

“Kind of” Ali took a deep breath and let it out slowly, not wanting the next part of the story to be true. “Whit thinks, she’s almost positive, that Dev is going to try to paint Hannah as a... deviant” she swallowed her anger. “And a bad mother...”

“Because she’s bisexual” Sarah finished for her, her own face twisted in disgust. “What a fucking
“Oh shit” Molly’s eyebrows both went up. “Is he trying to get custody of Meg?”

“Who knows?” Ali groaned. “He doesn’t really want her but Whit thinks he’ll use her as a bargaining chip and threaten Hannah with it. Hannah’s lawyer agrees and sort of expected something like this to happen. But she never though he’d drag Ashlyn into it.”

“When does Ash have to go down there?” Molly reached over and squeezed Ali’s forearm before patting it a few times.

“I don’t know” the brunette sighed again. “She’s got the NWSL playoff game in Minneapolis this weekend, she’s leaving tomorrow, and then Championship week starts the weekend after that, back in Minneapolis. It probably won’t be until the end of the month.”

“Our firm has had to testify, or be deposed, in lots of cases over the years” Sarah spoke up, hoping to reassure Ali somehow. “They always let us give the depositions up here in Boston. We’d just go to our lawyer’s office and one of the other side’s lawyers would be there to ask the questions. It gets videotaped and then they try to use whatever they can. I don’t think Ash’ll have to go to DC or sit in an actual courtroom. I’m not sure though, I’ve never gone through divorce proceedings...”

“I’m trying to remember episodes from ‘The Good Wife’ too” Molly giggled, lightening the mood. “They did those depositions in the conference room all the time, didn’t they?” she patted Ali again and then sat back in her seat.

They all chuckled at the reference and were quiet for a moment, watching the very last of the happy fans leave the seats down below them.

“Fucking Hannah” Ali gritted her teeth as she said the woman’s name she had hated for so long. “Just when I thought she couldn’t hurt us anymore...just when I thought I could actually like the bitch...” she paused and tried to tamp down her rising anger. “I actually felt bad for her at Christmas. I fucking held her hand for Christ’s sake!”

“You’re a good person Al” Sarah offered with a sincere smile. “And you love Meg and Ashlyn. Of course you tried to find a way to make things good with her. That’s just what you do” she shrugged supportively.

“It’s not all you though” Molly added. “Hannah did change. She got better about everything. It was almost like she saw how happy Meg was with you guys and that finally made her realize that you could all co-exist. It felt like both you and she put down the weapons” she chuckled softly. “She was great out in LA at the Olympics. I was nervous to be around her but she was nice and fun and...normal.”

“She was only there for a weekend” Ali rolled her eyes. “But you’re right. I felt it too. I never trusted it, but I felt it. She did try. But still, it’s always like there are two of her” she scowled again. “There’s the nice Hannah who thanked me, really sincerely and sweetly, for helping Meg figure out how to use tampons. And then there’s the Hannah who fucking tells Ashlyn how much she misses her...” Ali stopped herself, wondering how much she should say. Hannah had only referenced their past sex life once but it had rattled the brunette and she had never forgotten it. “…in bed.”

“What?!” Both women objected at the same time.

Ali spent a few minutes telling them the short version of the story of how Hannah, after a couple of
glasses of wine and during an argument with Ashlyn about Meg’s first full summer at The Academy, brought up how much she missed having sex with her ex-girlfriend, and Ashlyn’s long fingers in particular.

“Wow, I knew about the tampon story” Molly shook her head, “but what a fucking bitch.”

“See” Sarah sat up straighter and set her jaw. “That’s why I never like being friends with my exes. Too much bullshit that can go wrong at any time.” She caught herself and remembered that she was talking to the only ex-girlfriend she had ever managed to stay friends with. “No offense, and present company excluded” she smiled sheepishly.

“None taken” Ali chuckled. “I don’t know” she sighed heavily. “I hope this all works out without Ashlyn having to be a part of it. But mostly, I just hope it goes the fuck away. Dev’s been a complete prick about the divorce and is trying to pull every dirty trick he can think of to get out of paying Hannah a dime. She served him nice, normal, peaceful divorce papers in February and here we are, eight months later, dealing with this whole, other level of ugly divorce because he’s an asshole. I just want it done and over with. It’s been really hard on Meg all year too.”

“So a bigot and an asshole. God I hate that guy” Molly shook her head. “Didn’t Hannah know what she was getting in to with him?”

“No, I really don’t think she did” Ali replied in a softer voice. “As much as I’d love to blame her, and I still kind of do, it’s not really her fault. Dev never let any of that hatred show. He saved it for the business associates that he knew shared his views. He honestly thought that Hannah was with Ashlyn because she hadn’t found the right guy yet” she shook her head in disbelief.

“What about her other girlfriends, before Ash?” Sarah asked.

“They didn’t exist to him. I mean, most of us don’t go broadcasting our failed relationships to the new girl, or guy, in our lives” she chuckled. “I think Hannah only told him about Ashlyn because...”

“So Meg could keep Ash in her life” Molly finished with a groan. “Shit. That makes me like her even more.”

“I know, right?” Ali rolled her eyes and let out a loud breath. “I wish I could just fucking hate her, it would be so much easier. But then she does something really good and selfless for Meg and it fucks me up. It makes me think she’s a good person...”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far” Sarah chuckled. “I don’t know her but from everything I’ve heard, that’s a stretch even on her best day.”

“Poor Ash” Molly said softly. “Stuck in the middle of another big shitstorm thanks to Hannah Doucette.”

The NWSL playoff games were held Saturday, October 9th in Minneapolis, Minnesota and in Vancouver, British Columbia. The Vancouver Greys finished top of the table and won the Supporters Shield with Minnesota, Boston and Atlanta rounding out the top four teams. The Breakers travelled to Minneapolis for the first game and surprised and devastated the home team Shieldmaidens by earning a 4-2 victory. Everybody in the state of Minnesota had been pumped about the chance of their Shieldmaidens getting to the Championship game for the very first time in the club’s 10-year existence. Not only that, but they would be competing in their home stadium
because Minnesota was hosting Championship week this year. But the Breakers had their own plans. They remembered all too well how shitty it felt to host Championship week two years earlier and not be playing in the big game. Minnesota had won the Supporters Shield last season and was a very good team, but the Breakers played a better game that Saturday afternoon. In Game two, Atlanta completed the upset theme for the day by defeating Vancouver on their home pitch in British Columbia. That was the stunner of the day for everybody. Atlanta had barely made the playoffs, just beating out Houston and North Carolina for the fourth and final berth. But they were hot and playing good soccer and they won the right to play Boston for the big prize in two weeks’ time.

When Ashlyn flew back out to Minnesota the next week to call the Runners-up game on October 16th, she was still stressed out about both Hannah’s divorce and her brother’s sobriety. The keeper had gone to see Mattie twice, just to stay on top of things and try to avoid any emotional catastrophes she could. The good news was that she would not have to go to DC and testify in Hannah’s divorce suit. She was going to meet at Dev’s lawyer’s offices in Boston the second week of November to be deposed. Whitney would accompany her and represent her and that made the keeper feel infinitely better about the whole thing. It would be much easier answering questions about her relationship with Hannah in a private conference room with her bestie by her side. She almost felt like she could actually do it. Hannah had apologized about twenty times in the two weeks since Ashlyn received the legal summons but the keeper was just plain aggravated by the whole fucking thing. She kept her conversations with her ex as short and infrequent as possible. She knew it wasn’t Hannah’s fault, but she was still mad at her for marrying such a dickhead in the first place.

The bad news was that Chris was still proclaiming that he was sober and had even gotten pissed off at his sister for sticking her big nose in his business. He continued to avoid her calls and texts and even rebuffed Ali when she tried to reach out. His lies were unravelling bit by bit as his family started to keep close tabs on him at home and at work and even at Malcolm’s bedside where he was still spending a lot of time. There was no good or quick solution to either situation and Ashlyn just had to learn how to co-exist alongside both storms. It was extremely difficult and she relied heavily on her wife and children to help keep her focused on the important things right in front of her, like little league soccer and her upcoming birthday and the all-important Halloween which was right around the corner.

In a very sweet move, Ali and the kids held a surprise early birthday party for Ashlyn the night before she left for Championship week. They didn’t go out or plan a big excursion. Ali knew her keeper needed something to ground her and remind her where her center was so she could keep her head above water with all of the extra stress swirling around her. Thursday after work, Ali came home with Ashlyn’s favorite barbecue take-out dinner and then the kids gave her the eleven different birthday cards they had made her. Everybody had started out making two different ones and then Josie made a third and then the boys made her a card and the girls made her a card too. Ashlyn opened up her birthday presents from the kids: a necktie that Ali knew she would hate but hadn’t been able to steer the kids out of, and a pair of dress socks that matched it; a new pair of silver stud shark earrings; and some new paint and art supplies that Ali knew she was running low on. Ashlyn loved every part of her birthday party and especially relished snuggling all together on the big couch in the front living room to watch ‘The Goonies’, one of her all-time favorite movies ever. The moms covered the twins’ ears and eyes at a couple of the scarier parts but all four kids loved the movie too. It was such a special night that they skipped showers and even went to bed a little late. Ali was prepared for Friday to be difficult if it meant she could give her wife a special birthday send-off before her week away.

And there was one more surprise waiting for the blonde when Friday morning rolled around. Ali set her own alarm early and quietly got out of their nice cozy bed without disturbing her sleeping
wife. She locked both bedroom doors, stripped her pajamas off, and climbed back into bed to give her sleeping beauty one of her favorite wake-up calls ever. Technically it wasn’t even Ashlyn’s birthday yet and Ali wanted to make sure she didn’t suspect that anything was going to happen on her actual birthday in four days’ time. So the brunette gave her wife some amazing wake-up send-off sex to get her day started with a bang. She even offered to move their romp to the shower, knowing how much her keeper loved shower sex, but Ashlyn chose to stay snuggled in bed with the sexiest woman in the world instead. It was too hard to tear their arms and lips and fingers away from each other and the almost birthday girl didn’t have a single regret after Ali gave her two big orgasms, first with her mouth and then with her fingers between her legs. They moved lovingly but efficiently, knowing they had the breakfast and school gauntlet still to run, but it was the best start to a day that Ashlyn could remember in a long time. And instead of calling the car service for a ride to the airport, Ashlyn got another sweet surprise when her beautiful brunette told her she would be taking her in herself. She even parked in central parking so they could walk to the terminal together, arm-in-arm like they used to do before they had kids and it was difficult to make the airport trips. It was a tiny little thing, but it made Ashlyn indescribably happy. She hated to be apart from her family, and especially her wife, on her birthday, but feeling all the love from them now, before she had to go, had made her heart and soul sing. And Ali had made sure all of the other parts of her were well-loved too. If the keeper could just navigate her way through those two storms and use her family as her North Star, turning 42 would be pretty damned awesome, Ashlyn just knew it.
Minnesota defended their home pitch and won the runners-up game that first Saturday of Championship week. That meant that the Shield winners, Vancouver, finished the playoffs in an embarrassing fourth place. They were the defending NWSL champions, having beaten Houston last year to win the big prize, and they were well and truly embarrassed with this year’s playoff performance. Ashlyn called the game and then spent the next two days attending conferences and meetings about women’s soccer and the NWSL and all of the networking events that kept the week so busy and popular. Knight-Harris had sent its contingent of agents to Minnesota for the week to take care of anything their multitude of clients needed while they were all assembled in one place. Ashlyn took on a little bit of Ali’s role that week and represented K-H’s ownership. She schmoozed the NWSL team owners that were in attendance and talked shop with several of the coaches and trainers as well. She did her broadcasting work too, doing interviews with players and even beginning a players’ tattoo-rating challenge with the millions of fans on social media. Every day there was a tattoo challenge between two players, one of whom got knocked out of the competition. It was great fun and the players loved it more than the fans did. There were plans to organize it better for next year and use a bigger pool of players who wanted to participate.

When Ali arrived at the hotel late Tuesday afternoon she had her spies help her get a key to Ashlyn’s room and then get into it without the keeper finding out. Jen Tucker, Whitney and Ashlyn’s college friend and K-H’s first real agent besides Ali, and Paige Dandreo, K-H’s primary women’s soccer agent and one of their very earliest hires, kept Ashlyn busy with a Knight-Harris pow-wow that could have happened at any point during the next two days. But they told Ashlyn it was important so the keeper made herself available, as always. Ali bluffed her way through the hotel desk and chided them for not having her key ready for her wife’s room as they had pre-arranged. The brunette got herself settled into the room and got showered and dressed for the evening she hoped to spend with her birthday girl. Ali’s first instinct had been to pack some new lingerie and kidnap her wife for the night with only the room service waiter interrupting them. But it was Ashlyn’s birthday and she probably had gotten herself excited for going out to dinner with some friends and former teammates to celebrate and Ali didn’t want to mess that up. So she decided to surprise her wife when the keeper came back to her room to get dressed for dinner and then tag along with her for the night, partying right along with everybody else who loved her so much. They would have time later that night or the next morning, before she had to catch her flight home, to enjoy their more intimate celebration.

Ashlyn was surprised to see the lights on in her hotel room when she unlocked the door and stepped inside. She nearly had a heart attack when Ali popped her head out from around the corner by the bed where she had jumped to hide when she heard the key card in the door.

“Jesus Christ!” the keeper yelled as she held her hand to her chest and jumped back.

“Surprise!” Ali laughed, beaming at her birthday girl. “Happy Birthday beautiful.”

“You scared the shit out of me” Ashlyn bent over with her hands on her knees and laughed along
with her wife. “Oh my God, Ali, you’re here!”

“Is it ok?” the brunette asked as she stepped out into the open area at the foot of the bed and stood waiting for Ashlyn to make the next move.

“Ok? It’s awesome!” she wrapped her beautiful brunette up in a huge hug, swaying them both side to side and squeezing her tight. “I’m so happy you’re here baby. Thank you.”

“Yeah?” Ali asked, pulling back to look into those tawny hazel eyes she loved so much.

Even after eleven years together there were still times when the brunette questioned whether the hot, retired professional athlete with the big endorsements and the primo broadcasting gigs would want her around. Ali’s self-esteem wasn’t really that low, but every once in a while it astonished her that Ashlyn Harris liked her and enjoyed spending time with her. As much as she had embraced and flourished in her position at K-H, deep down Ali was sometimes still the quiet, lonely sales rep who hid herself in her work. Flashes of that time in her past, when she crushed on the keeper from afar, popped into her head occasionally and this moment was one of them. She was suddenly shy and nervous.

“So much yeah” Ashlyn grinned at her and then kissed her soundly, bringing the brunette back to the present and reminding her just how loved she really was. “Are you kidding me?” she hugged her again after they broke for air, leaning back and lifting her off the ground for a few seconds. “You just made me the happiest woman in the world baby.”

The night was a lot of fun and Ashlyn really enjoyed spending time with people she didn’t get to see very often. They went to dinner with friends and then met other friends for drinks and dessert afterwards and then even finished the night at a club for some birthday dancing. That was the beauty of Championship week. Everybody went to it, former players, current players, coaches, trainers, owners and, of course, the agents who represented all of them. Just as the league itself had grown, the week between the runners-up game and the big game had increased in every way. There were more clinics for the athletes to participate in, more seminars for the coaches and trainers to learn from, and more athlete panels and meet and greets for the fans to enjoy. It still bothered Ali that she didn’t attend the whole week any more. She vowed to start making sure she spent more time there next year, even if she had to call in several babysitting favors to accomplish it. If she planned it right, she and Ashlyn could enjoy a vacation at the same time, or at least a long weekend.

“What are you doing?” Ashlyn whisper-yelled when her wife followed her into one of the dark, private bathrooms of the VIP room at the club.

Ali didn’t hesitate. She locked the door behind her and fixed her lidded eyes on the keeper who just looked shocked at the moment. The loud music from the club filled the room, only slightly muffled by the wall between the two spaces. They had both been drinking for hours, but neither was too drunk, just very nicely buzzed and having a great time. They had been dancing together on the packed dance floor for the past hour and were both a little sweaty and a lot turned on.

“Since we’re not gonna get back to our room before midnight, you’re getting your birthday orgasm right now” she licked her lips as she watched her wife’s face change from surprise to recognition and then appreciation. “We’ve got fifteen minutes left in this day so if you have to pee you’d better hurry up.”

As soon as the keeper finished washing her hands after using the toilet, Ali grabbed her from behind and pressed her body up tight against hers, wrapping her arms around Ashlyn’s front and starting to work on getting her pants undone again. They had gotten dressed for a date night but not
super dressed up. Ashlyn wore medium blue jeans with a pair of nice leather loafers and a crisp, tight, pink dress shirt, untucked and open at the collar. The dark grey blazer that she wore over it was back at their table with Ali’s purse and several of their friends. The brunette wore a long, black skirt with an almost too long slit up one side and short black boots with a 3” heel. The beautiful paisley blouse she wore was multi-colored but still dark with tiny gold center points for the paisley pattern that caught the light and, even in the dim club, shone brightly. It had a wide, open neck and she wore it so it was down off of one of her shoulders, exposing lots of skin which she knew her keeper would appreciate. Ali loved to dress for her wife and she didn’t care what anybody thought about it. Ashlyn did the same thing. She knew Ali loved when she wore a pretty color underneath some of her suits and blazers and she was more than happy to choose a pink or lilac or coral colored shirt more often than not. Ali’s thick, dark hair was down and she had curled the ends so they fell just at her shoulders with medium-sized gold hoop earrings flashing near her jawline.

“Al, I don’t know...” Ashlyn hesitated, putting her hands on top of her wife’s to stop her from undoing her pants.

“I don’t need you to know, we’ve got 11 minutes left of your birthday” she unzipped her keeper’s fly. “I just need you to stand here and let me work babe.”

Ali moved her hand up to cup her wife’s breast, still standing behind her and waiting for Ashlyn to let go of her other hand so she could get the goddamned button of her pants undone. She brought her lips to the back of her keeper’s neck and placed a warm, open-mouthed kiss there, dragging her lips from one side to the other with three more kisses before she felt Ashlyn’s hands relax.

“Damn, baby” she moaned, enjoying the way Ali was teasing her with her tongue and lips on her neck.

The brunette finally got Ashlyn’s pants undone and pulled them, and her boxer briefs, down to her knees, biting her keeper’s ass cheek on her way back up to her original position.

“Hey” Ashlyn chuckled and leaned back into her wife as she felt her hands return to her breasts.

“Mmmmmm, that ass is so soft...” Ali nibbled her earlobe and then sucked on the soft skin behind her ear. “Almost as soft as this spot...here” she nipped the spot behind Ashlyn’s ear that drove her keeper crazy and felt her own passion pool when the blonde whimpered and sucked in a breath.

“Fuck Al...” Ashlyn reached behind her and grabbed two handfuls of her wife’s round ass, squeezing hard through the skirt. She didn’t feel any panties and groaned when she thought about her sexy brunette wearing a thong for her on her birthday. “God, I love you” she moaned out.

Ali worked both breasts up as best she could without taking the time to remove Ashlyn’s shirt or bra, driving her wild with her mouth on her neck the whole time. She felt Ashlyn’s body relax and start to coil at the same time, as she pressed her own front even harder into her back.

“I love you too, All-star” she purred into her ear, hot breath tickling the already sensitive skin there. “And until I can show you just how much when we get back to our room, this will have to do for now.”

The brunette trailed her right hand down Ashlyn’s chest and past her spiderweb until she was scratching lightly at her short hairs. Ashlyn spread her legs out as wide as she could, which wasn’t very far because her pants were still around her knees, and leaned back into Ali, appreciating for the millionth time how strong her beautiful brunette was.

“Are you wet for me, sexy? I’ll bet you are” she traced the outline of Ashlyn’s ear with the tip of
her tongue while she worked her fingers lower, past her mound and around her clit.

“Oh yeah” Ashlyn husked out. “I’m so fucking wet baby. And it’s all for you...mmmmmmmm...”

Ali slid her fingers through her keeper’s drenched folds and moaned as she pinched one of her nipples hard. Ashlyn’s hands on her ass felt incredible and she was starting to get distracted. There was no time for that, she chastised herself and teased her wife’s wet and ready entrance with the tips of her fingers.

“God I wish we had more time. The things I want to do to you...fuck” she whispered the last word right into Ashlyn’s ear and then sucked on her earlobe, making the blonde whimper and moan.

“Jesus Al...”

The brunette got her fingers nice and wet and moved her hand to Ashlyn’s other breast while she dragged those wet fingers up to her clit. She moved them all around the sensitive nub, loving the way her wife was bucking her hips in anticipation.

“Here we go, gorgeous” her voice was low and sultry and Ashlyn could hear the desire laced in it.

Ali circled her wife’s throbbing clit a few times and then began to rub it slowly and methodically. She pinched it between her finger and thumb and felt Ashlyn suck in a breath and hiss in pleasure as one of her legs trembled slightly.

“Mmmmmmm...shit...baby, yes. That’s it, right there...”

The brunette’s hot breath was in her ear again, a low chuckle turning into words dripping with want.

“Does that feel good? Do you like that baby? Hmmm?” she teased her wife with some more slow rubbing, not giving her the pressure she needed just yet.

“Hell yes” Ashlyn grunted. “Fuck. Please...please, fuck me” she tried to move her own hand to her clit but Ali smacked it away.

“No, no, that’s my clit now” she used her left hand to turn Ashlyn’s face towards her so she could work her lips across her jaw towards her mouth. “All mine...”

The keeper moved her hand to her own breast then, continuing the work that Ali had started there. She kept caressing and squeezing her brunette’s ass with her other hand as she started to feel dizzy with lust. She would have done almost anything to be able to take Ali’s clothes off and feel her skin all over her own.

“All yours baby...I’m all yours...mmmmmmmm...fuck Al...”

Ali knew there was no time left, she had already teased her keeper for too long. She covered her wife’s lips with her own and kissed her hard, sucking her tongue and then nibbling on it as she started to rub her clit hard and fast too. Ashlyn’s body immediately responded. Her leg trembled again and she moaned loudly into the brunette’s mouth while she clutched at her ass and tugged on her own nipple. God she loved her wife’s fingers on her. She was rubbing her so hard and so fast and it felt incredible. Ashlyn felt her orgasm start and couldn’t help but grind down into Ali’s fingers for even more contact.

“Fuck Ashlyn” Ali panted out after they broke from their kiss and the keeper turned to face forward again, her mouth open and her eyes closed as she chased her release. “So hot...Jesus...fuck
I love touching you like this...” she groaned and put her lips back on Ashlyn’s neck.

“Yes baby” Ashlyn gasped and pinched her own breast again as she felt the exquisite pressure on her clit about to make her explode in pleasure. “Yes...fuck...yes Al...oh God...yessssss!!!” she shouted as she came, doubling over as all of her muscles contracted and she started to shake.

“That’s it, beautiful. So fucking beautiful” Ali cooed as she held her wife through her orgasm, supporting a lot of her body weight even as she rested her cheek against her keeper’s strong back. “I’ve got you and I’m never letting you go.”

There was a loud bang on the door that made them both jump and yelp in surprise and Ashlyn almost fell over because her pants were still around her knees as she tried to turn around too quickly.

“Easy there All-star” Ali chuckled, recovering quickly from the scare and moving to the sink.

“Holy shit!” she exclaimed, still catching her breath. “Damn that felt good” she smirked as she watched her wife’s ass while she stood at the sink wetting some paper towels. “I love my birthday...so much” she panted.

“You’re welcome” Ali returned, kissed her quickly on the lips and then squatted down in front of her with the paper towels to clean her sexy keeper up. “Get yourself put back together up there” she started to say but got so distracted by the beautiful pussy in front of her that smelled so delicious...

“Hurry up Al” Ashlyn giggled and flinched, still sensitive to her touches.

The brunette finished with the paper towels, pressed one warm kiss to Ashlyn’s mound and then pulled her underwear and pants back up. They both took another minute to adjust their clothes and their hair and their faces before sharing one last kiss and re-entering the club. They walked to their table hand in hand and ready to face the rest of the night but looking forward to what was to come when they got back to their hotel room.

Unfortunately, they were both so exhausted when they returned to the hotel that it was all they could do to strip the clothes off of each other and sloppily make out for a while in bed. They never got any farther than that before falling asleep, Ali’s body sliding off of her wife and down into Ashlyn’s right side. The brunette had planned to give her keeper a good and proper eating out but never managed it, at least not until just before sunrise when her full bladder woke her up. When she got back into bed she gave Ashlyn another sweet and satisfying wake-up orgasm, burying her face between the keeper’s long, toned legs again – just as she had for the early birthday send-off sex back at home.

They watched the sunrise together from the comfort of bed and then went two more rounds each, revitalized by the dawn and the nearness of the woman they loved. Ali’s first orgasm, simmering since the night before in the club bathroom, was one of the biggest she had ever enjoyed and Ashlyn, incredibly turned on as a result, came again after only a few minutes in her wife’s capable hands. The second round was slower and much more emotional, almost tender. They both had a profound appreciation of and for the other’s body, but there were times when that appreciation went further and turned into something closer to worship. That morning, in the half-light of the young, new day, Ashlyn took her time and worshipped her beautiful brunette in a way that almost moved her to tears as she gave witness to Ali’s rapture. The brunette returned the favor with as much devotion and fervor and they were left spent and humble and exalted.

“I’m so glad you’re here. Thank you for my wonderful birthday surprise baby” Ashlyn looked up and gave her wife a lopsided grin from her spot, laying with her head on Ali’s stomach.

The brunette had crawled up the bed to cuddle and hold her keeper and was laying with her head
propped up against the pillows and the headboard. Ashlyn was laying on her left side, curled up with her cheek against her wife’s bare skin, facing up towards the headboard so she could gaze at her beautiful brunette as they softly stroked and petted each other. The keeper reached up with her right hand and cupped Ali’s cheek as she spoke, loving how soft and slow everything felt in that moment.

“I love spending your birthday with you” the brunette nuzzled into her wife’s warm hand and continued running her own hand through Ashlyn’s hair as she returned the gaze. “It’s my favorite day in the whole world” she turned her head and pressed a soft kiss into the palm of Ashlyn’s hand. “It’s the only day that really matters.”

The keeper smiled at the kiss and the sweet, adoring look Ali gave her as she blinked softly through her lashes. Ashlyn traced her wife’s jaw with her fingertips, moving up to her ear and her neck. She brushed the dark, silky hair away and caressed the soft skin from there down to her collarbone and her strong shoulder. Ali’s skin broke into goosebumps at the feathery touches and she hummed contentedly. The keeper continued trailing her long fingers down her wife’s chest, through the valley between her breasts, and over to her tattoo. She traced the letters there while Ali caressed the mermaid tattoo on her thigh. Finally, when Ashlyn got too close to the sensitive skin of her wife’s breast and nipple, the brunette giggled and pulled her hand away from the mermaid to hold her keeper’s hand still.

“Sorry” Ashlyn turned her face down and kissed her wife’s stomach. “I didn’t mean to tickle you. I just...you’re so incredible Al. Thank you for letting me be the one who gets to see you like this...” she started to get choked up but smiled adoringly at the brunette she loved more than anything else in the universe. “I know what a gift it is and I just want you to know how much it means to me...how much I treasure it, and you.”

“Oh sweetheart” Ali’s voice was low and quiet and full of so many strong emotions. “You always say the most wonderful things to me, thank you” she pulled her keeper’s hand up to her mouth and kissed it, holding it against her warm lips for almost a minute and then kissing it again. “And I feel the same way. I know how lucky I am to have you and to be with you and to be yours. You mean everything to me Ashlyn.”

They lay there like that for another several minutes, basking in the love that surrounded them and seemed to move right through them like a constant, powerful energy. They intertwined their fingers as their hands rested next to Ali’s side, right in front of Ashlyn’s chest, enjoying their perfect, blissful moment. Without any further conversation, Ashlyn shifted her position, leaving a couple of warm, kisses to her wife’s smooth skin where she had just been laying. She settled in next to Ali and they snuggled together, pulling the covers up and getting cozy again. It was only 8:30am and the pull to get up and enjoy a big room service breakfast was almost as strong as their desire to stay exactly where they were and not move a muscle. But this time it was Ashlyn’s bladder that initiated the next phase of their day. Ali only had a few more hours before she had to head to the airport and they decided to spend them naked and in bed together.

“There are 13 Frank Lloyd Wright buildings in Minnesota” Ashlyn said as she focused on the breakfast in front of her, ravenous after their long night of drinking and dancing and their early morning activities. They sat on the edge of the bed leaning over the room service cart between them. Ali had the bedsheet wrapped around her and Ashlyn had put on joggers and a t-shirt to answer the door. “Two of them right in Minneapolis.”

Ali stopped what she was doing, fork mid-route to her open mouth, and felt overcome by love for her thoughtful wife. It wasn’t Ashlyn’s dream to visit Frank Lloyd Wright’s houses. And the keeper hadn’t even known Ali was going to be in Minneapolis with her. But she had researched the
houses anyway.

“Honey” the brunette’s voice shook a little as she tried to keep control of it. “Did you look that up...?” she couldn’t continue so she just stopped and tilted her head to the side as her emotions ran away on her.

“Yeah, I did” Ashlyn replied without looking up, so focused on filling her belly that she didn’t notice how emotional her wife had become. “I thought I might go check them out and take pictures for you...you know, just until we can come back and you can see them...what’s the matter baby? Are you ok?”

“Oh Ashlyn” Ali reached for her keeper’s hand as she tried to steady herself. She squeezed it and blinked the most loving look at her. “You are just too good to be true sometimes.”

“Only sometimes?” Ashlyn teased, finally realizing how she had impacted her wife that tender morning.

“You seriously were going to do that?” Ali chose to let the quip go and concentrate on how wonderful the keeper was.

“Well, yeah” she shrugged. “I’m here all week and I thought it might be fun to take a look. I thought about maybe trying to go to one this morning, but...” she smirked at the brunette, “I love your plan way more.”

“Me too” Ali giggled as they got back to their food. “Thanks for always thinking about me babe. Even when I’m not with you. I love you.”

She knew the feeling and did the same thing herself. As soon as she went somewhere without her keeper, the first thing she did was think about all the things there that Ashlyn would enjoy. Then she thought about all the things there that would be so much more fun if they were visiting together instead. It was just what you did when you were in love with someone. That person stayed with you no matter where you were and you saw the world with them right at the front of your mind. It was a great feeling. The only thing better was sharing it all with your love once you were reunited, telling them everything you had seen or thought about while you were away. The FLW buildings in Minnesota had been an extremely tangible example of this and Ali felt those butterflies in her stomach again at the thought of it.

When they were done eating and had showered and gotten themselves cleaned up and presentable, they went for a walk to a nearby park to stretch their legs. They walked along the path slowly, arm in arm, still needing to be as close together as possible. It was cool, but not cold and they wore lightweight jackets and talked about how cute the kids had been when they checked in with them before breakfast. Vicki, Koty and Brianna, with help from Bandit, Persey and Fred, seemed to have everything under control and were just getting ready to take them all to school. Ali knew her wife missed their kids a lot when she travelled for work and wondered, for probably the millionth time, if she should try and distract her or if she should tell her every detail of the five days she had missed with them so far. She opted for distraction, believing that her own departure in another hour was already going to be hard enough for both of them.

“So, did you talk to your mom and dad yesterday?” she asked, knowing both parents would have called to wish their daughter a happy birthday.

“Yep” the keeper smiled and nodded. “They’re both good. Carol’s got something wrong with her hip and they’re going to an orthopedic specialist next week. I guess she has a history of hip replacements in her family” she shrugged. “I’ll call her tomorrow and talk to her about some of the
tests they’ll do and all of that stuff.”

“Such a good daughter” Ali squeezed her and kissed her cheek.

“And dad and Lydia are both good. He’s been spending a lot of time with the kids...” she let the words trail off as a heaviness settled around her at the thought of Chris and Beth and the kids.

Ali let a minute go by without saying anything, wanting to let Ashlyn share what she wanted or needed to. But when the keeper didn’t say anything else, she spoke carefully and evenly.

“How’s that going? How are Malcolm, and Chris?”

“Ugh, Al, I don’t know what to do” she shook her head sadly. “He’s drinking again, I just know it. I know he’s upset about Malcolm – who’s not doing well at all. They don’t think he’ll make it to Thanksgiving” she closed her eyes for a second at the awful thought.

“What does Beth say? What’s she going to do?”

“She says he’s fine when he’s home. And he tells her he has a handle on it and he’s just struggling with the Malcolm thing...”

“And the plan is that he’ll stop drinking once Malcolm’s gone?” Ali’s voice had a little edge to it and she chastised herself. It was taking everything she had in her body not to fly down to Satellite Beach and tell Chris what a fucking idiot he was.

“Yeah I guess so” the keeper shrugged again and let out a heavy sigh. “Dad caught him drinking in a bar up in Cocoa Beach. Like if he went to the next town up the beach nobody would recognize him or something. Fucking idiot” she shook her head in disgust. “One of dad’s buddies saw him and called dad so he drove up and told him to go home. He took him to a diner and made sure he was sober and then followed him back home.”

“Jesus Ash.”

“Beth has asked him to get help but he won’t do it. Says he’s got it under control and he’s just having a rough time right now.”

“What about the kids?”

“He’s great with them when he’s around...”

“But he’s not around very much these days” Ali filled in the silence her wife had left as she fought the tears that were forming in her eyes. “I’m so sorry babe. This is just awful. I’m here for you though, ok? Don’t forget that. Whatever Beth and the kids need, or Chris, we’ll help them.”

“It’s all up to him” Ashlyn wiped away her tears angrily with her free hand. “Dumb motherfucker. How many times do we have to go down this same fucked up road? I never thought he’d be so fucking stupid again, not with the kids, not with Beth. How do you put all of that on the line? For what? For a fucking drink?”

“He can’t help it though” Ali offered quietly. “He’s sick. I know you know that, but it’s easy to forget at times like this, when you’re pissed off at them for falling again.”

“I think Beth should kick him out.”

“Then where will he go?” Ali asked, without any judgment or reproach.
“Probably my dad’s but who knows?”

“I’m sure she wants to keep him at home to keep an eye on him. As long as he’s not coming home drunk or anything...”

“It’s just a matter of time Al, you know that!” Ashlyn’s whole body flinched as a jolt of anger and outrage coursed through it. She yelled her words and separated herself from her wife in one furious motion, stepping forward and seeming to shrug something heavy away. She turned to face Ali, tears streaming down her face now. “He’s gonna come home drunk. And then Beth’s gonna kick him out. And then he’s gonna get even worse, and for who knows how long? Malcolm’s gonna die” she paused while her voice cracked at the idea of losing someone she had known for most of her life and was almost like a brother to her. “And when that happens Chris is really gonna lose it. But this time, it’s not bad enough that it’s him that’s slipping away. What happens to Beth? She’s fighting the same fucking disease he is and she’s holding it together. But for how long? What happens if him fucking up makes her fuck up? Jesus Christ! I can’t believe this is happening all over again.”

Ali let her wife vent all her frustration out, thankful that the park was pretty empty on a Wednesday morning. She stood there and listened, remembering exactly how horrible and helpless it felt to be in Ashlyn’s shoes right now. That was the cruelest part of all – there was literally nothing anybody could do to help Chris until he was ready to receive it. He was still avoiding his sister’s calls and rarely responding to her texts. He knew she was the one who was going to call him on his shit and he didn’t want to hear it. It was just that simple. When the keeper was done getting her anger and frustration out of her system, however temporarily, Ali guided her over to a bench and sat with her until the storm had passed. Ashlyn was living Ali’s worst nightmare out and it made the brunette sad and angry and terrified all at the same time. Kyle relapsing was something she worried about constantly and always had. She had learned, over the years, to keep it on the back burner, tucked away in the corner of her mind so it didn’t rule her days or ruin her nights. But it was there. Just as she knew it was there for Ashlyn, but three times worse because she worried about her brother, mother and father. Addiction was deadly and sneaky and ruthless and relentless. Nobody was ever really cured. The cruelty of that concept was impossible to live with sometimes and that’s why so many addicts ended their own lives instead of disappointing their loved ones again, if they still had any left in their miserable lives.

It took Ashlyn almost ten minutes to calm herself down. She sat facing straight ahead, the feeling of Ali’s arm draped casually around her shoulders as she sat beside her was the only thing that kept her still. They didn’t say anything and Ali didn’t even look at her beautiful keeper as they sat there. They just sat and breathed and then breathed some more.

“I’m sorry you came all the way here to watch me fall apart” Ashlyn’s voice was small and soft as she put her hand on Ali’s thigh and pulled their bodies even closer together.

“Don’t be sorry honey” Ali squeezed her shoulders and patted her hand where it held onto her own thigh. “I came here to be with you. I’m happy to be right here beside you, no matter what, my love.”

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The Championship game on Saturday, October 23rd was one of the best in years. Atlanta was a hungry young team that had been knocking on the door of the playoffs for the past couple of years. They had only been in the league for eight years and this was their very first time in the playoffs at all, and they had made it to the big game by upsetting last year’s champs and this year’s Shield winners. But Boston had also been lurking around the playoff threshold for the past several years.
They had made it in as the fourth playoff team three times since Ashlyn’s retirement after the 2021 season, only to lose their playoff game in 2022, 2023 and then again in 2025. This year they were the third seed and maybe that had made the difference. Ashlyn could tell they were determined to win the whole thing this year and she was not about to bet against them. The league was more balanced than it ever had been as the teams slowly but surely moved to bigger stadiums with more professional facilities and staff. Instead of just Portland, Houston and Orlando as it had been back in 2017, almost all 20 NWSL teams were now backed by an MLS team with only Kansas City, Chicago and Washington still struggling to make that jump.

The game itself was well-played and fast-paced. Ashlyn wondered to herself if the game had gotten faster in the past six years or if she had really just slowed down that much. She hoped it was the former but feared it was the latter. In the end, Boston’s more experienced team came out victorious and hoisted the championship trophy high. It had been a great showcase for the league. Both teams played aggressive, physical soccer but they weren’t out there mauling each other the whole game. The technical level of the whole league had continued to rise as more and more young girls started to play soccer earlier and receive better and more professional coaching as well. The country was hungry for soccer, finally, and the fans were attending both the women’s and the men’s professional league games in droves. The keeper was thrilled for her old team and the Kraft family. The Breakers hadn’t won a championship since Whitney’s swan song back in 2020 after making it to the Final game four years in a row and winning two of them. The seven-year wait had been painful, to say the least, but they had finally done it. Ashlyn went down to the pitch to corral players for post-game interviews and by the time she was done she had been hugged and jumped on by so many excited Breakers players that she almost looked as if she had sweated through a full 90 herself. She didn’t care. It felt great to be in the middle of a mass of sweaty, exuberant, talented women celebrating one of their biggest dreams coming true on the soccer pitch. Ashlyn didn’t think she would ever get tired of being in that environment. The memories were too good and sweet, like her own drug that she was addicted to.

As usual, her interviews and coverage from the pitch was the best around and many of her clips made the rounds on the big, national sports shows later that night and even into the following week. The NWSL was growing in popularity all the time, and despite the USWNT’s disappointing 3rd place finish at the World Cup that summer, the country had finally fully embraced soccer. The timing for the USA hosting the World Cup that summer had been impeccable. It was the last piece to the puzzle. It had been the extra ripple that had finally enabled the water to break through the dam. Ashlyn knew it, she could feel it in her bones down there on the pitch. The US finally had permanent soccer fever. Hallelujah!
Ali had been proud of the resolve she had shown for the past six months. It hadn’t been easy and she had experienced more than a few weak and dark moments, but she had been able to keep those mostly to herself and sometimes Sydney. She confided in Ashlyn too, but tried not to give her too much to worry about. All in all the brunette was satisfied with the way all three of them had held it together. But she really felt like she was going to lose her mind if she didn’t get some answers this time. She needed to know what the fuck was going on inside her own body and she really didn’t think she could stand another inconclusive ultrasound result.

It was Monday night and the keeper had just returned from Championship week the afternoon before. Ali and Ashlyn were going to watch some tv downstairs after putting the kids to bed that evening, both longing to snuggle up and relax without doing any thinking or planning or trouble-shooting. The keeper had been waiting for a while, loving up the dogs and getting their show all cued up. She had poured a glass of wine for her wife and a glass of whiskey for herself and couldn’t imagine what was taking the brunette so long putting Drew down. She finally got up to investigate.

“Are you ok honey?” Ashlyn asked softly as she stuck her head into the master bathroom ten minutes later.

“Yeah, sorry. I just really felt like a bath. I’ll be done in a minute though...”

“No, don’t hurry” the keeper came all the way in and closed the door behind her to keep the warm, fragrant air inside the bathroom. Ali had lit a couple of candles and turned the lights down low. Ashlyn knew something was troubling her if she needed one of her de-stressing baths. “I just wasn’t sure where you disappeared to, that’s all” she smiled warmly and knelt next to the tub. “Do you need more hot water?”

“Ummm, sure” the brunette smiled gratefully as she watched Ashlyn lean over and turn the hot water on.

The keeper put her hand under the strong stream to deflect it away from Ali’s leg in case it was too hot too fast. She used her other hand to release the drain and let some water out while the tub started to fill up with the hot water. It only took a couple of minutes and Ashlyn kept her focus on the water and the drain, trying not to intrude too much into her wife’s relaxation time. The bath was still full of lovely, scented bubbles and Ali looked beautiful and serene with her head resting against the padded headrest and her eyes closed.

“There, that should be better” Ashlyn turned off the water and stopped the drain again. She gently patted Ali’s knee and stood up, drying her hands on the hand towel. “I’ll be downstairs if you need me. Just take your time” she bent over and kissed her wife’s forehead before stepping to the door.

Ali reached out and grabbed her keeper’s hand at the last second, surprising even herself. She had thought that she needed a nice, quiet bath to calm her anxious mind and help her prepare for the next day. She had even been mildly annoyed at the interruption but then felt awful for bailing on Ashlyn and their tv snuggling plans without even telling her. Now, as her keeper was about to leave her alone, the brunette realized she wanted her to stay.

“Will you stay with me?”
Ashlyn paused and squeezed her wife’s wet hand before turning to face the tub again.

“Are you sure?” she gave Ali a kind, questioning, half-smile. “I just didn’t know where you were, that’s all. It’s ok if you need to be alone, baby. I get it.”

“No, I know” Ali tilted her head and blinked up at her sweet, thoughtful wife. “I want you to stay, if you want to” she clarified sincerely. “It’s ok if you don’t want to though...”

“Al” she smiled again, bigger this time. “I always want to be with you, I missed you a lot last week...”

“So come take a bath with me” Ali patted the top of the water with her other hand. “We’ll just relax and be near each other. It’ll be just like we planned but without the tv.”

They both chuckled and smiled some more.

“Ok, I’d love to” Ashlyn nodded. “I poured you a glass of wine, do you want me to bring it up?”

“Oooh, yes please. That’d be perfect. Thank you, sweetheart.”

Five minutes later, they were both in the soaking tub, doing just that, and enjoying their adult beverages. They sat at opposite ends with their hands resting innocently on each other’s legs. They stayed there for several minutes, just relaxing and letting the hot water soothe their bodies and minds. Ashlyn thought back to the soaking tub they had shared during their getaway in St Petersburg, Florida during February vacation that year. Before the hot sex they had enjoyed in that tub, the keeper had found it to be a lovely, relaxing way to be intimate with her wife. Not necessarily sexual, but close and intimate. She had promised herself that she would make sure she and Ali took a lot more baths together this year and had managed only two since then, including the one they were sitting in now. It had been another failed attempt to make more time for she and her beautiful brunette. It was an improvement over the year before, but not by very much. She took solace in the fact that there were two months left in the year and vowed to redouble her efforts. Ashlyn modified the goal to one shared soak per month, minimum. She was so wrapped up in her thoughts that she almost didn’t hear Ali’s soft, hesitant voice.

“Will you come with me to my ultrasound tomorrow?”

Ashlyn sat up, surprised by the request, and made the water slosh around as she looked at her wife’s shy, worried expression. It would be Ali’s twelfth scheduled ultrasound, not counting the extra one she had done in April. It would complete her third full year of them, and the brunette had never once asked her wife to go with her. Ashlyn had made the request herself on two different occasions. They had gone to the extra one in April together without even discussing it, primarily because they were meeting Dr. Comello afterwards. And then the blonde had surprised her wife for the one that was on her actual birthday at the end of July last year. But Ali had never asked her before.

“Of course I will” she recovered and smiled reassuringly at the brunette. She wasn’t going to tell Ali that she had been scheduled for a full day of Breakers events to celebrate their big Championship win. The club was trying to take advantage of this week, while everybody was still in Boston before the off-season began, to do some fan appreciation videos and make some celebratory appearances. But if Ali was asking her at this late notice that meant she hadn’t planned on it. Which meant that something was bothering her enough to reach out and ask for support. There was no way the keeper was going to say no. “Just tell me when and I’ll be there” she rubbed her leg and loved the sweet, appreciative look on Ali’s face. “I wouldn’t miss it.”
“Thank you honey. It’s at 11:15am. I don’t know why this one’s so hard...I’m sorry...” she started, sheepishly, but Ashlyn interrupted her.

“Don’t even start with the I’m sorry” she shook her head and smiled. “No need for it, sugarplum. I’ll be there. Want me to pick you up? Are you going back to work afterwards?”

“Yeah, that’d be nice” Ali nodded and gave her wife a sweet smile. “Thanks, babe.”

A week later, the following Monday morning, Dr. Patty Comello texted Ali to tell her that she expected to have the results later that afternoon. The doctor had done this back in July as well, knowing both Ali and Ashlyn were on pins and needles as they waited patiently to figure out what the weird shadow-thing was on the last two ultrasounds. It was above and beyond but Patty wanted to do everything she could to keep Ali abreast of the situation. By telling her she expected to make the phone call that afternoon, she gave the brunette a chance to go home to take the call or to have Ashlyn come to meet her at her office to take the call. The doctor knew her patient was anxious and wanted her to be able to get whatever support she might need when she heard whatever the news might be.

Ali called her wife and then her best friend after receiving the text. She filled Ashlyn in and told her she was fine and didn’t need her to change her plans that afternoon. The keeper was scheduled to be at the Mental Health Institute filming two new struggler videos that would run, hopefully, for the Christmas holidays. Ali spoke to Sydney about the usual things, including how their Halloween had gone the night before. She told her that she was supposed to get a call from Dr. Comello that afternoon with her latest results and Sydney gave her the pep talk she needed and assured her that whatever the result, they would face the next steps together. Ali wandered into Whitney’s office but the lawyer was out for the day working hard on finalizing the location plans for the Engen Foundation.

The coach wasn’t that surprised when Ali showed up at her school that afternoon. The brunette sat in the bleachers, bundled up against the cold weather they were experiencing that week, and watched Sydney and her assistant coach run the soccer team through warm-up drills at the beginning of practice. The team had two more games in their season, one on Wednesday evening and one on Saturday afternoon, and they were hoping to finish strong and make it to the state tournament. None of that mattered to Sydney as she watched her best friend sitting there with her knees together, phone resting right on top of them just waiting to ring. Sydney waved and then smiled when Ali returned her own with a bashful shrug of her shoulders. It took almost an hour, but just before 4pm the coach heard the cellphone ring from the bleachers. She had already told her assistant coach that she would need a few minutes at some point during practice, and she just nodded at her before jogging over to meet Ali. They moved behind the bleachers for a little privacy and Sydney instinctively put her arm around Ali’s waist and kissed her on the cheek.

“Ok, we’re here. I’ve got you on speakerphone” Ali’s voice was stronger and steadier than it should have been considering how nervous she felt.

“Hey Patty” Sydney greeted the doctor who had delivered both James and Maddox for her.

“Hi Sydney. I’m glad you’ve got some girl power with you Ali, good for you” the cheerful doctor commented before getting started. They could hear the sound of papers rustling in the background. “Ok, so I’m looking at the results of both the ultrasound and the bloodwork. The bloodwork, as usual, looks great. So no worries there.”

“Boo-yah” Sydney fistbumped the air because Ali’s hands were busy holding the phone and clutching her best friend’s waist. “One down, one to go” the coach squeezed her bestie and grinned.
“And the ultrasound looks good too” Patty stated plainly, pausing for a moment to make one last review.

“Don’t sound so excited doc” Sydney rolled her eyes and chuckled. She was a little concerned that Ali hadn’t said anything yet.

“No, I’m sorry” Patty chuckled nervously. “I’m just...I know this is a big deal and I’m relieved for you Ali, I just want to make extra sure...”

“Is the shadow thing still there?” the coach asked, frowning at the delay from the doctor. “What do you mean it ‘looks good’?”

“Yes, it looks good” Patty tried again. “I don’t see any sign of whatever was there the last two times. No shadows anywhere. I know it’s frustrating to not know what we were seeing, but sometimes it happens like that. It could have been something as simple as a shadow. It could have been a benign cyst that you passed. We just don’t know.”

“So nothing showed up on the ultrasound this time. At all, right?” Sydney clarified, wanting to be sure she was very thorough because it was obvious that Ali wasn’t able to do it for herself right at the moment.

“That’s right Syd. The ultrasound was clear” she stated definitively. “If you want to come in and do another one, just to be sure, I can schedule one for you...”

“Does she need to do that? I mean, is there a chance that this one’s not right?”

“No. This one’s absolutely right. I wouldn’t offer the extra ultrasound normally, but because I know your case is a little different I thought I would at least offer it to you” Dr. Comello explained, her kindness on full display again. “But, in my opinion, there is absolutely no need for it. I’m confident in this result and I’m happy to tell you that we’re back to having nothing to keep an eye on.”

“Thank you, Jesus!” Sydney yelled out loud, turning her face up to the sky and then laughing as she squeezed Ali again.

“Thanks Patty, for everything” Ali finally spoke, her voice a little choked up as her emotions finally started to get the better of her. “I really appreciate the call and all your patience walking me through this. You’re just the best...” she couldn’t continue without crying so she just stopped talking and nodded her head as her face scrunched up and fought those tears and emotions.

“You’re very welcome. Let me know if you or Ashlyn have any other questions about any of it. But it really looks good Ali. You don’t have anything unusual to worry about so try not to, ok?”

“Ok” she squeaked out.

“We’ll take another look in January, as scheduled, alright?”

“Yep” she squeaked again.

“Sounds great Patty” Sydney took over, realizing that Ali was about to burst into tears. “Thanks again.”

The coach took the phone and ended the call before wrapping her best friend up in a huge hug. The two women held each other tightly and cried onto each other’s shoulders, both of them relieved beyond measure. It was the best news they could hope for and, for the very first time, they released
all the anxiety they had both built up over the past six months since Ali’s first questionable result back in April. They had both been strong for each other, all along. Neither was willing to be the one who let doubt creep into any of their conversations since Sydney’s heartfelt talk during their drive to New York City the first week of May. They both knew it was a façade, but they needed it to hold up. They needed to have faith and believe and that’s what they had found a way to do. Sydney had cried out her fear to Dom after the shadow was still there at the end of July ultrasound, just as Ali had done with Ashlyn. But they never admitted it to each other. This time, for some reason, it took both of them holding up a strong front to get through the difficult and nerve-wracking times. They didn’t pretend to understand it, they just knew what they had to do for each other. Ali had drawn a great deal of strength from her inimitable best friend, as usual. She needed Sydney to be brave and strong for her and the coach had come through, just as she had been doing since they were six years old. That afternoon, in the chilly Fall New England air, they hugged and cried and thanked each other for staying strong and true. They didn’t want to even think about the end of January ultrasound. That was three months away and too much for them to even consider yet. They just wanted to enjoy three months of ‘no news is good news’ and keep hoping for the best. That was enough for right now.

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In between Ali’s ultrasound and the phone call from Dr. Comello with the results had been 5 long days, one of which was Halloween. It was on Sunday night this year and the weather was really uncooperative. It was cold and rainy and ordinarily would have been just the kind of night that moms would not let their children go outside in. But Halloween was not a night to be skipped because of some inclement weather. Not for hardy New Englanders anyway. The Krieger kids, and Ethan Machado, still went trick or treating as soon as they finished their hastily eaten dinner. The difference this year being that first Ali, and then Ashlyn when it was her turn, carried two umbrellas and tried to keep everybody as dry as possible. It was too bad that everybody was out with big umbrellas because it was really hard to see all the cute costumes and cute kids. The only way you could get a good look was if they made it to your doorstep. In a first, Lily had actually convinced Dodge to wear the costume she wanted him to wear. They were 4-1/2 years old and they both loved the kids show ‘Paw Patrol’. Lily went as Everest, a siberian husky dog who loved to play in the snow when she wasn’t helping the team with rescues. Dodge picked Marshall, the dalmation fireman dog who was sort of the class clown of the show. He was best friends with the police dog and that’s who both Ali and Ashlyn thought their son was going to choose. Ever since officer Fulkerson had visited the big old house earlier that year, Dodge had been fascinated with all things police. But something about Marshall’s silly, fun-loving personality spoke to the boy and solidified his choice. Both twins were absolutely adorable. Dodge/Marshall’s uniform was the red firefighter’s coat and backpack with the red firefighter’s helmet. And Lily/Everest’s outfit was a teal green winter coat and backpack with matching winter hat. Those outfits were on top of the actual dog costumes themselves so each kid looked like a siberian husky and a dalmation complete with cute ears, noses, tails, and, in Dodge’s case, spots.

Josie seemed to reconsider her own costume choice when she saw her younger siblings looking so cute. Josie was 6-1/2 and often enjoyed many of the same shows that the twins did. She was truly a middle child and her varying interests reflected that. Big brother Drew and the twins rarely enjoyed the same shows, for example. But Josie and Drew liked some of the same things, just as Josie and the twins did. Neither mom had come from a family of three children so there was no history or experience with the middle child syndrome, but they could both see the struggle Josie often faced. She was a little too old to hang with the twins and a little too young to hang with Drew. She most often ended up going with Dodge and Lily for two reasons. First was that Drew went and did his own thing and didn’t invite her to join him all the time. And, second was that Josie enjoyed being the big sister and bossing her younger siblings around. The little redhead decided to dress up as
Merida from Brave and Ali thought she was going to die from the explosion in her heart. She loved that Disney movie and that character and couldn’t have been happier about her daughter’s choice. And Josie took Fred that year to be Merida’s horse, Angus. Persey’s dark brindled coat would have been a better choice for the big black horse, but Fred was so much more suited for the social occasion and was easier to handle out among so many kids and strangers. Ali and Ashlyn also understood that those situations that made Persey uncomfortable also added stress to the poor dog and nobody wanted that. No, Persey girl was much happier greeting all the visitors from the comfort and safety of the mudroom with whichever mom happened to be by her side.

Drew and Ethan wanted to come up with another buddy costume idea and somehow stumbled upon the Blues Brothers. Ethan went as the Dan Aykroyd character and Drew as the John Belushi brother.

“Did you let him watch that movie?” Ali asked, her eyebrow quirked higher than Ashlyn had seen it in a very long time.

“I did not” she replied evenly and honestly as she muted the soccer game on the tv in the front living room. Ali had just come downstairs after trying to find out from Drew how he knew who the Blues Brothers even were while putting him to bed. “Did you?”

Ali smacked her wife’s arm as she sat down next to her on the couch with a frustrated sigh.

“Seriously Ash, how does he know what that movie is? It’s so old. It’s not like there are ads for it on tv. I don’t get it.”

“Did you figure out if he’s Elwood or Jake yet?” Ashlyn chuckled at how much this was bothering the brunette.

“Ugh, no. I think he’s Elwood, that’s the fat one, right?” Ali rolled her eyes at her own poor choice of words. Both moms tried very hard to think about the words they used in their everyday conversation and the impact they had on the little ears around them. “The shorter one.”

“No” Ashlyn laughed out loud this time and patted her wife’s leg. “Jake is Belushi, the shorter one” she made a proper face when she said ‘shorter’. “Aykroyd was Elwood, the tall one.”

“So you know all of this but you have no idea how our son has even heard about the movie?” the brunette challenged with a chuckle of her own, finally finding some humor in the situation. “Are you sure you wanna stick with that story?”

“I am!” the keeper laughed again and then squealed when Ali started to tickle her. “I swear, I don’t know how he knows about it” she laughed and tried to defend herself. “Maybe he and Ethan saw it at Sam’s...”

“No, I asked him that and he said no” Ali slowed her tickling and Ashlyn took advantage by jumping onto her wife’s lap and straddling her, accidentally smacking her in the chest as she went. “Ooof, watch it babe, they’re small enough already. I don’t need you giving them any extra abuse” she whined and then giggled.

“Oh, sorry baby. My bad. Is it ok? Do I need to kiss it and make it better?” she teased as Ali pushed her hands away from her injured breast.

“No, get away” she giggled. “Seriously, honey, how does he know about the Blues Brothers? I’m really worried about this.”

“I know you are Al, and I’m not sure why” Ashlyn stopped trying to paw at her breast and took
hold of both of Ali’s hands instead. “I mean, I get that we don’t want him watching random movies without our permission. But that movie wasn’t really that bad. At least not what I remember” she frowned a little bit as she tried to think what was included in the R-rated movie. ”It’s mostly just swear words.”

“Well, you’ve obviously seen it. You’re very familiar with it…”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that. I mean, ‘Stripes’ was more my favorite. That’s a funny movie” she smiled as she thought about it. “Chris and I used to watch those all the time. ‘Blues Brothers’, ‘Stripes’, ‘Animal House’, Caddyshack, all those good, old funny movies…” she paused and squinted. “Holy shit” she focused on her wife’s amber eyes as the puzzle pieces fell into place. “Chris. I’ll bet the kids saw the old VHS tapes at his house.”

“God, you don’t think he let them watch it, do you? What other movies does he have? Where does he keep them…”

“Ali, calm down, stop, baby...please!” she raised her voice just enough to break the brunette out of her concerned rambling. “There’s nothing bad. It’s just those movies. And I don’t think Chris would ever show the kids any of them. Not for another couple of years anyway for Johnny. I really think, worst case scenario, they saw the movies on the shelf. Honestly, the kids wouldn’t know what to do with a VHS tape anyway” she chuckled.

“You’re right about that” Ali exhaled and looked relieved for the first time since they started talking. She opened her mouth to ask Ashlyn to call Chris and just ask him about it, but caught herself at the last second. She knew the stubborn man still wasn’t picking up her wife’s calls. “Alright, well, we’ll just ask Drew in the morning then” she smiled sweetly up at her wife and hoped she hadn’t noticed the awkwardness of her statement.

The last thing she wanted to do was remind Ashlyn that her brother was icing her out of his life while he slowly sank back into alcoholism. But she hadn’t been so lucky. The keeper’s shoulders slumped and her whole body seemed to sag as it sat atop Ali’s lap.

“He won’t pick up...I know he won’t” Ashlyn’s voice was quiet and sad. “I’m sorry Al.”

“Oh, honey, what are you sorry for? It’s not your fault that Chris is...” she paused and chose her words carefully, “having a hard time right now.”

“I know, I’m just sorry to bring this crap into your life” she dropped her eyes and started to get off of Ali’s lap, but the brunette held her firmly by the thighs and didn’t let her leave.

“Ashlyn, listen” she began so tenderly that the keeper could feel tears trying to form in her eyes already. “This is our worst nightmare, both of us. You and me. This could easily have been Kyle, or Koty. And the next time it happens it probably will be” she swallowed hard as her own words struck at her heart. “There is no ‘my life’ or ‘your life’ anymore anyway. We’re a team, babe” she smiled, genuinely buoyed by the thought. “Your mess is my mess and vice versa, that’s how it works. You know that” Ali smiled softly, reached up and cupped her wife’s cheek. “One of the things that I’m most thankful for, that gives me the most peace in my whole life, is that you know what it feels like to have an addict for a brother. You know exactly how fucking terrifying it is. I’ve never had to explain any of that to you honey, because you get it. Right?”

“Yeah, of course” Ashlyn finally lifted her eyes when Ali coaxed her chin up. “Always, baby.”

“Well don’t feel like you have to explain or apologize or anything to me then, because I get it too. I get it sweetheart, and I’m right here and we’ll face it together. Whatever happens. Ok?”
“Why are you so good to me?” the keeper’s lips curled into the tiniest smile.

“Because I love you, more than anything” she smiled back and pulled her wife down for a soft, sweet kiss.

They kissed again and then Ashlyn let her whole bodyweight rest on top of her wife and hugged her tightly. They both hummed happily into the embrace and Ali spread her hands slowly across her keeper’s back, rubbing soothing patterns into her thin sweatshirt. After a couple of quiet minutes Ashlyn sighed heavily.

“What’s the matter honey?” the brunette asked, words still soft and tender and full of love and patience and kindness.

“Now I really want to watch ‘The Blues Brothers’.”

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Whitney thought that Dev’s lawyer was just bluffing and trying some strongarm tactics to get Hannah to accept less in the divorce settlement. She really believed that calling Ashlyn, and the woman Hannah had dated just prior to Ashlyn, to testify in the divorce case was just intended to frighten Hannah. She thought that for the whole month of October and even into the first week of November. But at the beginning of the second week of November, the day before Ashlyn was scheduled to give her deposition, Whitney started to have her doubts. Maybe Dev’s only goal was to embarrass Hannah and make her pay for the embarrassment of divorce that she was causing him. Maybe it was just payback. It was a big risk because Hannah was well-known and well-liked in his business circle. That was where they had met, after all. The events company that Hannah worked for specialized in the big corporate companies that populated Washington, D.C. and the tall, beautiful redhead was familiar to almost everyone, at least obliquely. If Hannah followed through on her own threat of telling everybody in that world what a disgusting bigot Dev was, he would definitely take a hit in his wallet. More importantly even than that, he would take a hit in his pride and in his family’s reputation back home in India where they still did a great deal of business. Dev’s father was still alive and involved, albeit peripherally, in the company business and would certainly react negatively to his son’s predicament.

“Why hasn’t he called it off Whit?” Ashlyn asked anxiously as she paced in front of her best friend who was sitting on her living room couch breastfeeding her 4-month old baby boy. “I thought you said he would back off and that he was just bluffing?”

“I think he is” the lawyer replied evenly, trying to keep both her baby calm as well as the woman pacing in front of her. “He may not call it off until you’re sitting there in the conference room tomorrow” she shrugged. “Just relax and stay calm.”

It was Monday morning, November 8th, and Ashlyn was visiting Whitney at her house in Winchester for some last-minute deposition prep and general friendship and advice. Becca was at the local daycare that the Flanagans had begun to use once Whitney went on maternity leave.

“Yeah, that’s easy for you to say” Ashlyn was barely listening as her own nerves and insecurities pinged around the inside of her brain. “You’re not the one who’s going to have to tell total strangers how many times a week you had sex with your ex-girlfriend or, or, or describe ‘in detail’ she used air quotes as she referred to the latest document she had received from Dev’s lawyer explaining what information she should be expected to provide, “what our sex life entailed. God, that motherfucker...he’s just fucking with me to try and embarrass Hannah and I swear to fucking God...” she gritted her teeth and spoke through her clenched jaw.
“Hey, hey, Ash!” Whitney whisper-yelled and finally got the keeper’s wild-eyed attention. 
“Language, first of all” she nodded down at little Tommy. “And second of all, the deposition won’t 
be part of the public record even if the divorce does end up in court. They’d have to convince the 
judge that there was some compelling reason to have the discovery materials become public 
record, and most judges won’t allow it without a really good reason. It’s pretty obvious what Dev’s 
intent is here and I’ll be shocked if the judge lets that happen.” 

“I can’t believe Hannah hasn’t caved yet” Ashlyn whimpered as she dropped herself dramatically 
into the chair next to the couch. 

“Do you want her to?” Whitney asked carefully. 

Ashlyn had complained about this stupid deposition for the whole 5 weeks she had known about it, 
but she had never once said out loud that she wanted Hannah to just make it go away. The keeper 
had always been supportive of her ex-girlfriend and had even given her advice and support over the 
phone since the big blow-up with Dev back at Christmas. Whitney was intrigued and worried 
about her best friend’s most recent comment. 

“No” Ashlyn finally replied after a long pause. She sounded like a spoiled 4-year old who wasn’t 
getting her way. “I just wish...ugh, I just wish none of this was happening. That’s all” she admitted 
and slumped even lower into the chair. 

“Well there are only two ways this doesn’t happen Ash” the lawyer’s voice was calm and even 
again. “One is that Dev caves and gives Hannah what she’s asking for in the divorce settlement. 
And the other is that Hannah caves and lets Dev hose her, in the settlement. There are no other 
options...” 

“I know, I know” Ashlyn scrubbed her face with both hands and sighed loudly, clearly frustrated 
with the situation and torn by her own feelings. 

“Do you really want her to give in?” 

“Dirty truth?” the keeper paused and continued after Whitney nodded. “No, I don’t want her to let 
that fucker, sorry” she glanced apologetically at her bestie and the big beautiful baby nursing at her 
breast. “I don’t want her to let him win. Not at all. I’m just...terrified.” 

“Of the testimony?” Whitney prodded softly, expertly working through Ashlyn’s volatile feelings 
as if she was walking through a minefield with an accurate map showing where each explosive was 
hidden. 

“Yeah” the keeper finally admitted quietly, dropping her eyes. “I mean, I know I’m the one who’s 
always joking about sex and teasing about it and Ali’s the private one” she began, speaking slowly 
and softly. “But having a laugh about it with your friends is so much different than this. What 
Hannah and I did in our bed is nobody’s fucking business. Not anybody’s. It really pisses me off to 
think that he can make us talk about it...” she stopped when her anger and fear became too much to 
control. 

“I know” Whitney tried to soothe her without treating her like a baby. “It’s not right and you 
shouldn’t have to be even thinking about it. You’re right Ash. It’s not fair at all. But I have two 
things in the works that might help Dev make the right decision.” 

“You do?” Ashlyn sat up straighter and focused her attention on her brilliant best friend. “Like 
what?”
“Well, when Dev hadn’t given up by last night I sent an email and then made a phone call to his father’s office...”

“No way...” the keeper started to get excited.

“He’s almost 11 hours ahead of us time-wise so it’s been tricky, but luckily I’m up at all hours of the night these days” she chuckled as she lifted Tommy up to burp him.

“Here, let me” Ashlyn quickly moved next to Whitney on the couch and took the big boy from her. She began patting his back as his mommy continued to explain.

“Well, long story short, I managed to talk to Mr. Karmacharya senior’s associate and advisor...”

“His right hand man?” Ashlyn giggled excitedly.

“Yeah, basically” Whitney chuckled as she cleaned herself up and re-fastened her nursing bra and top. “He was very interested in what I had to say.”

“Whit, you’re killing me, what did you say?”

“I just explained that it would be a real shame for the details of his daughter-in-law’s situation to be made known to all of his business associates in the US as well as India and London.”

“I thought that was Dev’s plan though, to embarrass her?” Whitney’s jaw dropped to the floor. “She would do that? I mean, how kinky was he?” her eyebrows went up to her hairline as her mind raced with all the new information it was trying to process. “Wait, I don’t think I wanna know” she shook her head, changing her mind.

Nobody wants this to happen because it means that you have to be deposed tomorrow as planned, but if that happens then Hannah is prepared to amend her divorce suit and include the unsavory details of her sex life with Dev.”

“What?!” Ashlyn’s jaw dropped to the floor. “She would do that? I mean, how kinky was he?” her eyebrows went up to her hairline as her mind raced with all the new information it was trying to process. “Wait, I don’t think I wanna know” she shook her head, changing her mind.

“I don’t blame you” Whitney laughed. “But it doesn’t really matter if he was kinky or not” she shrugged. “All that matters is what Hannah says under oath, or while being deposed.”

“Wait, so you’re saying she would lie under oath about Dev just to pay him back for doing this to us and trying to screw her over in the divorce?” Ashlyn’s eyes were wide as the pieces started.
coming together for her.

“You tell me” Whitney grinned. “Does that sound like something Hannah would do?”

Chapter End Notes

Anybody actually think Hannah wouldn't do something like that???
Ashlyn sat next to Whitney in the lobby of the 24th floor of one of the tallest office buildings in all of Boston. Dev’s lawyer’s firm occupied four floors of the prestigious building and was one of the biggest and most respected law firms in the city. They had offices in several of the bigger cities across the country as well as London and a few others around the globe. It was hard not to be intimidated by the sheer wealth of everything you could see or touch within their offices. One of Whitney’s classmates from law school had interned at the firm and had been more than happy to fill her in on everything he could remember from his days and nights there. One of the first things he told her was that they didn’t hire a lot of female interns or lawyers for that matter, and that they didn’t play games or mess around with the small stuff. They were cutthroat and very very good at what they did. They also treated their interns like complete crap.

“Don’t worry about any of this” Whitney had whispered to her best friend as they sat patiently waiting for Dev’s lawyer to appear and take them to whichever luxurious conference room they would be using that morning. “These people have nothing to do with you. They don’t matter at all. They’re just a room we’re using today. That’s it. Don’t let them get into your head.”

Ashlyn appreciated the advice and knew Whitney had said it for her own benefit as well as the keeper’s. This type of law wasn’t her specialty and she was nervous too. The keeper spent her time thinking about what an incredible friend Whitney Elizabeth Engen Flanagan was instead. She was still on maternity leave and only working ‘part-time from home’ until the end of December, but here she was, making arrangements with Ryan to take care of baby Tommy for the morning and maybe the afternoon too. It was hard to tell with depositions. They went on for as long as the questions kept coming. The lawyer was tired and cranky from taking care of a newborn and a toddler, yet she had stood by Ashlyn through every twisting step this stupid divorce case had taken over the past 5 weeks. And somehow, she looked like she knew what she was doing. Whitney looked calm, cool and collected as she sat there in her business suit. She looked great too, except for the exhaustion in her eyes and the way her swollen breasts stretched her suit jacket to the seams. She had gone and bought a new blouse just so she could wear it today and had decided to just keep her suit jacket unbuttoned.

“Thanks Whit” Ashlyn said sincerely and gave her best friend a loving smile. “I really owe you for this. I won’t forget it, not ever.”

“It’s ok Ash” the lawyer returned the smile with just as much love. “You’d do the same for me. I know you would.”

“Krieger?” a young man in a suit called out as he stepped into the lobby with a file folder in his hand.

For the first time ever, Ashlyn wished she hadn’t taken her wife’s name. She felt terrible about
dragging Ali’s family name into this muck. She had tried to keep everything in her ‘professional’ Harris name but with the legal documents she had no choice but to use her official name. Ashlyn Michelle Krieger. When she had admitted this to her wife the night before, while struggling through a sleepless and anxious night, Ali had reassured her as she always did.

“Babe, the Krieger name has been through the muck before, I promise you” she rolled onto her side and started sleepily rubbing Ashlyn’s upright back as the keeper sat up wringing her hands with worry. “Kyle did some awful things before he got clean. Don’t worry. I swear, you brought our name up in the world. Trust me.”

Ali didn’t care about the Krieger name. What she cared about was somebody leaking the deposition to the media somehow. The brunette had lost more than her share of sleep worrying about every intimate detail of her wife’s sex-life finding its way onto social media and spreading like wildfire. There was precious little she could do about that though. She trusted Whitney and knew that if there was any way possible to keep Ashlyn from being deposed, she would find it.

“Mr. Capwell will be with you in a few minutes” the young man said after ushering them into a lush conference room filled with a beautiful, medium sized oval table and ten leather chairs that went around it.

The court reporter was already seated and ready to record every single word that Ashlyn, her attorney, and the opposing counsel said during the deposition. She nodded at Ashlyn and Whitney.

“The deponent will sit there” he pointed at a particular chair. “It’s best for the camera” he explained and then left the room.

There were bottles of water grouped at each end of the table and a separate, much smaller table at the back of the room with an ice bucket and some glasses and more bottles of water. There was even a bowl of lemon wedges and another one with lime wedges.

“Still nothing?” Ashlyn leaned over and whispered to her lawyer, hoping beyond hope that either plan A or plan B had actually worked.

Whitney checked her phone again, even though she had just looked at it ten seconds earlier. She was praying to get a call or a text or an email from Dev’s lawyer, Mr. Capwell, telling her that his client had settled with Hannah and there was no need for the deposition after all.

“No yet.”

After a painfully slow fifteen minutes, Mr. Capwell entered the room and introduced himself to both Ashlyn and Whitney, shaking their hands and making sure they were comfortable and had everything they needed.

“Alright then, shall we proceed?”

It was 10:45am and there was no more time for ‘yet’. Ashlyn swallowed hard and cleared her throat as Whitney and Mr. Capwell got the legalese out of the way. The keeper couldn’t believe how thick her tongue felt inside her mouth, which was as dry as the hot sand at Good Harbor beach. She half-way stood up and reached for a bottle of water, knocking the small but powerful microphone over with her tie as it swung from her neck while she moved.

“Oh, uh, sorry” she apologized in a hoarse, scratchy version of her actual voice. She tried to put the microphone back where it belonged but she had no idea where that was. After a minute of fumbling with it, both lawyers looked at her with kindness in their faces. Ashlyn was thrown by the friendly
look on Mr. Capwell’s face. Why the hell was he being nice to her? Before she could wreck anything else, the court reporter came over to the table and repositioned the microphone. She also moved the bottles of water closer to Ashlyn so the same thing wouldn’t happen again. The keeper marveled at her efficiency and thought of her wife. That was totally something Ali would have done. The keeper calmed for a moment, thoughts of her beautiful brunette working their magic like they usually did. She tried to open the bottle of water but couldn’t manage to get the cap off. It was one of those fancy, glass bottles of water with the aluminum cap and the paper you had to peel off to get to it. Ashlyn tried again, and again, and was about to give up when Whitney reached over and opened it for her without skipping a beat of the legal conversation she was having with Dev’s lawyer at the same time. She subtly gave Ashlyn’s arm a soft squeeze before pulling her hand back to the legal documents in front of her and demanding that a few last-minute changes that had been made to the questions in the deposition be changed back to their original format. Before the keeper had swallowed more than a sip of the water, the deposition began.

“Please state your full name.”

“Ashlyn Michelle Krieger” the keeper squeaked out, cleared her throat, and then tried again with better results.

“What is your relationship with Hannah Doucette?”

“We’re friends” she answered evenly, remembering the coaching Whitney had given her. ‘Less is more’ Whitney had said, ‘don’t give them any more than you have to.’

“When did you meet Ms. Doucette?”

“In February of 2014.”

“And where and how did you meet her?”

“Through a mutual friend, at a bar in Washington, DC.”

“And have you always been ‘friends’ with Ms. Doucette or was there more to your relationship in the past?”

Mr. Capwell was still smiling at her and confusing her with his friendliness. She was expecting him to be a dick and come after her hard.

“We were girlfriends.”

“And what do you mean by ‘girlfriends’?” he smiled again. “Do you mean the kind of girlfriends who get their nails done together and go shopping together?”

“No...” she started to elaborate but then caught herself. She heard Whitney’s voice in her head again ‘don’t give them any more than you have to.’ She smiled back at Mr. Capwell and closed her mouth.

“I see” he nodded and his smile faded just a bit. “Do you mean romantic girlfriends as in you and Ms. Doucette were engaged in a homosexual affair?”

“Yes.”

“And when did this homosexual affair begin?”

Ashlyn bristled at his repeated use of the phrase ‘homosexual affair’ but Whitney had warned her
that he would do things like that. He would try to get under her skin and keep her off balance and unsettled.

“In April of 2014.”

“Ohmmmm...” he paused and looked at notes in front of him. “Ms. Doucette said that the homosexual affair began in July of 2014. Why would there be a different date?”

“Oh, um” Ashlyn looked at Whitney, knowing she had already fucked up. “I misspoke, July of 2014 is correct.”

“Tell me why you answered April” he stared at her, knowing he had his first tiny opening and could inflict some damage. “What happened between you two in April that made you give that as your first answer?”

“Umm...” she looked down and cleared her throat.

In the brief few seconds that her eyes were in her lap, she saw the engagement ring and wedding ring on her left ring finger. She saw the matching ring she had gotten for Ali for Christmas that same year Ali had proposed, on her right middle finger. What the fuck was she hemming and hawing about with this asshole lawyer? She didn’t have anything to be ashamed of or embarrassed about. Just because Dev was trying to make it seem like her relationship with Hannah had been ‘deviant and unnatural’, according to the legal documents, didn’t mean it was true. Fuck this shit. Ashlyn started to get angry again.

“Can you answer the question please?” Mr. Capwell interrupted her thoughts and pissed her off even more.

“April was the first time we had sex, but we didn’t officially become a couple until July. That’s why the answers are different” she replied in a calm voice, but with fire in her eyes.

“Ah, yes, the sexual component of the homosexual affair” he nodded and made a note without even looking at the keeper. “We’ll get to that in more detail later on, but for now we’re going to focus on the timeline” he finally met Ashlyn’s gaze and was surprised to see so much confidence there. “How long did the homosexual affair last?”

“We broke up in December of 2015.”

“And since that point you two have remained friends, with no sexual contact. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“And when did you start having contact with Ms. Doucette’s young daughter?” he quirked an eyebrow at Ashlyn and she almost lost her temper.

This was exactly what Whitney had been talking about. He was trying to make it sound like Ashlyn had had inappropriate contact with Meg. He had chosen his words very carefully to paint just the picture he wanted to paint.

“Hannah told me about Meg in November of 2014 and we all started spending time together as a family around that same time” Ashlyn answered and surprised herself by keeping her cool.

“And what do you mean by ‘spending time together as a family’?”

“We ate meals together and did things together...”
“What kind of things?” he interrupted, sensing another opportunity.

“Things like watching movies and going to the zoo and the mall and the toy store and the grocery store and...”

“Ok” he cut her off. “That’s enough, thank you.”

“You know you have to let her answer the question. You can’t tell her that’s enough. It’s up to her to decide when she’s done answering a particular question. Come on Isaac” Whitney reproached her colleague, not missing a beat.

“Yes, of course” he gave Whitney a withering look. “Please continue” he turned to Ashlyn, no longer smiling.

“We took Meg to the doctor and the dentist and Hannah brought her to my games. We did all the usual family things that every family does.”

“And do you continue to have contact with Ms. Doucette’s daughter today?”

“Yes.”

“And was or is your relationship with Ms. Doucette’s daughter also sexual? Were you and are you engaged in a homosexual affair with Margaret Doucette too?”

“What?! No!” Ashlyn shouted, fury flashing across her face.

“Isaac, really?” Whitney raised her voice and levelled Mr. Capwell with her fiercest stare. “That is completely uncalled for and you know it. What the hell game are you playing?” She turned to the court reporter, “I’d like the record to show that counsel is not following the guidelines established and agreed upon...”

“I apologize” he smirked.

“One more time and we’re out of here” Whitney scowled at him.

They had all agreed to leave Meg out of the divorce proceedings entirely, but Dev had already ruined that by accusing Hannah of being an unfit mother. Still, the rules set up for this deposition were clear – Ashlyn would be asked exclusively about her relationship with Hannah. Leave it to Dev to play dirty, just as Whitney suspected he would. Mr. Capwell started asking about the end of Ashlyn’s relationship with Hannah and what had caused it to fail. They continued with the basic framework of their relationship right up until it was time to break for lunch. They were scheduled to meet again 90 minutes later and start discussing the sexual aspect of Ashlyn’s homosexual affair with Hannah.

“Jesus fucking Christ Whit” Ashlyn shook her head as she moved the salad around her plate. She kept her voice low in the crowded restaurant just down the street from the office building and tried not to make a scene. “This sucks and we haven’t even gotten to the worst part yet.”

“I know Ash” Whitney sympathized. “But you’re doing great, just great. Really. I’m not just saying that either.” She paused for a minute, pained by the doleful look on her best friend’s face. “You should try and eat now. It might be a long afternoon...”

They were interrupted by Whitney’s phone ringing. The lawyer looked at the caller ID and sat up straighter in her chair.
“It’s Hannah’s lawyer” she told the keeper as she took the call, her eyes wide as she walked towards the restrooms to get out of the dining room and away from the other diners.

Ashlyn sat there feeling like her skin was on fire as she waited for whatever news Hannah’s lawyer had called to share. Mr. Capwell hadn’t made one peep about either plan A or B the whole time they had been sharing that conference room upstairs. But they didn’t really expect him to. Ashlyn had thought all hope was lost once the deposition had actually started, but it never occurred to her that the solution might be communicated to her through Hannah’s lawyer. The keeper caught herself holding her breath and willed herself to use her lungs while she waited. She was just about to call Ali because she couldn’t stand to wait another second, but she saw Whitney moving quickly towards their table with a barely contained grin on her face.

“Whit, what the hell is going on?” she leaned forward in her chair and felt her heart rising up into her throat.

“We’re done. That’s it” Whitney beamed as she sat back down. “Dev gave in. He’s agreed to drop his countersuit.”

“Holy shit” Ashlyn whispered as a smile slowly crept across her own face. “You did it!”

“I think you did it” Whitney countered, patting her best friend’s arm. “You were such a boss in there that I think Capwell realized you weren’t going to help their case very much, aside from the sex stuff” she rolled her eyes.

“No way” the keeper shook her head. “Was it plan A or B? Which one finally made that prick crack?”

“A little bit of both, honestly” Whitney chuckled. “Dev’s father absolutely went crazy when he found out what was going on. We’ll never know exactly what he said or what he threatened his son with, but I think it’s fair to assume he got his point across.”

“Oh my God, that’s awesome!” Ashlyn tried not to jump for joy.

“And then Hannah’s lawyer must have painted quite the picture of what would happen if Dev continued down this path. Her basic message to Mr. Capwell was that if Dev came after Hannah as a mom and used her bisexuality against her in court then she was going to make sure to testify about his ‘deviant behaviors’ as well as his extremely bigoted views.”

“Thank fucking God” Ashlyn rolled her eyes in sheer relief and leaned over to hug her awesome lawyer and badass best friend. “And thank you Whitney fucking Engen. I’m gonna need to have another kid just so I can name him or her after you for this.”

“Let’s not get crazy now” Whitney chuckled. “Eat your lunch so we can get the hell out of here before anybody changes their damned mind.”

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Chris Harris’ best friend Malcolm passed away the weekend before Thanksgiving and left a lot of friends and family devastated by his loss. The community of Satellite Beach had come together to help his wife, Jenna, and young daughter, Sierra, as much as they could during the final months of his battle. Everybody was coming together as they grieved for him as well, the whole community moved by the sudden and shocking death. The family decided to have his funeral on Tuesday, two days before Thanksgiving. There wasn’t a good time to do it and messing up other people’s holiday plans weighed heavily on Malcolm’s wife’s mind. When Beth Harris had gone to visit the grieving
woman she had come to know very well over the years, Jenna admitted that she was at least a little glad that it hadn’t happened right before Christmas. She said it would have been too much for their 7-year old daughter to deal with.

Ali and Ashlyn had been planning to spend Thanksgiving in Satellite Beach anyway, so they changed their tickets and flew down Tuesday morning so the keeper could be there for the funeral that afternoon. Ashlyn had been surprised and touched when her wife suggested they make the trip South for the holiday that year. It wasn’t their routine, but the brunette knew her wife needed to see her brother. She knew if Ashlyn could get down there that she would find Chris and force him to talk to her and tell her what was going on with him, hopefully before it was too late.

“I don’t want to pull the kids out of school though” Ashlyn shook her head as she and Ali discussed travel plans once they learned of Malcolm’s death Sunday afternoon.

“It’s ok Ash” Ali held her wife’s hand as they sat on the couch in the family room, laptop open on the coffee table in front of them. “Wednesday’s only a half day anyway” she shrugged and kept scrolling through available flights with her free hand. “They’ll only be missing one day. It’s ok, I’ll talk to their teachers. We’ll bring whatever work they need to get done with us. Don’t worry honey” she rubbed her hand on her keeper’s knee in a soothing circle. “Let me handle it this time, alright?”

The young Krieger family flew to the Melbourne airport and settled into Carol and Tammye’s beach house Tuesday morning. Carol and Ali stayed at the house with the kids, including Johnny and Lizzy whom Beth had brought over, while Ashlyn and Tammye went to the funeral. The mother and daughter took their places in the church pew and watched for Chris and Beth but they didn’t arrive until a minute before the service started. Chris barely got into place as one of the pall bearers in time to carry the coffin into the church. Beth took a seat at the back of the church, by herself. Ashlyn felt her blood start to boil at the sight of her brother. He looked awful. He was bigger and looked bloated and his skin was pasty and splotchy. His beard was long and unkempt instead of the usually neatly tended beard that they were all used to. And he was walking with a limp as the pall bearers made their way down the aisle towards the front of the church. Ashlyn could only imagine what sort of drunken situation he had gotten himself into that had resulted in a twisted knee or sprained ankle or whatever was the matter with him.

“Relax” Tammye pressed her hand onto her daughter’s leg. “Now is not the time. We’ll deal with him after we say goodbye to Malcolm.”

For the first time since Chris had entered the church, Ashlyn looked at her mother sitting next to her. She was shocked to see the anger and pain filling Tammye’s face and it occurred to her, finally, that Chris’ fall off the wagon was hurting other people as well. She knew Mike Harris had been trying to pick up the slack for his son when it came to the kids. He picked them up from school or covered the flower shop so Beth could do it herself. Ashlyn knew her mother and Carol were helping as much as possible too. Everything about the situation was making the keeper angrier and angrier as she sat there on the hard, wooden pew. She tried to focus on the funeral service and listen to the words of the pastor standing at the front of the church but it was all just noise ringing in her ears. She felt the tell-tale pressure inside her chest and knew she was starting to have some sort of panic attack or stress reaction. The keeper closed her eyes and began to do one of her PTSD exercises, willing herself to focus on her mother’s hand moving in slow, soothing circles on her leg. 45 minutes later as the loud church organ played a hymn to indicate the end of the service, Ashlyn slowly opened her eyes to find that she and her mother were some of the last handful of people still sitting in any of the pews.

“Feeling better?” Tammye asked softly and carefully after she had given Ashlyn a minute to adjust
to her surroundings again.

“Yeah, thanks” she looked sheepishly at her mother who had kept her hand in place the whole time. She wondered how many times Tammye had done something similar for Carol. “Sorry...”

“Honey, it’s ok” she leaned over and kissed her daughter’s blushing cheek. “I’m just glad you’re feeling better now.”

“Did Chris leave?” she turned her head all the way around to look at the back of the church.

“Yes, Beth too, but I’m not sure they left together” Tammye sighed. “He knows you’re here. He knows he can’t avoid you forever. We’ll find him and we’ll talk to him.”

“Are we doing an intervention?”

“I think we have to, don’t you?” Tammye put her arm around Ashlyn’s shoulders and squeezed her.

The next day, Wednesday, everybody in the family was on alert, ready to assemble as soon as they could find Chris and get him or keep him in one spot. But that never happened. Ashlyn, Tammye and Ali all talked to Beth and told her what the plan was to make sure she was on board. Mike had all of his buddies on the lookout for Chris and they all hoped he wasn’t on some big bender as he tried to deal with his deep grief. Nobody felt much like celebrating Thanksgiving until Deb and Mike Christopher arrived late Wednesday afternoon. Much as she had done back when Gram was sick and the family had gathered to spend their last Thanksgiving with her, Deb gently reminded everyone how important the holiday gathering was. In her usual cheerful, but thoughtful, way, Deb brought everybody out of their funk and back together almost effortlessly. Having the kids around certainly helped her make her case, and Carol was a quick and easy convert. Everyone else followed suit one by one with Ashlyn and Beth the last to try and get into the spirit of Thanksgiving once Thursday finally rolled around. Carol and Tammye hosted and everybody filled the beach house to enjoy the day. David and Carlin, Ashlyn’s cousins, were both there with their girlfriend and daughter, respectively. They watched the parade on tv with the kids for as long as they could keep the little ones still. Then they went out to the sand and played soccer and hosed around like they always did whenever they all got together. Sadly, that only made them miss Chris even more. The big man was always one of the loudest and most fun participants in all of those fun, physical activities.

Every time a kid would ask where Unky Chris was or where Daddy was, the nearest grown-up would repeat the answer Beth had been giving her own kids for months. ‘He’s very busy at work and he can’t be with us as often as he used to right now. But he’ll be back soon.’ Ashlyn wouldn’t do it. She refused to lie to her own children about Chris so one of the other grown-ups would have to answer in her stead.

The big man didn’t make an appearance until late that evening, after the kids had gone to bed down in the basement. Deb and Tammye were cleaning up the kitchen after dessert. Mike and Mike were watching tv in the rear corner of the living room. Carol and Ashlyn were getting the dining room table set up for cards while Beth and Ali were just coming upstairs after putting the kids to bed. The door from the garage to the kitchen burst open, making both Deb and Tammye jump and scream in surprise. Chris limped through the door and stood there, getting his bearings and his balance. It was hard to tell if he was drunk or not, but they all knew he must have been very recently. His eyes looked clear and he seemed to be in control of himself. Maybe his sore leg had caused his momentary unsteadiness as he had entered the kitchen. Chris could see Beth and Ali just climbing to the top of the stairs as he looked through the kitchen into the dining room and front hall. Carol and Ashlyn both leaned towards the hall so they could see the kitchen door and the smile that had appeared on Chris’ face from seeing his wife changed instantly to a scowl when he
saw his sister. Mike and Mike got up and joined the group in the hall and Chris felt overwhelmed already. He started to turn right back around but stopped when he heard his mother’s pleading voice.

“Please honey, stay and have some pie with us.”

It was a simple request but it had been calculated. Tammye knew her son’s weakness for Carol’s homemade pumpkin pie would make him sit down and at least have a slice. They might not have much more time than that, but she was almost positive she could get him to stay that long.

“It’s Carol’s homemade pumpkin pie” she continued as she walked over to him and gave him a side-hug. “Your favorite.”

Chris sat at the kitchen table after receiving another hug from his mom and then one from his wife. Carol brought over the half of the pie that was left and the homemade whipped cream and sat down at the table with Chris, Beth, Tammye and Ali. The brunette hadn’t wanted to intrude but Beth had pulled her by the hand without even realizing she was doing it. Ashlyn and Mike Harris stayed in the dining room with Deb and Mike Christopher pretending to play a round of cards. Nobody was really paying attention and Deb and her husband just sort of kept some light conversation going while they all robotically played gin rummy. Deb could see the fear and anger on both Ashlyn and Mike’s faces and felt so sorry for their predicament. It was clear that they would be the heavies in the conversation that was still to come. They both seemed prepared for it, despite their anguished faces as they waited for the peaceful pie scene to wrap up. It took a long half hour of waiting but, when they heard Chris slide his chair back and announce that it was time for him to go, they both jumped to their feet and moved towards the nearby kitchen.

As soon as Chris saw them his face changed from the sad and broken one it had been while he sat at the kitchen table to a hard and defiant one. He pulled his hand out of Beth’s and took a step back.

“Yeah, it’s definitely time to go” he repeated angrily.

“Bubba, we need to talk” Ashlyn tried first, keeping her voice soft even though her face was stiff and stern. “Please...”

“Ha, that’s funny” he sneered and laughed dismissively at his sister. “When you come down here all you ever do is judge us. Judge us and then bitch us out because we’re not living our life like your perfect life.”

“Chris...” Beth started but he cut her off with another hard look just for her.

“What? You know I’m right. We’ve talked about it before Beth. It’s about time she heard it from you too” he challenged his wife.

“That’s not true baby...”

“Oh come on, we all feel the same way” he looked at his mother and Carol sitting on the other side of him. “Why am I always the only one who speaks up?”

“You don’t speak for me” Tammye looked him in the eye. “Not with that nonsense. You know better than that Christopher. Your sister’s only trying to help...”

“Oh please. Help what? Help herself feel better about leaving all of us down here? That’s bullshit and you know it mom.”

“She’s trying, we’re all trying, to help you get off of this road you’re on son” Mike Harris spoke
clearly and took another step into the kitchen. “You can’t see it clearly right now, I know” he nodded. “But you’re in trouble Bubba and we want to help you out of it.”

“I’m outta here” he waved them all off and started to turn to the door behind him, hoping to escape back into the garage the way he had come in.

“No baby, I can’t let you go. Not until we talk” Beth moved quickly between her husband and the door, her voice firm.

Chris sighed heavily and then chuckled at his wife’s attempt to block his way. Everybody in that room knew he could lift Beth up and move her anywhere he wanted to, but they were all hoping he would treat his wife with the love and respect he always had up to this point. Ali wasn’t taking any chances. She hadn’t recognized the brother-in-law she loved so much the whole time he had been in the kitchen. Chris, the real Chris, wasn’t there. The brunette darted over and linked arms with Beth, backing them both up against the door. Tammye and Carol followed their lead from the other side of Chris and stood in front of the sliding glass door from the kitchen to the back deck. All four women stood with defiant looks on their faces.

“Please, let’s just talk some more” Tammye pleaded and let her face change into a hopeful smile. “Sit and have another piece of pie...”

“Oh fuck the pie!” Chris yelled, starting to feel trapped and ganged up on. “I’m leaving.”

He turned back towards the kitchen and took two steps towards the dining room and front hall,shrugging both his father and sister off when they reached out to try and grab one of his arms. Nobody was really exerting their full strength yet. They were all hoping they wouldn’t have to. When the big man got to the front door he stopped and stared at Deb and Mike Christopher who were blocking it. There were two sliding glass doors out onto the big back deck. One was in the kitchen, very near the kitchen table they had all just been sitting at. And the other was in the living room, all the way on the other side near Tammye and Carol’s master bedroom. Chris started walking as quickly as he could towards that one. Everybody else was hoping to keep whatever happened upstairs away from that end of the house because all 6 kids were sleeping in the two bedrooms directly below.

“Chris, wait!” Ashlyn tried again, jogging after him and following him out onto the deck, their father close behind her. “Come on Bubba, please.”

The women in the kitchen used the sliding door there to move onto the deck while Deb and Mike Christopher followed through the living room. Every single one of them had gone through a confrontation like this before at some point in their lives, even Mike Christopher. He had been there for Koty’s episode that Christmas and knew things could get physical and explode pretty quickly. Carol had been there for that situation too, although she didn’t remember much of it after she had gone into her PTSD shock. But she knew what they were getting into with Chris. Tammye had warned her just as Deb had warned Mike.

“Christopher Ryan Harris, please don’t do this” Tammye entreated, trying hard to keep the panic out of her voice as she moved across the deck towards her son. “Please let’s just sit down together and talk.”

“What’s the point mom?” he wheeled around to face her, still twenty feet of deck separating them. “I’m wrong, you all are right and I’m supposed to just sit and listen to you all tell me that? No fucking thank you.”

“We’ll just listen then. You talk. You tell us what you want us to know” Ashlyn was next to him,
right at his side, and carefully put her hand on his shoulder. “Please, just...don’t go.”

There was a moment where they could all see him considering it and there was more hope and optimism than anything else out on that deck. But then Chris’ face changed again. He looked at his wife first and his face was full of sadness and regret. It changed to frustration and then annoyance and then full-blown anger as he looked to Carol and then Tammye and finally Ashlyn.

“Fuck this shit” he shrugged Ashlyn’s hand off of his shoulder and started walking towards the end of the deck nearest the kitchen and the garage so he could get to his car faster. He also knew he would encounter less physical resistance walking past the four women from the kitchen than he would going towards the other end of the deck where both Mikes, Deb and Ashlyn stood.

“Yeah, fuck this shit is right” Ashlyn had tears in her eyes as she spit words out angrily, barely putting any thought behind them. “That’s what you are Chris, you know that? You’re nothing but a piece of shit. I’m glad you’re leaving. Why don’t you leave for good...once and for all so we don’t have to worry about you anymore. Go on, follow Malcolm along and keep him company. At least then you’d be good for something. You’re a worthless, selfish, piece of shit...”

“Ashlyn...” Ali’s voice punched through the fuzz in the keeper’s ears and pulled her out of her rant, momentarily.

“No, he needs to hear this. We’re all too afraid to hurt his feelings or make him start drinking more again. Well, guess what guys? He’s a fucking drunk and he’s leaving here right now to go get drunk again. On Thanksgiving. What, were you sober for two hours so you could come over here and eat some fucking pie Chris? That’s what you’re here for huh, the pie? Not your wife or your kids or your family. Nope. Just some feed for the big, fat, bull – no, not even a bull. You’re too much of a coward to be a bull. You’re a fucking cow. Your kids are downstairs asleep, wondering where the fuck their dad is Chris. They’re wondering what they did wrong to make it so their dad won’t come home anymore...so he doesn’t love them anymore. That’s what you’re doing you dumb motherfucker. You’re doing exactly what we swore we would never do!!!” she yelled as her brother just kept limping towards the end of the deck and down the stairs to the sand below.

He never slowed down or made any indication that he could even hear his sister’s verbal attack. Ashlyn had been walking behind him as she berated him and everybody else was following the two siblings’ progression towards those deck stairs. Ashlyn had tears streaming down her face and her chest was heaving as she hurled hurtful word after hurtful word at her big brother. It seemed as though they caused her more pain than they did him.

“Chris!!!” she screamed. “Look at me!!” she yelled from the top of the three deck stairs. He was on the sand and walking behind the garage about 8 feet away from the stairs when he stopped. “Look at me, Bubba, please” she begged.

When Chris slowly turned around to face her, she stepped down onto the sand and took a deep breath.

“It’s me and you Bub, like it always was. Me and you helping each other figure shit out. Me and you alone in some apartment waiting for mom or dad to come home and make us dinner. Me and you alone at night...” she sniffled and wiped her runny nose on the back of her hand, “wondering if they were ever coming back for us.”

Chris dropped his head and they all saw his shoulders slump from where they still stood at the top of the deck stairs.

“Me and you wishing our lives were different, and wishing our parents were different...” she
paused and he lifted his red eyes to look at her as they connected for just a second. “Those two kids downstairs, your kids...they’re wishing the same thing right now. They’re us Chris. That’s not Johnny and Lizzy down there” she shook her head slowly and sadly. “That’s Chris and Bash down there and YOU’RE the drunk dad who won’t come back to them. Don’t you see that? You’re the dad they’re waiting for...”

It happened so quickly that nobody really had time to react. Chris’ whole face contorted into a twisted mask of rage as his brain processed his sister’s words. Before she could even finish her last sentence he growled like a wild animal and charged at her.

“No, Chris! No!” Mike Harris shouted at his son and lunged down the three steps to push Ashlyn into the sand and out of the way.

Everybody was yelling at him to stop and calm down but Chris barreled into his father and then Mike Christopher who had followed right behind him to try and help stop the out of control man.

“Mike!” Deb screamed when both older men fell backwards into the deck stairs, Chris landing in between them with a loud groan.

Everybody scrambled to help but Chris slowly picked himself up and turned his attention back to his sister who was standing six feet away from him. He growled again and ran at her for the second time, missing her when she side-stepped out of his way.

“Christopher!”
“Chris, don’t!”
“That’s enough now.”
Tammye, Ali and Carol all yelled out as they helped Deb and Beth with both of the injured Mikes.

But Chris was like a man possessed. He picked himself up again with more beast-like growls and ran at his sister three more times. Their progress had taken them further down towards the beach and about twenty feet away from the deck. It was dark and hard to see exactly what was going on, but Ali heard her wife scream and ran towards her without wasting a second. As she got closer she could see that Chris had her in some kind of a choke hold from behind. They were both still on their feet and Ashlyn had her hands up trying desperately to pull his strong forearm away from her throat. She pulled on it and hit it but he still held on tight. Ali launched herself onto his back, wrapping her legs around his waist and trying to pull his arm away from behind. She realized quickly that she would need to find another way to get him to release Ashlyn. She started smacking him in the face, open-palmed, harder and harder the longer he held onto his sister.

“Let her go! You let her go Chris! Let her go!!” she yelled as she kept smacking him.

He still held on, stumbling a bit in the sand as both women struggled and fought in front of and behind him.

“Chris...” Ashlyn gasped out, her voice barely recognizable.

Ali heard the fear in that voice she loved so much and a jolt of rage coursed through her entire body.

“You let her go you bastard!” she moved her hands to his face and pressed her fingers into both of his eyes. “Let her go!!! It’s not her fault that you hate yourself. Don’t beat her up because you want to beat yourself up. Grow up! Take control of your life again! It doesn’t have to be this way! You’re stronger than this. You’re better than this. Don’t be such a fucking pussy!!”
Ali dug her fingers into his eyes deeper and she was dimly aware of movement behind her. She didn’t have a chance to investigate though. Ashlyn, using some of the last breath she had in her lungs, launched one final coordinated attack. She bit down hard on Chris’ forearm, snapped her head back into his nose, elbowed him as hard as she could in his big, bloated gut, and kicked him in what she thought was his bad knee.

“Aarrgghhh!!” he screamed out and fell to his knees in pain.

He released his sister as he clutched at his bleeding nose with one hand and his knee with the other. He rolled to his side as every curse word he knew flew from his lips. Ali felt hands pulling her off of him and she immediately let go, her only thought in that moment was Ashlyn’s safety.

“Ashlyn!” she yelped as she stumbled through the sand towards her wife who was lying in a heap with Tammye kneeling next to her and brushing sand off of her red face. “Oh God, are you ok?”

Deb followed her daughter and knelt beside her while Beth tended to Chris. Ali pulled her wife into her lap, making sure her neck was clear so she could breathe. Her face was bright red and streaked from her tears, but her beautiful hazel eyes blinked open a few seconds later.

“I’m...gonna...kill him...” she gasped out in a ragged voice.

“Shhhh...it’s ok” Ali leaned down and kissed her forehead. “He’s down” she glanced over and saw Beth clearing the sand from his face and wincing at the scratch marks Ali had left near his eyes. She felt bad for hurting him but she had no regrets. She would do anything to help her keeper, anything. Ali felt her own breathing start to slow down a bit after the huge adrenaline shot from the fight. “It’s all over now. Just be still and breathe.”
Hey guys. I'm posting this one a little early because my Patriots are going to have me a little busy this evening. Go Pats!!!!
Also, I had an extraordinarily busy week last week and wasn't able to do much writing at all so I'm behind my own schedule. I'm hoping I can catch back up, but just in case I can't....there may be a slight lag between chapters once you get caught up to me later this week. But I think you all know by now that I'm committed to this story and I would never in a million years just abandon it or let it drag on between chapters. If that ever happens, somebody do a wellness check on me! lol. No, but for real. :o
And lastly, I'm sorry this part of the story is hard but life will go on for everybody. It's just going to be really hard for a while.

The aftermath of the fight was far-reaching but still didn't convince Chris to deal with his problems. That Thanksgiving would go down in family history as one of the worst nights of their lives. Mike Harris had to go to the emergency room to be treated for three broken ribs sustained when Chris drove him into the deck stairs. Mike Christopher had only bumps and bruises from his less-direct contact with the raging man and the stairs. Ali had a broken ring finger on her right hand from when Ashlyn slammed her head back into Chris’s face. Ali’s third fingers were both in the area, her first and second fingers from both hands were dug into her brother-in-law’s eyes, and had been slammed between Ashlyn’s hard head and Chris’ cheekbones. The brunette was lucky not to have broken both of those fingers. Ashlyn had a big lump on the back of her head and a sore throat from Chris’ intense choke hold. She had been able to keep the full strength of his arm away, but just barely. And Chris was in tough shape, aside from his weakened condition because of the drinking he had been doing for months. Both his eyes were swollen and he had deep scratches on either side of them. His face was red and swollen from the slaps the brunette had delivered. Luckily Ali hadn’t scratched his actual eyes – he had somehow managed to get his eyelids shut in time. His nose was broken and he had a deep, painful bite mark on his arm, both courtesy of his sister. Ashlyn had guessed correctly about his knee and it was wrapped in an aircast until the swelling went down enough to determine exactly what was going on there. Both Chris and Mike were released in the middle of the night after being treated. Tammye and Beth were ready to take them both back to the beach house so they could help them convalesce, but Chris refused any help. He had a friend pick him up instead and the family didn’t see him again for weeks.

When Ashlyn and Ali returned to the beach house at 2am after being treated and checked out at the hospital they tried to get some sleep down in the basement bedroom they usually shared but it was hard to come by. Ashlyn had been quiet ever since she opened her eyes on the beach after escaping her brother’s terrifying hold. Ali was worried about her wife’s PTSD but didn’t know what she could do to help, other than hold her and love her. The brunette had been terrified herself as she watched the big man she loved and trusted try to hurt, or maybe even kill, the woman who meant everything in the world to her.

“I love you so much Ashlyn” Ali pressed a kiss into her wife’s shoulder as she spooned her from behind. They were both quiet for a moment, their bodies and minds trying to settle down enough for sleep to find a way to overtake them. All they could hear was their own breathing and Ashlyn clearing her painful throat every once in a while. “I was so scared” the brunette whispered, not sure
if it was too soon to talk about the fight but unable to wait. She needed to be comforted too, as much as she wished that was not the case right then. “So fucking scared...” her voice cracked, even through the whisper, and she began to cry softly.

Ashlyn’s heart ached when she heard her wife’s anguish and felt her fear and love in the hot tears that hit her shoulder and soaked through her t-shirt. The keeper had wanted so much and had aimed so high that night. She wanted to somehow save the brother she loved from himself and from his addiction. She wanted to help bring his young family back together and ease the worry of her own parents too. She had done everything she could think of to reach him. She had pushed every button she knew the big man had. She had ventured onto thin, dangerous ice to try and get to him and pull him up out of the freezing waters he was drowning himself in. She felt like she was so close, like she could almost reach his hand with her own right up until the last second before she knew she was going to black out from the choke hold he had on her. But she had failed. He had slipped away and into the cold, dark water and she honestly didn’t know if she would ever see him again. Ashlyn was sad and angry and frightened and about twelve other different things in between as she lay there in bed that night. The one thing she definitely did not want to happen was for anybody else to follow her out onto that ice. That had been a decision she had made for herself and herself alone. Ashlyn’s emotions were wild as she felt the enormous guilt fill her soul for the damage that had been done to the people she loved. It was her fault that her father and Mike Christopher had both been hurt. It was her fault that Ali...God, sweet strong fearless Ali, had been hurt. It was all her fault and she didn’t know how she would forgive herself.

Ashlyn reached behind her and pulled her wife into her back, as close as she could, and was relieved to feel Ali doing the same around her stomach. The keeper turned her head to the side, which killed her throat, and croaked out words that would never be enough but were all she could muster in the moment.

“I’m so sorry Al” she choked out. “So so so sorry...I never meant for any of that to happen...”

“Shhhh...don’t talk honey” Ali interrupted with a sniffle as she spoke through her tears. “Your throat...just...” she didn’t know what else to say because she really did want Ashlyn to talk to her and tell her what she was thinking and feeling.

“No” Ashlyn shook her head and rolled onto her other side so she was facing her beautiful, distraught brunette. “I need you to know how sorry I am Ali” she pleaded with her raspy voice and her sorrowful eyes. “He could have really hurt you” she felt her own tears start to slide down her cheeks. “He...he wasn’t himself” she shook her head as she tried to focus through her tears on her wife’s warm, whiskey-colored eyes. “He could have...killed you...”

The words seared through both women’s brains and hearts and they clutched each other through big sobbing tears. They held on tightly, both of them sobbing, with their chins over the other’s shoulder and their arms wrapped tightly around each other for almost ten minutes. All the fear and anxiety and nervous energy poured out of them through those tears until there was nothing left. They both felt empty and spent. It took all of their energy to hold onto one another as their tears finally slowed and then stopped. Ashlyn pulled back and took her t-shirt off, using it to wipe her wife’s face and nose and then her own before tossing it to the floor and pulling Ali in close to her chest again. They flipped the wet pillows over and got as comfortable as they could. Ali’s finger was throbbing and she knew the pain medicine was wearing off. She had broken the middle phalanx, or the second bone in from her fingertip, but it was a clean break. The bone had been set in the emergency room and they had sent her home with a two-finger hand splint that bound her ring finger to her middle finger for support and then splinted the two fingers together. It was black and made of strong nylon with sponge padding so it was pretty comfortable. It was breathable and lightweight and wasn’t too hard to take on or off. There was a thick 2” band that mounted around
her wrist at the base of the splint and then another, 1” strap went across all four of her knuckles. There were two more straps that went across the two splinted fingers, one at each long bone. She was supposed to wear it all the time, even at night. After the first two weeks she could take it off for short periods of time so her joints didn’t get too stiff. It wasn’t waterproof so she would have to take it off to shower and she was already aggravated by it and it had only been a couple of hours. She had to wear the splint for four weeks and then, if everything looked good after that, she could switch to just taping the two fingers together for the final two weeks of her recovery period. She would see Dr. Comello when she got home and get it all worked out with her. Her finger hurt like hell and Ali had just banged it about six times as she and Ashlyn hugged and cried and started to heal. Ashlyn’s throat felt like she had swallowed razor blades and the crying had only intensified the sensation as her throat constricted. The only fix for her injury was rest. She wasn’t supposed to talk too much and she was supposed to take it easy on the neck muscles as well.

“How’s your finger?”
“How’s your throat?”

They both asked at the same time, still, amazingly, in tune with one another after everything that had happened that night. They had pulled back to look at each other, faces only a foot apart. They both smiled, but the exhaustion on their faces made them seem small and hesitant.

“Sore as hell” the keeper croaked out.

“It fucking kills” Ali admitted with a wince.

“We should try and sleep” Ashlyn gently lifted the brunette’s right hand to her lips and kissed the back of it, carefully avoiding the broken and splinted fingers.

“I’m sorry babe, for all of it” Ali stared meaningfully into her wife’s eyes. “I’m so sorry, sweetheart” she cupped Ashlyn’s cheek with her free hand and tenderly moved her thumb along her cheekbone and down to her lips and her jaw. “I know you’re not ready to talk about it yet but I’m here when you are. I’ll be here Ashlyn, every step of the way.”

“I know. Thank you” Ashlyn blinked softly back at the brunette.

“And I know you think this is all your fault” Ali started but paused when Ashlyn’s eyes flew open in surprise. “Honey, I know you” the brunette smiled warmly and continued to caress her keeper’s face. “I know you’re taking this all on your shoulders and I’m telling you now and I’ll keep telling you as often as it takes until you actually believe it...this was nobody’s fault but his.”

“But...”

“No buts” Ali shook her head and used her thumb to press into her wife’s lips. “No way. You know better, I know you do.” Ali started to second guess herself when she saw Ashlyn close her eyes and tears start to form again in the corners, but she kept going, eager to get this one important fact established before they both tried again to fall asleep. “It’s not your fault that your dad got hurt, any more than it’s my fault. He did this” Ali kept her voice low and slow and calm, but still couldn’t bring herself to say Chris’ name for some reason. “I feel bad that I hurt him, I almost scratched his eyes out for God’s sake” her own eyes went wide at the vivid memory. “But I’d do it all over again if that’s what it took” her breath hitched as she thought about what might have happened out there on the beach that night. “And it’s his fault, not mine. And he’s gonna have to own all of this and the rest of the mess he’s making before he comes back into our lives again. We all know that, babe. We’ve all been through this before and nobody blames anybody but him. So don’t waste another minute thinking any of this was your fault. You know better.”
Ashlyn didn’t say anything but she leaned in and kissed her wife’s lips very softly, nodding her head just the tiniest bit in acknowledgment. She knew Ali was right, and right about all of it. It was good to hear the words out loud though and the keeper wondered how many more times she would need to hear them before her enormous guilt started to fade. She knew it would be a rough time ahead and she sighed in frustration. She had so much work to do to try and get over this fucking awful night and she didn’t know how she could ever forgive her brother. But she knew she had to try. Somehow, she had to try and find a way, even though part of her was saying not to bother until he decided to make an effort himself and get clean and find his way back to his family. Her last thoughts before finally drifting off to sleep were of Johnny and Lizzy and then her own beautiful children. Thoughts of her kids always led to thoughts of her amazing wife and she felt her heart swell. Ali, her feisty fucking wife, her strong warrior princess, her all-powerful queen, her fearless lion...she had come to Ashlyn’s aid and fought fiercely, right alongside her. For the first time since the fight Ashlyn felt a glimmer of hope spark up again deep inside her battered heart. With Ali by her side she felt like almost anything was possible, like any goal was attainable – even the salvation of her beloved brother. With the last bit of energy she possessed, Ashlyn rasped out three final words.

“I love you.”

The aftermath continued and Beth made the hardest decision of her life and had the locks on the house changed. She opened up a new bank account for home stuff and changed all the security access and passwords on her business accounts so Chris couldn’t have any of their money. If he was going to get money he was going to have to work for it. Which would be difficult because he had lost his job at the surf shop he loved so dearly. She left him voicemails explaining what she was doing and why. She told him that she loved him and when he was ready for help she would be there for him. She also told him he wouldn’t be able to see the kids again until he was clean and sober. She did everything she was supposed to do except get a restraining order. Even after the debacle at Thanksgiving, Beth wasn’t afraid of him. She couldn’t explain why, but she just knew he would never hurt her. She blamed herself for not getting more involved in the fight that night. She was convinced that nobody would have gotten injured, aside from the two Mikes, if she had gone down to break it up.

The family was crushed by the disappointment and swamped by the sadness of it all. It was a familiar road for them and they knew what they had to do. That didn’t make it any easier though, not for any of them. It had been the longest stretch of time in the Harris family’s existence that all three of the recovering addicts had stayed clean and sober. Chris had been the last one to fall off the wagon too, 14 years ago. But the silver lining that time had been his meeting Beth in AA afterwards. Ashlyn had always expected her father to be the one to relapse and he almost had when Gram had died. The keeper didn’t even know how close her father had come to throwing his hard-fought sobriety away in the dark months that followed his mother’s death. Kyle Krieger had reached out and provided a lifeline of sorts to the man he didn’t really even know that well at the time. Maybe that was the key though. It took someone just a bit farther away sometimes. Ashlyn had no idea what else to do to help Chris this time. Kyle Krieger had tried his best to reach out to Chris, even travelling to Satellite Beach the week after Thanksgiving to try and talk to him in person. But all of his calls and texts had fallen on deaf ears and Chris had refused to see Kyle at all.

With Chris officially moved out of the house, Beth had been forced to tell the kids a more realistic story about where their father had disappeared to. It broke her heart when she told them that he was sick and that he wouldn’t be able to come home until he was better. She had broken down in tears when 10-1/2 year old Johnny had asked if they could go and visit him. Fucking addiction.
“Ashlyn I want to ask you something but I don’t want you to feel obligated…”

“What’s going on Carol? Just tell me” the keeper interrupted her mother-in-law anxiously.

They had been talking on the phone two weeks after Thanksgiving and the conversation had been fairly light up to that point. The women gave each other updates on kids and grandkids and Carol told Ashlyn that Mike Harris’ ribs were doing much better and that her father was feeling stronger every day.

“Nothing’s going on, well, besides your brother” she paused. That’s what they all called it now. The situation in general was referred to as ‘Chris’ or ‘your brother’. If they were talking specifically about the fight they called it that – ‘the fight’. It all seemed so surreal when the keeper thought about it. “I think Beth and the kids could use a change of scenery right now and I know she doesn’t want to have to go to her parents for the holidays” Carol continued. “I’d like to fly them up to Gloucester for Christmas this year and I know it’s awfully late notice…”

“Yeah” Ashlyn nodded thoughtfully. “Yeah, let’s do it. We’ve got room. It’ll be good for everybody to be together. Great idea.”

“Are you sure? I haven’t talked to anybody but your mother about this so don’t feel like you have to say yes” she took a beat. “You have your own things going on too and the last thing I want to do is make anything harder on you…”

“Carol, I’m fine. I’m pissed and sad but I’m fine. I promise.” There was a slightly awkward moment where Carol decided not to call Ashlyn out on her blatant lie. She was anything but fine. “What about Dad?” the keeper began talking again, hoping to change the subject. “He won’t want to leave Chris all alone.”

“That’s what your mother said too. It might be best for him to stay home then…just in case.”

Ashlyn knew what Carol was trying to say without wanting to say the words. Everybody was afraid that Chris would try to go back to his house on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day to see the kids and make a huge scene. The thought of traumatizing the kids with something like that was the motivating factor for the trip to Gloucester and Ashlyn knew it. If Mike Harris stayed home he could be around for Chris if he did want to make contact with a family member for the holiday. Most of Chris’ friends knew how to get a hold of Mike and they even left messages for him with Lydia at the beachside bar where she worked. Mike became the defacto go-between for Chris and the rest of the Harris family.

“How’s mom doing?” Ashlyn asked carefully, hoping for the truth even though she had just lied herself.

“Oh, you know…she’s upset…devastated, really. She feels guilty. She feels like everything’s her fault and like she’s responsible for every bad thing that happens to either you or your brother” Carol replied candidly. “She knows better, in her head, but she still beats herself up even though it’s not her fault and there was nothing she could have done to keep this from happening.” Carol took a breath and sighed heavily, her own sadness coming through the phone. “Just like you’re feeling, I imagine. So I guess that’s what we’re calling ‘fine’ these days.”

For her part, Ali was trying to stay strong for her wife but it was a tough ask. The brunette was so angry at Chris that she wasn’t sure she would ever be able to forgive him. It had been bad enough that he was drinking again and throwing away his family, his kids! But after he attacked Ashlyn...after he had nearly killed his own sister, Ali had been trying desperately not to hate him. But she was failing miserably. Honestly, she didn’t care if she never saw Chris Harris again. He
had crossed too many lines that night and Ali was done with him. She hadn’t admitted it to anybody yet but Kyle had figured it out.

“Alex, I just need you to know that I’d rather die than hurt you, or mom and dad, ever again. I promised myself that I would never put you guys through that again and that is a promise that I plan to keep for the rest of my life. No matter what it takes.”

His words were solemn and sincere as he spoke with his sister over the phone the week after Thanksgiving. He had just returned from his failed trip to Satellite Beach where all he could do was talk to Mike Harris about that awful night. He and Ali had already talked about the fight a couple of times and Kyle had also talked with Deb and now Mike Harris, about it so he had a couple of different perspectives on what had happened that night. He knew his sister well and he could tell that she was really having a hard time moving past the incident and he thought he understood why.

“I know how scary it is to love one of us losers...”

“Kyle, you know that’s not...”

“Just, hush up and listen for a minute” he interrupted her right back. “Well, I have a pretty good idea how scary it is. I’m lucky enough to be the loser who does the scaring instead of the one who has to love me. But Nate and I have talked a lot about it. I know you’re mad at him, at Chris, and I would be too. I mean, I am mad at him for obvious reasons, but he didn’t attack my wife on Thanksgiving.” He paused and got his thoughts together when he heard his sister’s frustrated and impatient sigh. “I know it’s not fair and I know it’s going to be hard as hell, but you have to let Ashlyn try and forgive him, even if you can’t. She loves him like you love me” he offered gently.

“I know Ky” she replied softly and sadly. “I know. I’ll never tell her how much I hate him for what he did. It’ll be hard enough for her to make her peace with him without me making it more difficult” she sighed heavily. “But I’d like to fucking kill him. I swear to God...”

“He might just take care of that on his own from what I hear so be careful what you wish for” he cautioned, his voice low and serious.

“Have you heard from him?”

“No, I talked to Mike though and he says Chris is on a real bender.”

“Fuck” she sighed again. “It’s bad enough he’s willing to ruin his own life, but what about his family? What about his kids? Doesn’t he care how much he’s hurting them?” her voice rose as she got angrier and angrier.

“He does care” Kyle answered softly. “It eats him up inside when he thinks about it. Which is why he drinks more so he won’t have to feel anything...”

“Ky, I’m sorry” Ali stammered, realizing too late how much her angry words must have hurt her recovering addict brother.

“Don’t be. You don’t know what it’s like to be Chris and I don’t know what it’s like to be Ashlyn. It’s ok Alex. You have every right to be upset with him. It’s going to take a long time for him to fix things this time, if he can fix them at all. But first he’s gotta fix himself and I really hope he can do that.”

Ashlyn felt all of the things Carol had said Tammye was feeling, and then some. Additionally, she felt responsible for pushing her brother over the edge Thanksgiving night with her cruel words. They were meant to break through whatever hold the alcohol had on him and she had been harsh
and unyielding as she tried to reach him. She thought she had done it too. For a split second when she stood at the foot of the deck steps and Chris turned around to face her, she thought she had gotten through to him. But all she had done was enraged him. She had waved the red cape in front of the bull and incited him to wreak more havoc on his family. The weight of that responsibility made Ashlyn stumble through the next few weeks following Thanksgiving. Ali gave her a wide berth, knowing her sensitive wife was dying a bit inside from all the guilt she carried. The brunette knew that Ashlyn had increased her sessions with Mattie to try and work through everything and that there wasn’t much she could do to help except be patient and be present for her keeper when she was ready to talk about it with her. Truthfully, Ali wasn’t thrilled about having houseguests that Christmas. They had done the Meg, Hannah and Dev thing last year and she had really been looking forward to a quieter holiday this year. And by quiet she meant that they would only go to the usual four or five Christmas parties and squeeze in a quick weekend trip to Miami to attend Mike Christopher’s retirement party along with all of the other holiday festivities. But she couldn’t deny that Beth and the kids would be better off away from Satellite Beach that Christmas. It would be fun. They would make sure the kids all had fun at least. It was Christmas after all and they were upset and confused enough already.

Ashlyn and Ali went about their daily lives as best they could. Ashlyn worried constantly about her brother but was working on keeping it compartmentalized so it didn’t overrun her entire life. Chris was doing a good enough job wrecking the family’s Christmastime, the keeper was not going to do more of the same if she could at all help it. The couple got dressed up and went to the Knight-Harris holiday party the second Friday of December. The company was bigger than it had ever been but, having learned from their earlier mistakes, the hiring practices had ensured that the employees were good people who enjoyed working in a team environment. The party was a great microcosm of the culture that Ali had worked so hard to establish at K-H. It was a good group of people and the annual gathering always left both Ashlyn and Ali feeling proud of their achievement.

The following Friday evening was the Mental Health Initiative’s Holiday Gala and fundraiser and they attended as a family, just like the year before. Ashlyn had spoken with Helen Siegfriedt to find out how bad it would be to leave early again and lose out all the schmooze time she usually spent with the wealthiest members of Boston’s elite society.

“Ashlyn, I told you, it’s wonderful that you bring the kids. I had more conversations about you guys after you left the party last year than I thought was even possible. I appreciate your concern, but if you can make the phone calls afterwards again then I really see it as a benefit for us” the MHI administrator explained.

It was true. In the days after last year’s gala Ashlyn made phone calls to all of the attendees that she hadn’t actually spoken to that night. The calls were well received and the MHI had enlisted several new benefactors based on what had started with those phone calls from the charismatic keeper. The other major coup the MHI pulled off that year was convincing Helen to extend her contract with the organization. Ashlyn had been trying to get another five years out of the talented fundraiser and organizer but Helen had held firm at two. Five or two, it was still a major win for the MHI and Ashlyn was more than pleased with the result of so much effort. Part of the new agreement was that Helen would hire her replacement and train her, or him, before she left for good at the end of 2029.

The very next morning after the gala Ali and Ashlyn flew down to Miami with Drew and Josie. Dodge and Lily were the ones to stay behind this trip and Ken and Vicki were the lucky grandparents to babysit them. It was a whirlwind of a two-day trip with a flight on each day, which
was never ideal. But Mike Christopher was an important part of their lives and Ashlyn wanted to make sure they were there to celebrate him and support him after all the years he had been doing the same for all of them. When things had gone so horribly wrong at Thanksgiving, Ali told her wife that it was ok if she and the kids stayed home and only the brunette made the trip. But the keeper felt strongly about it, making Ali love her all the more. Even when she was suffering, Ashlyn found a way to take care of the ones around her. It might not have been with all of her usual light-hearted and good-natured personality, but even Ashlyn at half-speed was still pretty great.

Kyle and Nathan flew down with Edgar and Cristina and both Ali and Kyle knew from the look on their mother’s face how much it meant to her that they were both there with their families. Deb had never forced Mike on her children and vice versa. She did her best to make people comfortable as they got to know each other but she never pushed any interactions or pulled any strings to make some sort of connection exist between her new husband and her children. It was kind of unlike Deb but it was the most important thing in the world to her when she married Mike. She knew she deserved to find her own happiness but she would never want to sacrifice her children’s to do so. Over time, Mike’s genuine love for Deb shone through and both Kyle and Ali could see it. That’s all it had taken, really. Mike and Ali both loved to golf so they had that in common and the rest just grew from there. Kyle and Mike had a harder time finding something they shared but they kept trying and that joint desire to have something in common almost served the same purpose. Truthfully, Mike and Nathan got along better than Mike and Kyle did but that was mostly because the pharmacist loved to play chess and at least followed men’s golf. Mike turned out to be a really good grandfather too, which surprised himself most of all. That had been part of the problem he and Deb had gone through when Deb had first fallen in love with her grandchildren. Mike wasn’t sure that was what he wanted for his life so they spent some holidays apart and tried to figure out what the best thing to do would be for both of them. Before Mike even realized it was happening, he had grown fond of the big old house in Gloucester and the grandkids who lived there. More importantly, he learned that he missed his wife when they weren’t together as much anymore. He hadn’t married Deb for her kids or her grandkids, just as she hadn’t married him for his children. It took some work, but they figured it out and eventually bought the condo up in Manchester to be close to Ali and the kids whenever they wanted.

The short weekend trip included several firsts. It was the first time Edgar and Cristina had been to visit Deb in Miami, as well as their first time flying on a plane. It was the first time either Ali or Kyle had met Mike’s first wife, Lorraine. And it was the first time Edgar and Cristina met Mike’s grown children, Donnie and Lori. Donnie was 28 and Lori was 26 and they were both still single and focused on their careers and having fun before settling down. Ali and Kyle hadn’t seen much of either Christopher sibling once they went to college. Before then, they had all spent time together when Mike had his kids at home for the weekend and Ali or Kyle were visiting. They had never become close or anything but there had never been any animosity either. They simply didn’t see each other often enough for a real relationship to develop. Maybe once Donnie and Lori settled down and started families of their own they would all grow closer. Only time would tell.

The final big first of the weekend was that Josie, 6-1/2 years old, lost her very first tooth! It had been loose for several days and both moms knew they would need to watch their daughter carefully to make sure she didn’t swallow it, as her older brother almost did when he lost his first tooth. They knew Josie would have a fit if she didn’t get to put her tooth underneath her pillow for the tooth fairy to claim. After getting settled at Deb and Mike’s house early that afternoon, Ali and Ashlyn got their two big kids ready for the retirement party at the country club. Both moms were enjoying the relative ease in which everything kid-related happened that afternoon and evening. It made such a difference having only two of the kids with them, and especially the two eldest. Deb had arranged the party so that all of the guests arrived for cocktails at 6pm and then sat down to dinner at 7pm. Mike got up and gave a little speech between dinner and dessert and then everybody
could do what they wanted – dance, drink at the bar, tour the country club, play cards or other parlor games in the game room. It was during dessert, when many of the guests were up milling around and stretching their legs, that Josie stopped what she was doing and cocked her head at both of her mothers. She looked at Ali, on her left, first and then Ashlyn on her right.

“What’s up Jose?” Ali asked, giving the girl her full attention even though Drew was trying to pull her on to the dance floor with him.

“Drew, Mommy said she’d dance with you when she was done eating dessert” Ashlyn tilted her head at him and lifted her eyebrows in a wordless warning.

Drew sat down in his chair with a heavy sigh and rested his chin in his hand with his elbow on the table. He looked equal parts adorable and handsome in his dress pants, and plaid button-down shirt and bow-tie. He wore a red sweater vest over it and looked just christmasy enough for December 18th. Ashlyn smiled at him and then looked at her daughter, sitting right next to her. The little redhead was squinting and moving her jaw around as she sat in the chair between her two mothers who were both now watching her carefully. After a long minute Josie opened her mouth, put her thumb and forefinger into it and pulled out the loose tooth. She held it up for everyone to see and beamed, revealing the slightly bloody gap in the middle of her bottom row of teeth.

“It came out!” she yelled excitedly, looking from one mom to the other.

“It sure did little one!” Ali reached over and rubbed her back while Ashlyn leaned forward to look into Josie’s mouth.

“Wow!” the keeper grinned as she used her thumb to pull down Josie’s bottom lip to get a better look. “Great job honey. Did it hurt?”

“Nope” she shook her head, face still one big grin.

“Here, have a drink of water” Ali held her water glass and let Josie sip from it. “Sometimes it bleeds a little bit when you lose a tooth” she paused and waited to see if Josie would complain about the room-temperature water hitting her gum. “Does it feel ok?”

“Yep” Josie nodded and then took another sip.

“Ewww, it’s got blood on it” Drew scrunched up his face as he leaned across Ali’s body to get a closer look at the freshly removed tooth.

Ashlyn knew that it was bloody because Josie had literally pulled it out of her mouth. Her gum was bleeding a little bit too. The tooth had definitely been ready to come out, but it hadn’t just fallen out.

“Yours probably was too” Ali pulled his head closer with her free hand and kissed his cheek with a loud smacking kiss. “But you had it in your mouth for a while when you were chewing your sandwich, right?”

“Yeah” he nodded and climbed up onto Ali’s lap, absent-mindedly patting her shoulder and chest while he settled into place, never taking his eyes off of his sister’s tooth still held high in her hand.

“Does it hurt JoJo?” Ashlyn asked, wanting clarification once and for all before letting her worry go.

“Nope” the girl gingerly touched the hole where the tooth once was and kicked her legs out in front of her, still excited from the big event. “It doesn’t” she shook her head and turned towards Ashlyn
wanting a hug.

Ashlyn leaned over to wrap her daughter up in a hug but the two simultaneous actions caused their hands to crash into each other in the air above the table. Ali watched as Josie’s little tiny tooth got knocked out of her small fingers and bounced twice across the table towards the empty chairs where Kyle and his family had been sitting just a few minutes before.

“My tooth!” Josie yelled, a look of utter panic on her face.

Ashlyn pulled her hand back quickly and turned to try and follow the path of the tooth, her own face full of the same panic. If she lost Josie’s first tooth she would never forgive herself. The next few minutes were a blur of frantic searching for a tiny white tooth on a white tablecloth covered with several white cloth napkins that had been tossed onto the table when the NYC Kriegers hit the dance floor. Ali had followed the tooth the longest and had been able to direct their search to the correct vicinity of the table.

“Maybe it bounced off the table” she suggested as Ashlyn met her worried face with fearful eyes of her own. “I didn’t see it do that, but I know it went this direction. I saw it.”

Ashlyn pulled the three chairs out that were in that area and bent over to look at the carpeted floor. Josie’s whining had increasingly gotten worse and the little girl was about to have a meltdown. Drew’s running commentary about how funny it was that Mama had knocked Josie’s tooth out of her hand wasn’t helping anything.

“Drew, that’s enough” she snapped at him, catching his eye as she bent over again, this time with the flashlight from her phone assisting her search.

“Why don’t you crawl under the table and help us look for it?” Ali suggested and gave him a pat on the back as she hiked up her tight-fitting dress and used the chair to help her get down on to her knees.

The brunette and Drew both crawled under the table while Ashlyn was on her hands and knees over by the three chairs. The keeper swallowed hard when she saw a floor vent nearby and prayed to God that Josie’s tooth hadn’t found its way down into it. It would be lost forever if that had happened. Ali groaned when she felt something wet and slippery under the palm of her hand. It was easy to forget how messy kids could be at the dinner table when most of the mess ended up on the floor and out of sight.

“Gross...” she couldn’t help herself from complaining.

“Why’s all this food down here?” Drew asked innocently as he crawled next to his mommy.

“Because you kids are messy eaters and you don’t even realize when you drop things” Ali sighed and lifted her palm up to see what she had leaned on. “Lettuce, thank God” she rolled her eyes in relief at the piece of lettuce, covered in dressing. It could have been so much worse.

“What in the world is going on over here?” Kyle laughed as he stood at the table behind his sister’s ass.

“I lost my tooth and then...I lost my tooth!” Josie explained dramatically, her voice half whine and half wail.

“Oh, wow, ok then” Kyle’s eyes went wide when he saw the anxious look on Ashlyn’s face across the table. “Here” he patted Ali’s hip and pulled her back a little bit, “let me take a look” he helped her stand up and kissed her flushed cheek. “Your dress is much too pretty for you to be crawling
around down there” he smiled at her. “We’ll find it, right Drew?”

It took almost ten agonizing minutes before Drew’s triumphant voice rang out.

“I found it!”

He had worked around the other side of the table, still heading towards Ashlyn on the opposite side, but going wide left. The truth was he didn’t like how gross it was underneath the table so he tried to stay on the periphery of it. Nobody really cared though. They were all just glad he found the tooth.

“It must have bounced off the chair and gone that way” Ali surmised, unable to stop thinking about it until she had a logical explanation for why it had ended up in a location that was not where she had originally seen it heading.

Ashlyn knew better than to question her. Earlier in their relationship she would have challenged the brunette and suggested that maybe she hadn’t really seen it go in the direction she thought it had gone. But she knew better now. Mostly, she wasn’t going to win the argument anyway so there was no point trying. But also, Ali was usually right. As Ashlyn had come to learn after repeated instances over their almost 12 years together, if the brunette wasn’t sure about something she didn’t say it. If Ali said she saw the tooth go in a certain direction, then Ashlyn believed her. It was part of the brunette’s fact-based, common-sense approach to problem-solving. She examined the facts as she knew them and then went from there. She wasn’t going to waste her time working on solutions that hadn’t come from some sort of evidence.

“It must have” Ashlyn agreed, sincerely, as she pushed the chairs back closer to the table again. “It probably hit the edge of the seat or something and then went that way.”

Ali gave her wife a soft smile and a relieved roll of her eyes as they shared a quick look across the table. Josie was sitting sideways in her lap, clutching the tooth tightly in her fist and trying to calm herself down. The brunette rubbed her back and played with her medium length red-orange hair to try and soothe her and stave off the temper tantrum that had been about to erupt.

“How excited are you?” Kyle sat in Ashlyn’s seat and patted his niece’s legs next to him. “The tooth fairy’s going to come and take your tooth tonight!”

“Mommy, how will she know where I am?” Josie looked up into Ali’s face with a quivering bottom lip.

“Oh little one, don’t worry” the brunette cooed and gave her a kiss, knowing that a tantrum was still not very far away from becoming an ugly reality. “The tooth fairy will find you at Grandma’s house tonight, just like Santa found you here before when you were just a little baby” she smiled and cupped her daughter’s pink cheek. “Right Mama?”

“That’s right” Ashlyn came over, crouched down between Ali and Kyle, and gently poked the little redhead in her belly with a wink. “Why don’t you let me hold onto your tooth for you until we get back to Grandma’s” she put her hand out, palm up, on Josie’s lap.

“Nuh-uh” Josie shook her head emphatically. “Mommy, you hold it” she looked up at Ali again, very seriously.

Ali winced a bit at the hurt those words inflicted on her wife. Josie didn’t mean any harm by them, both moms knew that, but they stung Ashlyn just the same. In Josie’s mind, Ashlyn had knocked the tooth out of her hand already once and almost lost it. She wasn’t going to risk that happening
“Aw, I’m happy to keep your tooth safe for you, but I’ve gotta be honest, baby girl” Ali looked Josie right in the eye, “I’m going to give it to Mama to keep in her pocket as soon as you give it to me” she nodded towards Ashlyn and gave Josie a little shrug. “She keeps things safer than anybody else I know.”

“Especially because she’s got pockets in her pants and her suit jacket” Kyle chuckled. “And Mommy’s dress doesn’t have any.”

They all laughed but Ashlyn gave her wife’s shoulder a soft squeeze as she stood up and let Josie put her tooth into the palm of her hand. Ali patted Ashlyn’s thigh, almost as if she was trying to rub away the hurt in her tender heart right from there. The keeper reached over and took one of the paper bar napkins off of the table and folded it carefully around the tooth before stuffing it into her front pants pocket with an extra pat once she was done.

“There. All safe and secure” Ashlyn announced and winked at her still skeptical daughter. “Now who wants to dance?”

“Me! Me!”
“I do! Mommy, come on, you promised!”

Josie and Drew both shouted at the same time making both moms laugh. The brunette watched Josie’s face light up as her mama scooped her up and into her strong arms. They twirled together towards the dance floor, Josie’s huge, gap-toothed grin leading the way and Ali felt that familiar pull inside her chest.

“That’s some pretty cute girls right there” Kyle smiled as his eyes followed Ashlyn and Josie too.

“They sure are” Ali grinned at him as Drew finally got around the two chairs that had been between he and his dance partner and tugged the brunette to her feet. “But I think I’ve got the handsomest dance partner at the whoooooole party right here” she giggled and held her arm up so Drew could twirl underneath it on their way to the dance floor.

Kyle had a zinger ready in reply but decided to let it go. He suddenly got emotional watching his sister and her family and the sweet interaction with Josie’s first tooth. He had missed the milestone with Edgar but knew he and Nathan would have the chance, very soon, to help Cristina welcome the tooth fairy to her room for the very first time. Kyle had always been a little relieved to leave his sister’s bustling house after his visits in the past. Of course he loved her and her family to the ends of the earth, but it could be exhausting staying in the big old house. He used to tease his sister for going to bed so early every night but then he would fall into the exact same trap when he visited them. Raising kids and being a mom, or a dad, was hard fucking work. He had always understood that from the very first time he met beautiful baby Drew. But now that he had Edgar and Cristina, not that he loved them more or less than Drew and Josie or any of the Krieger kids, he finally got it. He knew what it felt like to be the parent who was there for the kid 24/7, anytime they needed him. He knew what it felt like to be the parent who could comfort the child who was hurt or upset or frightened. He knew what it felt like to be the parent who rejoiced in his kids’ achievements, no matter how tiny. Kyle finally understood what the parents got out of the deal, besides bags under their eyes and questionable stains on their shirts. He really, truly, got it and he knew he would never be the same again. How could he be? His heart now was the same open, bleeding, raw wound that his sister had tried to describe to him for the past nine years. His heart beat and pulsed with the two little hearts that relied on him and looked up to him and needed him a dozen times every single day of their young lives. Times were darker than normal for the Krieger family that December as they agonized and hoped along with the Harris clan, and Kyle knew exactly how
lucky he was. He had never felt stronger or more clear-headed about anything in his whole challenging life. His heart ached for Chris Harris and what he must be going through but he knew down to the very core of his soul that he would never, ever make the same mistake. Kyle treated his sobriety like a delicate orchid, or the sickliest little baby bird or the most priceless gem. He took exquisite care of it and nurtured it and made sure it had all the light and water and love it needed to thrive. He nourished it and tended to it when it was feeling weak. And on the days when it was strong, he cleaned it and polished it until it shone and sparkled. No, Kyle would never ever take his sobriety for granted or treat it less than the most important thing in his life. He knew, and was reminded in moments like the one he had just shared with his sister, that nothing else in his life could exist without it. He knew he had to be selfish about his sobriety and was thankful that the people in his life understood that and forgave him for it. Kyle Krieger had been given a second chance at life and had worked hard to make the very most of it – no way in hell was he going to risk any of it for even a minute.
Tammye, Carol, Beth and the kids arrived in Boston on Thursday, December 23rd. Ali and Ashlyn hosted Christmas Eve as they had for the past couple of years and everybody had a nice time. The honor of putting the star on top of the tree went to Johnny and Lizzy this year and everyone cheered while Kyle and Ryan lifted the two kids up high so they could reach the top of the tree. Ali thanked her brother for letting the Harris kids steal Edgar’s turn. The siblings had agreed after Meg’s turn last Christmas that the Guerreros would be the next two in line. Kyle understood the special circumstances and was glad he hadn’t said anything to Edgar about it before. Peaches, now just over a year old, wreaked havoc everywhere she went. She chewed into some wrapped presents under the tree and destroyed a couple of ornaments right off of the tree itself. She was caught several times just about to jump up on the kitchen counter to help herself to whatever smelled so good up there. Ali was surprised at Peaches’ bad behavior because she was used to Luna always being so well behaved.

“Ky, you’ve gotta get her trained” she quirked her eyebrow at her brother as they cleaned up the broken glass from one of the lightbulbs in the candle of the window the young dog had knocked over while jumping up on the windowsill to bark at her own reflection. “Is she always like this?”

Ali hadn’t seen Peaches too much that year after Kyle brought her up for his family’s vacation week around the 4th of July. She had been a cute 8-month old puppy then and not quite as destructive as she had become by the end of December.

“I’m trying” he complained, embarrassed and exasperated with the dog. “Let’s just say it was a lot easier when it was just me doing the training with Luna” he sighed. “I think we’re confusing her or something” he looked over his shoulder and lowered his voice before continuing. “I don’t think Nate follows all the rules when I’m not around, and I know Cristina doesn’t.”

Ali took a minute and thought about how difficult it would be to try and train a puppy when there were kids around to confuse and complicate the issue. She and Ashlyn had been lucky to train both Persey and Fred well before there were toddlers in the big old house. She felt a pang of guilt as her thoughts shifted to how glad she was that Kyle and his family, including Peaches, were staying at the Kimballs again. She didn’t really feel that way though, she always wanted her brother to stay with her. The big old house was full of Harrises that Christmas so there had been no choice to be made about where Kyle and his family stayed. But she was relieved to not have to worry about Peaches destroying lord knew what else.

“Wow, I never thought about that before” she admitted as they followed a trail of destruction towards the mudroom, picking up shredded wrapping paper and bits of two different Christmas cards that Ali and Ashlyn had received that year. “Can you guys take her to puppy training together, as a family? I’ve heard some places offer that” she suggested. “That way you all learn together and everybody knows the rules and learns to use the same commands.”

“Yeah, I found a place but it’s almost an hour away” he sighed as they threw out the remnants of Peaches’ rampage in the kitchen trash. “Maybe we’ll just have to make that work. This is just too
much” he shook his head. “I’m so sorry sis.”

“Don’t worry about me BB” she gave him a quick hug. “But you’d better keep her out of the front parlor. That’s all I ask” she cocked her head at him as his eyes went wide.

“Ummm, I’ll be right back” he turned and rushed towards the front of the house, hoping upon hope that somebody hadn’t opened one of the gates and let Peaches into the front parlor.

Christmas Day was another success up at Ken and Vicki’s after the morning’s barely controlled chaos at the big old house. Instead of 4 young children tearing through miles of wrapping paper and mountains of bows, there were 6. Deb and Mike Christopher had come over early, as they usually did, and Tammye and Carol were ready to help Beth, Ali and Ashlyn as well. Beth, with Mike Harris’ help, had gotten creative about the bigger toys that Santa had brought for Johnny and Lizzy. Johnny was 10-1/2 and starting to get a bit skeptical about whether or not Santa Claus was real. When he opened a box that held only a picture of the new bike he had been wanting for the past three months he rolled his eyes and looked at his mother with a mixture of doubt and hope.

“Mom, what’s this?” he shrugged as the unwrapping frenzy continued around him.

“What does it say sweetie?” Beth smiled back at him while Ashlyn monitored the situation from a few feet away. She had done the writing on the note from Santa so Johnny wouldn’t recognize Beth’s script.

Johnny carefully read the words out loud.

“Johnny – I know you wanted this bike and it’s waiting for you at home. I left it there last night instead of bringing it to you in Gloucester so you wouldn’t have to ride it all the way back home to Satellite Beach. Ho ho ho! Hope you like it! Love, Santa.”

“How cool is that?” the keeper nudged his arm when the boy still seemed hesitant about the gift. “That Santa, he’s always thinking” she grinned.

“Let’s see if there are any other presents like that from Santa that he left at home for us” Beth encouraged, knowing Lizzy had a new bike too. “Then we’ll have Papa go over and look for us” she smiled when she saw the intrigued look on her son’s face.

Sure enough, ten minutes later Lizzy opened up a box just like her big brother had and read the note from Santa. By now, even the Krieger kids were curious about this new development. Beth had texted Mike Harris when they were opening gifts so he knew the time was coming for his part of the morning. As soon as his dimpled grin appeared on the iPad in Ashlyn’s hands all 6 grandkids began greeting him with waves and smiles and shouts. He made a big production out of walking up to the house, his mother’s old house, in Satellite Beach and spotting the remains of some carrots.

“Oh well it sure looks like there were reindeer here last night” he enthused, finally opening the door to reveal the two brand new bikes, all assembled, with big red bows on the handlebars. “Nope, I guess he didn’t come here after all” Mike shrugged and scratched his head, pretending not to see the shiny new bikes right behind him.

“Papa!! Papa!! Turn around!!”
“Look behind you Papa!!”
“I see them!!”
“There’s my bike!!”

Several grandchildren shouted excitedly at the iPad screen and caused such a ruckus that Persey
got up to come and investigate.

“What’s that?” Mike milked it some more and made the kids yell more instructions at him as they pointed animatedly towards him. “Behind me?” he slowly turned around and shouted his surprise, rushing over to the new bikes and making sure to get nice and close with his phone so the kids could see them.

It was one of the sweetest moments of the whole holiday season and all the grown-ups enjoyed it just as much as the kids had. Even skeptical Johnny seemed convinced. The smile he wore for the rest of the morning was proof of it whether or not he was ready to actually admit it. In one of the rare chunks of quiet time between opening kid presents at 6:30am and leaving the house after an early lunch to get up to Ken & Vicki’s house by 1pm, Ali found herself closing and locking the master bathroom door behind her. It had been four weeks and two days since Thanksgiving and the brunette knew that Ashlyn’s heart was still broken from the events of that night. The keeper had been putting on a brave face and doing her best to let the magic of the Christmas season seep into her soul. But Ali knew having Beth and the kids here with them, and not Chris, was torturous for Ashlyn. She could see the pain hidden in her eyes behind the sweet laughter and loving moments with all six kids that morning. Everybody was going out of their way to make sure Johnny and Lizzy had a nice Christmas and, so far, it had been successful. But they were all hurting and Ali wanted desperately to ease some of her wife’s pain.

“Is that you baby?” the keeper called out from the shower, the two exposed glass sides too fogged up to see through. “I’ll be out in one minute, just doing the final rinse...”

She stopped talking when she felt the cool air come into the shower with the opening of the glass door to her right, face still under the stream of water. She hurried to rinse the soap out of her eyes so she could see what was happening. But before she had much time to wonder, she felt Ali’s hands moving slowly across her back and shoulders.

“Perfect timing” the brunette purred as she pressed a few kisses up Ashlyn’s spine. Her hands wandered around to the keeper’s stomach and then spread up to fondle her breasts and down to tease the top of her short hairs. Her broken right ring finger was still taped to the middle finger next to it so she wouldn’t be able to use her favorite two thrusting fingers for anything fun that morning. But the tape was better than the splint she had been wearing all day and night until just a couple of days before Christmas. She had two weeks left with the two fingers taped together and then, hopefully, she could have her fingers back. Undeterred, she pressed her own mound up against her wife’s ass and felt her core tug when Ashlyn moaned into the touches. “I thought I’d just help you out a little bit in here” her mouth was up near the blonde’s neck now and heading for the sweet spot behind her ear and Ashlyn gasped at the warm breath on her sensitive skin, “if that’s ok?” Ali’s slow, sultry voice asked what really wasn’t a question at all.

“Ummm...” Ashlyn swallowed hard, surprised at how turned on she was even through her sadness. “Do we have time?” her voice was low as she leaned her forearms against the tiled wall in front of her, beneath the shower head.

Without even thinking about it she spread her legs wider and pushed her ass back into Ali’s hips as she waited for the answer. The feel of Ali’s hard nipples poking into her back was doing things to her that she was finding hard to control. The brunette turned Ashlyn around so they were facing each other and gave her a slow, deep kiss while both hands moved to her pretty pink nipples.

“I won’t take long” she husked out when they came up for air.

She gave Ashlyn a hungry look and the keeper felt her own passion pool between her legs as she stared back into Ali’s darkening eyes. The brunette didn’t wait for an answer, knowing what it was
as soon as she had felt Ashlyn kiss her back a moment earlier. Ali moved her keeper so she was leaning against the tile at the back wall of the shower, with the shower head to Ali’s right as she faced her. She gave her another searing kiss and her hands squeezed and tugged on Ashlyn’s nipples and brought them to stiff points in just a couple of minutes. When they pulled back from that kiss, Ali kept her mouth moving down her wife’s neck, going faster than she really wanted to but knowing they really didn’t have a ton of time. There were enough adults downstairs to keep the kids out of trouble for a few minutes but they could be interrupted at any minute and they both knew it.

“Shit, baby” Ashlyn whimpered softly, both hands buried in the medium-length, dark hair that was only now getting wet from the shower. “Mmmmm, so good...”

Ali’s hands led the way down the keeper’s long legs and back up as her tongue and lips trailed behind, stopping at her freshly trimmed curls. She covered Ashlyn’s mound with her mouth and blew her warm breath over it, making her keeper moan loudly. Ashlyn spread her legs as wide as she could, bending her knees and lowering herself just a bit while Ali knelt down and wrapped her right arm around her keeper’s thigh to hold her close. The brunette brought her left hand up to continue playing with her wife’s beautiful breasts as she began to lick through her wet folds.

“Fuck, you taste good...mmmmmmmmmmm...” Ali moaned into her wife’s pussy. She licked up the juices Ashlyn had already spilled for her and then pressed her face up and into her entrance, thrusting her hot tongue inside her and making her gasp out in pleasure.

“Yes, fuck, Goddamn baby...mmmmmmm...” the keeper moaned and closed her eyes as she felt her excitement level ratchet right up.

“Mmmmmmmmm...” Ali replied back in another low, hungry moan as she swirled her tongue inside her wife while she grabbed at her ass with her right hand, arm still wrapped around her thigh.

The brunette hit Ashlyn’s clit with her nose a few times as she licked and sucked her way up and down through her drenched pussy lips. The keeper’s leg trembled each time she made contact with her sensitive nub and Ali knew she could get her off with a little clit work. She didn’t want it to end yet though. She wished she could stay between Ashlyn’s legs for an hour, maybe two. But there was no time for that, not on Christmas morning.

“My clit, Al, my clit...” she groaned and moved one of her own hands out of the brunette’s hair to take care of it herself.

“I’m on it” Ali pushed her wife’s hand away and then slid her mouth up to cover her clit completely, sucking it all into her mouth and teasing it slowly with her strong tongue.

“Mmmmmmmmm...” she moaned into the flesh and made her keeper groan loudly and tug on her hair.

“Fuck, yes, baby please...”

Ali released Ashlyn’s thigh and brought her right hand up to her eager pussy. She paused and groaned in frustration when she remembered her broken finger. Before her keeper even noticed, hopefully, Ali switched hands. She moved her right hand up to pinch and tug on her wife’s nipples and smoothly pushed the two middle fingers of her left hand up into her pulsing center.

“I love being inside you...mmmmmmm...” she husked out as she started pumping her fingers at a medium pace, her lips hummed against Ashlyn’s clit and made the blonde pull her wife’s hair again with another groan.
“Jesus, Al...fuck yes.”

The brunette started sucking hard on her clit while she increased her thrusting pace and pressure. She squeezed Ashlyn’s nipple between her thumb and forefinger and then tugged on it again.

“Unnnnnhhhh...yeah baby...ohhhh, so goooood...” the keeper moaned and moved her hand behind Ali’s head to hold it in place as she started to grind against her face.

Ali kept pumping with her left hand and tugging with her right while she watched and felt her wife climbing towards her release. She glanced up past her writhing torso and bouncing breasts and saw her head tilted back against the tile wall, mouth open and breathing hard. The brunette loved the way Ashlyn was holding her head and grinding into her chin and face, and felt her own juices starting to drip down onto her thighs. She hadn’t considered how difficult it would be to get her keeper off and then jump right back into Christmas morning mom mode. Oh well. One thing at a time. She felt Ashlyn’s leg tremble again and knew it was time. Ali thrusted harder, curling her fingers forward every few times, and began to flick her keeper’s clit as hard and fast as she could with her strong tongue.

“Fuck!” Ashlyn shouted out, much too loudly for a clandestine quickie, and covered her own mouth with her free hand to stop herself from doing it again. “Unnnnnnnnnnn, mmmmmmmmm...” she moaned as she climbed. “Oh God” she mumbled behind her hand.

“Mmmmmm...mmmmmm...fuck...Ali!!”

Ashlyn clamped her hand over her mouth as she came hard and tried to brace herself so she didn’t slide down the wall of the shower while her body jerked and bent forward. Ali wrapped both arms around her wife’s ass and the top of her thighs to try and give her some support as the orgasm rocked through her body. There was a knock on the bathroom door.

“Mommy, Jo...Jo...Josie says I can’t wear my red dress today cuz she’s wearing her red dress but I picked mine out first and it’s not fair and you have to tell her...”

“Mommy! She saw my red dress and then wanted to wear her red dress. She copied me!”

“Girls...girls...girls!” Ali finally got their attention, yelling over her shoulder towards the bathroom door as Ashlyn tried to pull herself together above her. “You can both wear your red dresses if you want...”

“No! That’s not fair!” Josie yelled and Ali was pretty sure she heard her stomp her little foot too.

“Mama will be out in a minute and she will decide what you will both wear if you don’t work this out first” the brunette set the boundaries in hopes they could solve their own problem without a big fight.

“Go wait in your rooms girls” Ashlyn called out once her breathing had settled a bit. “I’ll be out in a minute.”

Ashlyn pulled her wife up and kissed her hard as they embraced and turned the other side of their bodies into the warm water of the shower. They giggled softly with their foreheads pressed together and their lips curled into smiles.

“I can’t believe you did that” the keeper sighed happily. “That was awesome. Thank you honey.”

“I’m glad we squeezed that in there” Ali chuckled quietly. “I’m sorry you didn’t have more than five seconds to enjoy it” she rolled her eyes.
The brunette held onto her wife as Ashlyn turned them again so she could do another quick final rinse and go start peacekeeping. Ali thought about getting herself off quickly but she knew Ashlyn wouldn’t be able to get out of the shower if she did that. She sighed heavily and told herself she would just have to wait.

“Mama!” Lily was back at the door and Ali was so happy she had remembered to lock it. “Josie called me stupid!” she whined and both moms knew the little girl was about to have a full-blown hissy fit. Ashlyn squeezed the water out of her hair with both hands moving from front to back and then quickly stepped out of the shower after one last peck to Ali’s lips.

“I’ll pay you back tonight” she winked at her beautiful brunette and closed the glass shower door. “Lily it’s ok, I’m right here” she wrapped a towel around herself and opened the bathroom door to let the unhappy 4-1/2 year old in. “It’s ok sweetpea” she soothed as Lily buried her face in Ashlyn’s crotch and started to cry. “It’s alright sweetheart” the keeper bent over and rubbed her back and kissed the top of her head. “How about you come help me get dressed and then we’ll go pick out your outfit, ok?”

Ali smiled to herself as she washed her hair and listened to her wife solve the problem her own unique way. The kids all loved to help her pick out her ties when she got dressed up and sometimes she even let them help pick out which dress shirt to wear with her suit. They weren’t getting that dressed up today but Ashlyn knew the idea of being the only kid to help mama get dressed would shake Lily out of her snit. Ali knew it too. The brunette thanked God, again, for giving her a wife who was so good with the kids. Ali really felt like she had a true partner. A hot, sexy, delicious partner that she would have to wait about twelve hours to get naked with again. It was going to be a long day. A good, magical Christmas Day, but a long one nonetheless.

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Later that afternoon Beth called Chris and, of course, he didn’t pick up the call. She was prepared though and had Johnny and Lizzy ready to leave him a message and tell him the three favorite things they each got for Christmas. She didn’t tell him where they were, she just told him that they loved him and missed him and wished him Merry Christmas. It was cute and sweet but, as Ashlyn and Tammye listened from outside the door of the den at Ken’s house, one of the saddest things either woman had ever heard.

It was the usual crowd at Ken’s for the holiday and the only new face was a man Sandi Leroux had been dating fairly steadily for the past six months. He could only stay for a couple of hours but Ashlyn knew the idea of being the only kid to help mama get dressed would shake Lily out of her snit. Ali knew it too. The brunette thanked God, again, for giving her a wife who was so good with the kids. Ali really felt like she had a true partner. A hot, sexy, delicious partner that she would have to wait about twelve hours to get naked with again. It was going to be a long day. A good, magical Christmas Day, but a long one nonetheless.
kids, and Ashlyn and Sydney would be sure to hang out whenever they could as well. It was a great way to spend time with the family Ali loved while avoiding those members that she didn’t.

“Well if that isn’t the cutest fucking thing I’ve ever seen...” Sydney nodded towards Ashlyn and her mini-me for the day, Lily, and laughed.

“I know, right?” Ali rolled her eyes and giggled. “I almost died when I got out of the shower and saw them. The girls were fighting about what dresses they were going to wear...”

“Don’t you mean Josie was telling Lily what dress to wear?” Sydney teased.

“Exactly” Ali chuckled. “So I told them to figure it out or Mama would decide what they were going to wear when she got out of the shower. Lily was back at the door two minutes later complaining about Josie being mean and Ash had to go handle it. I like the result” she grinned and looked again at her wife and youngest daughter playing with the dogs on the other side of the kitchen.

Ashlyn was wearing dark jeans, two-tone brown oxford shoes, a white dress shirt with a black bow-tie and a red sweater vest over it. She had made her choices to match Lily’s outfit as closely as possible. The keeper had run from dresser to dresser in the boys’ rooms trying to piece together an outfit for Lily that would match one of her own outfits. It had been the little girl’s idea but Ashlyn had enthusiastically joined in. She and Ali had never insisted any of the kids wear a specific outfit, except at their christening when they were too young to care anyway. Lily had always followed Josie’s lead when it came to getting dressed up and Josie loved to wear pretty dresses and sparkly things. The redhead loved shoes, just like her mommy, and wanted to dress like a princess more often than not. Lily had slowly begun to buck that trend as she got a little older. The first thing to go had been the shoes. If Lily could be barefoot every day of her life she would be the happiest kid on the planet. She started asking to wear comfy sneakers with her dresses instead of the more usual dress shoes. Ali had reached a compromise with her when she showed her some oxford and mary jane shoes that were comfy but a little bit dressier than sneakers. Lily was thrilled and that had been the extent of it so far. But that morning she had told Ashlyn that she wanted to match her clothes that day, which was something the keeper had heard both girls say to Ali a lot over the years, but never before to her. Josie had gotten over the matching idea a year ago when she decided that mommy didn’t wear sparkly-enough dresses.

That morning Lily wore her own brown oxfords, but hers were brown and white instead of two-tone brown like Ashlyn’s. The keeper had to explain that with such short notice, their outfits would match today but not be exactly identical. She had braced for the hissy fit she thought for sure would follow those words, but Lily had just said ‘ok’ and shrugged. With the brown and white oxfords, Lily wore her own dark jeans and white dress shirt. She borrowed Dodge’s black bow-tie and red sweater vest and her outfit was complete. She whined about not having her ears pierced yet, the moms had made Josie wait until she was 6 years old and were going to do the same with Lily, so Ashlyn removed her own earrings and went without for the afternoon. The biggest sore spot with Lily, besides her terrible eating habits, was her hair. It was getting pretty long now and it was dirty blonde and naturally curly. The curls were looser than Dodge’s but that was because the length and weight of her long hair stretched them out. Dodge’s hair was short so his curls were much tighter. Lily always wanted her hair down but hated to have it brushed. Both moms explained to her until they were blue in the face that if they brushed it more there wouldn’t be so many tangles and then the brushing wouldn’t hurt as much. Ashlyn almost lost her mind when Lily had started playing soccer that Fall and refused to let either of them put her hair up in a ponytail so she could see. She ran around the soccer pitch and held her hair back out of her face with both hands. It was the stupidest thing either Ali or Ashlyn had ever seen but Lily just refused. If they managed to force her hair into a ponytail, Lily simply took it out once she was out on the pitch.
Brushing Lily’s hair before showertime each night or in the morning before school had quickly become the least popular activity for both moms and they secretly started using it when they made bets. Brushing Lily’s hair had replaced wake-ups as their unit of bartering, and for good reason. It took forever because the unlucky mom had to go really slowly and work the tangles out as carefully as possible or Lily would burst into tears and run away to keep them from doing any more brushing. Ashlyn always joked that she needed to take a valium before even attempting to brush Lily’s hair. Ali had threatened more than once that if Lily couldn’t keep her hair clean and brushed while it was long that they would have to cut it short instead. That usually adjusted the little girl’s attitude for a little while. Not only did Lily let Ashlyn brush her hair for her that morning but she let her slick it back and pull it into a bun at the back of her head too. They were absolutely adorable together and Lily beamed all day long.

“So, do you want me to pretend that you didn’t just tell me you two showered together this morning or was there something you wanted to share boo-boo?” Sydney smirked at her best friend as they both kept watching the matching mother and daughter across the room.

“God Syd, you don’t miss a thing do you?” Ali groaned, blushed and then shook her head with a giggle.

“Well, I like to just call it paying attention, but you know” she shrugged, “you do you.”

“Oh, God, yes. Ok? Yes, I jumped in the shower with her this morning” Ali admitted and blushed even harder. “Are you happy now?”

“Wow, that’s ambitious. Christmas morning, a house full of relatives, kids running all over the place. I’m very fucking impressed” Sydney nodded approvingly. “And I’m not nearly as happy as you must be after that” she chuckled and nudged her best friend with her elbow.

“Oh I wish” Ali rolled her eyes. “There’s ambitious and lucky and then there’s impossible.”

“No! Ugh, that’s the worst” Sydney put her arm around her shoulder sympathetically. “And now here you are watching her from afar, pining for her...probably shifting uncomfortably in your panties” she giggled when she saw Ali blush again. “Which are probably a little damp right about now...”

“Come on!” Ali smacked her bestie and did her best to scowl instead of laugh. “You’re just making it worse.”

“Oh please, you love to torture yourself” Sydney hip-checked her. “There’s no other explanation for those ben-wa balls other than sheer torture.”

“Syd!” Ali hissed, trying to yell at her best friend and whisper at the same time.

“Hey, I’m not the one who came to Christmas wearing those things...”

“One time! We did it one time!”

“Whatsoever you say Als” Sydney smirked and then laughed out loud at how discombobulated the brunette had gotten during their little chat. “For the record, I love it. I absolutely love it.”

“You love what? Ben-wa balls?”

“No” the coach shook her head and grimaced. “I really do think those are just mean. What’s the point of getting all worked up if you can’t do anything about it for hours? Not my cup of tea” she clarified. “I love that you guys are still so into each other. It gives me hope for all of us” she
chuckled but Ali heard the worry behind it.

“What’s going on boo? Are you and Dom ok?”

“What? Oh yeah, we’re fine” Sydney smiled brightly, a little too brightly.

Both women looked over to see Dom talking with Ken and Beth. They seemed to be discussing the television in the living room that was out of Ali and Sydney’s view. Dom pointed a few different ways and lifted his arms up high to simulate something they must have been talking about, maybe mounting a television?

“I keep telling him he’s wearing those shirts too tight” Sydney clucked but kept smiling at her handsome and fit husband.

“Oh stop” Ali chided her with a giggle. “He looks good and you know it.”

“Hell yes I know it” the coach turned to look at her best friend. “But I don’t need him getting a big ol’ fat head about it” she rolled her eyes and laughed. “My man is fine but I’ve gotta keep him humble” she quirked her eyebrow at Ali and went back to looking towards the living room. “I don’t need him getting any ideas. I know things have changed” she motioned towards her own body, moving her hand in front of her stomach and chest Vanna White style. “I can’t have him thinking he can do better now” she chuckled.

“Please tell me you’re just kidding” Ali laughed softly and raised her eyebrows as she stared at her bestie. “I mean, you don’t really think that, do you?”

“Listen, I own a mirror. I know my body’s changed since I popped out three babies” she shrugged. “Let’s just say I’m glad I have the personality to still make it work” she laughed again and turned her attention back to the other guests they had been watching over the past half hour or so, effectively ending their little heart to heart.

Sydney had made a joke out of it but their conversation stuck with Ali for the next several hours. Sydney had always been brash and cocky and confident, ever since she first developed the breasts to go along with her big mouth, sophomore year of high school. It was part of her charm and that brashness had always been a source of inspiration and courage for Ali. To hear her best friend talking about her own body in less than the glowing, boastful ways that they were all used to, really bothered the brunette. She would have to revisit the topic later, when they had more privacy. And more wine to help loosen Sydney up.

As the interested parties piled into the living room to watch ‘A Christmas Story’ with Ali and her dad, Ashlyn was pulled back into the dining room by Deb.

“Sandi doesn’t believe me” she stated matter-of-factly and stood with her hands on her hips, nodding at Sydney’s mother and quirking her eyebrow.

“I’m sorry I guess?” Ashlyn shrugged and popped one of Deb’s famous Italian cookies into her mouth while they were standing there next to the dining room table where all sorts of holiday goodies and sweets had been laid out.

The topic of Hannah and Dev had come up naturally as the family talked about Meg at different times during the afternoon. Bill Kimball had finally flat out asked Ashlyn what ever happened to that jackass, referring to Dev and making the kids snap to attention at the bad word. The keeper had explained that Hannah had filed for divorce in March and that Dev had been a jerk about it and
had made the entire year as painful as possible for his soon-to-be ex-wife. The good news was that they had finally come to an agreement so the divorce could proceed and be finalized, hopefully, early the next year. Everybody had been astute enough to realize that Ashlyn didn’t really want to talk about it any further than that. But Sandi had peppered Deb with more questions about bits and pieces that she had heard from Sydney over the last couple of months.

“Oh, ummm, she’s not” Ashlyn frowned and looked down, embarrassed by trying to talk with her mouth full of delicious cookie.

“Really?” Sandi’s eyes went wide. “They called you in to testify about Hannah? Was he really trying to get custody of Meg? She’s 15! What the hell was he thinking? She wouldn’t go live with him, even if he did somehow win custody” she shook her head in disbelief.

“Well, Whit says it was all posturing. He was trying to get Hannah to blink. But she didn’t” Ashlyn cleared her throat and took a swig of her beer.

“Good for her” Sandi grinned as Deb stood there proudly with her arms folded across her chest. “Is she going to take all his money? God, I so hope she takes him to the cleaners. What a bastard he was.”

“I’ll second that” Deb added.

“She signed a pre-nup so she won’t get half of everything” Ashlyn leaned over the table to choose her next cookie. “But she’ll get half of what he earned while they were married. And he made a buttload every year and they were married for six years...” she scrunched her face up as she considered, “I wonder if this year counts too?” she asked out loud. “I think it does. So seven years then. You can do the math” she chuckled and bit into one of Ali’s specialties – the peanut butter cookie with the hershey’s kiss baked into the top of it. Most people made those as sugar cookies, which were also excellent, but Ali made them peanut butter cookies instead and they were so much better.

“7 x ‘half a buttload’ sure sounds like a buttload to me” Sandi laughed at her creative equation, with Deb joining in. “She’s still not my favorite, but I’m happy for her. How’s Meg handling everything? Syd tells me she’s good every time I ask but I’m not sure she really knows” she giggled.

“Meg’s good” Ashlyn couldn’t help but smile as she thought of her step-daughter. “She really rallied around Hannah. It’s a shame it all happened, but the silver lining is that it brought them together at a time when they really weren’t getting along that well. I’m really proud of her. She grew up a lot this year.” The keeper paused as the truth of her statement made both older women nod their heads. “She won the starting spot for her high school team too. She beat out a senior for it and really played well this season” the keeper’s face filled with pride as she spoke.

“And she’s only a sophomore” Deb added like the proud grandma she was. “She thinks they might make her captain next season too.”

“Really?” Ashlyn looked at Deb in surprise. “She told you that?”

“She did” Deb nodded, beaming. “But she doesn’t want to jinx anything so she probably regrets it” she giggled.

“So did she stay home with her mom this year or did they get away?” Sandi asked.

“Yeah, we invited them up again but Hannah didn’t want to remind everybody about last year so
soon” Ashlyn sighed. “She’s really mortified that Dev was such a pig with all of us. She might never come back up here again.”

Deb and Sandi exchanged a quick, questioning look.

“And is that a good thing or a bad thing?” Deb asked carefully.

“Nah, it’s both, I guess. I know nobody really likes Hannah and I get it. I don’t blame them” the keeper smiled sheepishly. “I don’t care if Hannah never comes up here again, except that I know Meg likes her two worlds to come together sometimes. That’s all.”

“Well, if I get my way and if Meg picks up on all the hints I’ve been giving her, Hannah will be coming up here a lot to watch Meg’s college games” Deb giggled gleefully and gave Ashlyn a side-hug and a kiss on the cheek. “Sorry, not sorry!”

A few hours later, Ali drove home with the dogs in the back of the truck and Johnny and Drew in the backseat, following Ashlyn and Beth and the rest of the kids in the minivan. As the boys debated how much it would actually hurt if you shot yourself in the eye with a bb gun, Ali’s thoughts drifted to what a really nice day it had been. Koty had gone out of his way to spend time with both Johnny and Lizzy, even giving them some extra soccer time after the big family game. The Kimballs were now officially acclimated to the Kriegers and Dwyers, although Sandi Leroux still made Iris Kimball nervous and that amused the hell out of both Sydney and Ali. The two older women, then moms, had known each other when the kids were all back in school together - Kyle, Ali, Sydney, Nathan and Jared, but they had never really been friends. Iris had always seemed like too much of a stuffed shirt to Sandi and the single, divorced mom had always been too edgy and raw for the well-heeled Iris. It had taken grandchildren and thirty years for them to find their common ground, but they had done it.

Edgar and Cristina had played just as hard and often as the other kids, and that was a first. The past several holidays they had participated more than ever, but still always seemed to be holding back a bit. It was hard to tell if they were freaked out or just a little shy. But today they ran stride for stride with and laughed as much as every other kid. Edgar had even gotten into an argument with Cassius about some obscure soccer statistic that Dom had to look up the answer to resolve. Edgar had been correct and Ali marveled at the fact that the boy had stuck up for himself at all in the first place. Both Guerrero kids were finding their voices and their happiness and their peace. It was still an ongoing process but the whole extended family exulted in the progress that they had both made in just a little less than two years. Everything about the day had been hopeful and positive, except for the occasional sad moment where one of the Harrises would remember that their dad or husband or son or brother wasn’t there with them. Those were heartbreaking moments to be sure, but they were few and far between compared to the rest of the joy and happiness that had filled Ken and Vicki’s house that day. It had been a very Merry Christmas after all.
As soon as Deb learned that Beth and the kids would be coming up for Christmas that year she talked with Ali and made arrangements for another Nutcracker excursion. Ali and Ashlyn had already decided that they were going to take their kids again and when Deb wondered if Johnny and Lizzy might enjoy it too the plan was hatched. Ali wouldn’t let her mother pay for all the tickets though. Not this time. They split them and Deb pouted about it for a few days but eventually got over it. The Nutcracker 2.0 happened the day after Christmas and they went to the Sunday matinee and had a great time again. It was just like the year before except Mike Christopher, Ken and Vicki stayed home. There was no Whitney using an extra ticket and no Hannah or Meg. Instead Beth, Johnny, Lizzy, Tammye and Carol took their places. Ashlyn was afraid Johnny wouldn’t like it because of her brother’s highly macho influence, but he enjoyed it even if he hadn’t thought he would. His favorite part was the exciting sword fight, just as it was still Drew and Edgar’s favorite part. The day was another success and provided more fun and distraction for the Harris kids.

They were planning to stay for the whole week and fly home Sunday morning, January 2nd. Tammye and Carol and Mike Harris had surprised their grandkids with a trip up to Mt Washington in New Hampshire for a four-day ski and snow vacation. Ali would never complain about going to Mt Washington for any reason and she remembered fondly the different times she had visited over the years with Ashlyn and the kids and some of the four-families. They caravanned up Wednesday morning and drove home in the afternoon on Saturday, New Year’s Day. Ashlyn and Ali taught Johnny and Lizzy how to snowboard and ski and they all did some epic sledding. Drew was already a decent snowboarder, all those years boogie boarding paving his way, and Josie was starting to get the hang of it in her first winter as a 6-year old. That was the family rule, no snowboarding until age 6. Both Dodge and Lily were starting to ski, Ali insisting that all their kids learn to ski first and then progress to snowboarding. It was so hard to encourage the kids while every fiber of her being wanted to hold them back and protect them from any potential falls and injuries. The brunette knew it was a losing battle and all it took was a look from her patient wife to know she was going overboard. They had agreed to enforce all of the common-sense safety protocols and use all the correct safety gear for all the kids’ sports. But when Ali started to get overprotective and triple-check that helmets were fastened correctly, Ashlyn would flash her a look to tell her it was too much.

Ali made sure to give Beth all the tips she could, like make sure to pick a soft padded sled or tube so you didn’t destroy your tailbone when you landed after catching a little bit of air. For the first time since she’d been with them that Christmas, Beth seemed like she had a really fun time. They took the tram up to the top of Mt Washington to watch the sunset one afternoon and hiked and snow-shoed and went on a sleighride. The hotel pulled out all the stops to celebrate the holidays and both Ashlyn and Ali kicked themselves for not doing this sooner. All of the fun activities culminated in an incredible New Year’s Eve party Friday night that each of the kids tried their best to stay awake for. They dropped like flies though, one by one, and a mom would carry them up to one of their rooms where first Carol and then Tammye had retreated to celebrate like the grandmas they were. Johnny, Drew and Lizzy, the three oldest kids at 10-1/2, 8-1/2, and 8 respectively, made it the latest. Lizzy and Drew lasted until almost 9:30pm but not quite. Josie willed herself to stay awake to try and keep up with her older cousin but her 6-1/2 year old body could not keep up with her steely mind and she finally fell asleep at about 9pm. The 4-1/2 year old twins had barely made it past 8pm. They were all doing so many fun outdoor activities during the day that they had been falling asleep a little bit before their 8pm bedtime each night so far anyway. Johnny was the last to drop and he made it all the way to 10pm. Ashlyn was pretty sure he had played Tammye and Carol and gotten some extra sodas and the caffeine boost had aided his efforts. She didn’t call him out on
it though. If he needed that win right now, she was going to let him have it.

They had three rooms for their stay and each room had two queen sized beds in it. Ali and Ashlyn took one room, Beth another and Tammye and Carol the third. All three rooms were on the same floor and pretty close to each other but none of them were adjoining. The 6 grandkids rotated through in pairs so they all had a chance to sleep with Gigi and Caro for a night. New Year’s Eve was the twins’ turn and they were sacked out in the second bed, barely taking up half of it between the two of them. Carol stayed in the room with them as they slept, starting at around 8pm. Tammye came up next with Josie at 9pm and tucked her into the extra bed in Ali and Ashlyn’s room, sitting with her and texting back and forth with her wife in the other room. Beth came up and went to sleep with Lizzy and Drew at 9:30pm. She put Drew in with Josie, bade Tammye good night, and tucked Lizzy into the other bed in her own room.

“Are you sure you guys don’t want to come down?” Ashlyn asked her mother as she helped her get Johnny into his pajamas and into the bed in Beth’s room. Beth was out cold and they both wondered if all the cold-weather exercise and insane stress from her husband’s mess had finally caught up with the poor, beleaguered woman. They spoke quietly in the hallway outside Ashlyn and Ali’s room after tiptoeing out of Beth’s room. Tammye would stay in there with Drew and Josie until Ashlyn and Ali came up after midnight.

“No, you girls go have fun tonight. If you can stay awake” Tammye teased her daughter as they whispered.

“We can switch off” Ashlyn tried again. “We’ll stay down there for an hour and then you guys can have the last hour if you want. When was the last time you were up and blowing horns at midnight on New Year’s Eve?”

“A long time ago” Tammye chuckled. “And we’re not complaining. Now go on, don’t keep Ali waiting.”

It was a struggle. Ashlyn and Ali had been just as active as the kids had been for three days and they were exhausted and ready for bed by 10pm themselves. But it was New Year’s Eve and Ali knew it was still her girl’s favorite night and she was going to do everything humanly possible to stay awake for their midnight kiss. They danced for a little while and drank some coffee, giggling together about how tired they really were. Confessing it out loud made it easier to combat, together. As soon as one of them looked like they were starting to drag a bit, the other would pull them onto the dance floor where they tried to feed off the energy of the crowd all around them. Finally, in a last-ditch effort to stay awake at 11:47pm, they went outside onto the big wraparound porch that surrounded the beautiful, grand hotel. It was freezing cold and the icy air hit them square in the face as they stepped through the door and shivered.

“Holy shit! It’s freezing!” Ashlyn yelled as they walked arm-in-arm about twenty feet away from the door.

“I’m awake now” Ali giggled and then squealed as the cold pulled at her from all angles.

They were both wearing ski lodge attire but not any official outerwear. Ashlyn had jeans on with Doc Marten boots and a warm sweater over a collared shirt. Ali wore a soft and warm fleece zip up over a turtleneck. She could still pull off tights so she did, wearing insulated black ones with a comfy pair of Ugg boots. They huddled together and took off on their agreed upon lap around the entire wraparound porch, walking at first but then running by the time they had made it ¾ of the way around. They stumbled to a stop, hugging each other tightly and laughing as they tried to catch their breath, still freezing but no longer sleepy. Ashlyn tried to take a selfie but her hand was shaking from the cold and she had no faith in the quality of the picture. Their cheeks were pink
from the frigid air as they pressed them together in the pose, their eyes bright and smiles big and wide.

“Jesus, it’s cold out here!”

“I can’t take it anymore, let’s go back inside” Ashlyn moved them towards the door.

“There’s only a minute left babe, let’s stay out here for our kiss, just the two of us” Ali entreated, tugging on her wife’s arm. “Pleeeaaase?” she asked, sounding just like one of their daughters trying to get an extra piece of candy after her limit had been reached.

“Ok” Ashlyn relented. “But let’s go warm up for a minute and then come back out.”

They rushed inside and rubbed their arms and stamped their feet, trying to warm themselves up, laughing at each other the whole time. They started the countdown with the rest of the crowd, not making their move back outside until the very last few seconds.

“4, 3, 2, 1...” they shouted together as they embraced by the railing, back out in the cold midnight air again. “Happy New Year!!!”

Their lips were still freezing from their previous excursion, but they pressed them together in a slow kiss that deepened almost immediately. Ashlyn was very happy for the privacy the deserted wraparound porch afforded them, enjoying one of the most passionate New Year’s kisses with her wife ever. Ali held nothing back, kissing her keeper with all the love and devotion she felt for her, that night and every night of their life together. The familiar warmth that they always generated when their bodies were touching each other, spread over them, starting at their lips. They could hear all the other revelers blowing their party horns inside the big, beautiful ballroom as ‘Auld Lang Syne’ played but it sounded a world away right at that moment. For that moment there was only Ali and Ashlyn and their deep, abiding love that had gotten them through so many things in their twelve years together. Who knows how long they might have kept kissing out there on that porch that night, but a big gust of cold air hit them and felt as if it had come right down from the top of the mountain itself. It physically separated them and pushed them backwards a half step it was so strong.

“I love you so much Ashlyn” Ali breathed out as they regained their balance, still holding hands with icy fingers.

“Me too baby” Ashlyn gave her wife a dimpled grin and opened the door back into the hotel ballroom. “Happy New Year.”

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February brought a new challenge to the young Krieger family and it caught both Ali and Ashlyn by surprise, although it shouldn’t have. Starting in first grade, the elementary school that Drew and Josie attended held a mother-son dance and a father-daughter dance in January and February, respectively. Drew, big third-grader that he was, had just brought Ali to his third mother-son dance in January. The moms had agreed to alternate years and let Drew pick which mom joined him for the very first one two years earlier. Ali had gone first, then Ashlyn went last year, and now it was the brunette’s turn again. These dances were silly and cute and designed to be nothing but fun for everybody. The mothers loved it and the sons had a blast too because they got to hang out with their school friends at the same time. They did indeed dance together, most moms using the opportunity to teach their sons how to dance for the first time. They paid for pictures from the official photographer and struck cute poses. Everybody got dressed up. Mothers wore nice dresses. Sons wore their suits or at least their dressiest pants and sweaters over their adorable little neckties.
Some of them even wore bowties. Ashlyn had been pleased to see about a 60 to 40% ratio of neckties to bowties when she had attended last year. She had asked Drew last year if he wanted to wear matching outfits but he had declined. It wasn’t unusual for him to do his own thing though. He was getting older, 7 years old last year at the dance with the keeper, and figuring out how to be his own little human. Neither mom thought much about it until this year when Drew asked which mom was coming with him to his dance this year. When Ali happily exclaimed that it was her turn he had grinned and Ashlyn couldn’t help but see the look of relief on his face.

“Aw babe, I don’t think that’s what it was at all” Ali had tried to soothe Ashlyn’s hurt feelings later that night as they finally finished putting the last of the Christmas decorations away in the third-floor attic space. Everything had been taken down and put away into the totes, but the totes were still scattered around the house, mostly in the hallways. It was the third week of January and they were way behind schedule. “I didn’t see that at all in his face.”

“Of course you didn’t” Ashlyn tried to keep the hurt out of her voice as she stacked the clear storage totes with the labels on the end facing outward. She always wondered why you needed labels if the storage totes were clear. Wasn’t that the whole freaking point of clear storage totes? “All you saw was his ecstatic face when he found out it was your turn.”

“Ashlyn...” the brunette’s voice was soft and tender, knowing full well how much it hurt when one of the kids clearly chose one of their moms over the other for any activity or instance. “Hey, honey, come here” she tugged on her keeper’s arm to try and get her to turn around and face her but Ashlyn resisted.

“No, forget it, let’s just get this done” Ashlyn griped as she lifted another tote into place. “We’re late enough doing this as it is. Hand me the next one.”

Ali turned around to grab the next tote with a frown and they kept going until the chore was finally finished almost an hour later. They were quiet as they worked and the brunette used the time to try and think about what Ashlyn had said, and what she had seen in their son’s face that evening.

“Why do you think he was relieved it was my turn?” she tried again as she pulled the attic door closed behind her. Ashlyn was a few steps in front of her in the third-floor hallway. Instead of denying what her wife thought she had seen, Ali decided to give her the benefit of the doubt even though she had been looking at the exact same face and hadn’t seen it. “Do you know? I mean, do you have a theory?”

Ashlyn’s shoulders slumped and she let out a quiet sigh as she stopped at the doorway to Meg’s room. She flicked on the wall switch inside the door and the overhead light lit up the room as she sat down heavily on the couch that was still in place at the very front of the room, just as it had been when the room had been Ali’s office. The keeper slouched down and rubbed her face with both hands. Ali watched her from the doorway and felt her heart clench when she saw her wife’s watery eyes once she dropped her hands into her lap.

“Honey, what is it?” she asked as she sat next to Ashlyn, angling her body sideways to face her and resting a hand on her thigh and putting the other on her shoulder. “What am I not getting? Please tell me.”

“Al, don’t do that” the keeper shook her head and gave her wife a frustrated look.

“Do what?” Ali asked, still trying to soothe and understand in equal measure.

“Don’t treat me like a baby. Like I’m some fragile little thing that’ll break if you’re too rough with me.”
“Ashlyn” Ali quirked her eyebrow but it wasn’t one of her most severe, challenging quirks. It was more of a warning that she was only going to be patient for so long. “I’m not doing that. You’re upset and I want to understand why...”

“So you can fix it” Ashlyn snapped. “Because I can’t possibly fix it myself. Well, not everything can be fixed Ali. Not all the time.”

The anguished look on the blonde’s face made a shot of fear run through Ali’s whole body. This was more serious than just Ashlyn getting her feelings hurt because one of the kids hadn’t chosen her for something. In all honesty, Ashlyn was usually the first choice for most things in those situations. Ali had been right all those years ago when she looked into the future and saw what their lives would be like when they had children. Ashlyn was the fun mom and Ali was the mom who made the rules. That’s how the kids saw them more often than not and Ali wasn’t surprised by it. She didn’t love it and she had suffered plenty of hurt feelings as each child picked Ashlyn to do whatever fun activity had presented itself. Ashlyn was around the kids more because she picked them up from school most afternoons and had them for a few hours before Ali got home from work. There were reasons for all of it, the brunette knew. But both moms were going to keep getting their feelings hurt for a very long time to come. She cringed as she thought about how painful the kids’ teenage years were likely to be for both of them.

“No...” she began carefully. “You’re putting words in my mouth. I just want to know what’s going on. Why are you so upset, babe?” she shrugged off her irritation at Ashlyn’s curt reply and squeezed her thigh and her shoulder affectionately instead.

“He’s ashamed of me! Or embarrassed by me! Whatever, take your pick” the keeper shouted and then lowered her voice as she remembered Drew’s room was directly below them. “He doesn’t want me to go to the dance with him because I don’t wear dresses like the other moms. I don’t know how I missed it last year” she shook her head as the first tear slipped down her cheek. “He was miserable the whole time last year, do you remember?”

“Yeah, but he wasn’t feeling well” Ali scrunched up her face as she tried to recall the specifics. “You guys came home early because he was sick...” she nodded as she remembered. “His stomach was bothering him again.” Then when she thought about what the memory might mean, her eyes went wide. “Oh, God, you think he just made that up so you guys could leave the dance early?” Ali’s heart broke when she saw the pained look on her sweet wife’s face as more tears started to fall there. “Oh, Ashlyn. Oh, honey” she pulled her keeper into a hug, rubbing her back as she held her close.

They were quiet for a couple of minutes until Ashlyn sat back up again. She hadn’t had a big breakdown and Ali was surprised to see how quickly her wife had regained control of her emotions. The keeper wiped the tears off of her face with her fingers and took a deep breath.

“I’m going to bed” she announced and stood up slowly, as Ali held onto her hand, not letting her go.

“We’ll talk to him. He just doesn’t understand...”

“What’s to talk about?” Ashlyn shrugged as she looked down at her wife’s concerned face. “He feels what he feels. I’m not going to put him into situations that make him uncomfortable. I’m supposed to take care of him and protect him and be a place or a person he goes to when he needs to get away from those feelings. I’m supposed to make him feel safe and comfortable.”

“I’m not saying he has to take you to the dance next year” Ali tried to explain. “But we’ll talk to all of them about the things that make our family unique. Maybe we haven’t done enough of that or
maybe just not in a while...” she stood up, still holding Ashlyn’s hand. “Maybe one of his friends teased him about it or something like that. You know how shy he can be. Any extra attention, for any reason, makes him want to crawl into a hole...”

“I know Al, please, just let me go to bed. I’m tired and I just don’t feel like talking about this right now. Ok?” She squeezed Ali’s hand, still gripping her own. “We have a whole other year to figure it out before it’s my turn again anyway.”

They put off the talk when life got in the way at the end of January and Ali just went to the mother-son dance with Drew and the whole problem got put on the back burner. That was until early February when Josie came home with the notice about the father-daughter dance coming up in three weeks. Ashlyn read the notice three times as she emptied out the kids’ backpacks on the dining room table that afternoon. She was genuinely surprised at how unprepared she was for this topic to come back up again. How had they not seen this coming? How were they not prepared for this?

“Who do the other kids who don’t have dads bring to this thing then?” Ali asked, frustrated, as she dropped the notice back onto the dining room table later that night.

“I don’t know” Ashlyn shrugged as she sat in one of the dining room chairs, rubbing both of Persey’s ears as she sat on the floor next to her. “But Ethan brings his Nana to the mother-son dance every year...”

“Not this year” Ali interrupted her wife as she started to look over Drew’s homework that he had done, and Ashlyn had checked, that afternoon.

“Who’d he bring this year?” the keeper looked up at the brunette inquisitively, still rubbing the dog’s head with both hands.

“Didn’t I tell you?” Ali met her gaze and raised her eyebrows. The dance had only been a couple of weeks earlier but she had been hesitant to talk too much to Ashlyn about it because she didn’t want to bring up the sore subject. “He brought Lisa.”

“Wow” Ashlyn replied, eyes wide. “I guess that makes sense though” she returned her attention to the dog in her hands. “She and Sam are getting married this summer and Ethan really likes her.”

After Lisa and Sam had started dating in the summer of 2025 while Ethan and Sam were visiting Chicago, Lisa moved to Gloucester the following summer, in 2026. She bought her own condo and didn’t want to rush anything with either Sam or Ethan even though they ended up spending most of their time together anyway. This past summer Sam had proposed and Lisa had happily accepted and neither decision had been made lightly or without Ethan’s input. Sam had talked with his son about it for a long time, unwilling to put his own happiness ahead of his son’s peace of mind. Lisa had done the same thing – accepting Sam’s proposal conditionally, until she had talked to Ethan one-on-one to make sure he was ok with the idea. She had told him she wasn’t trying to be his mom because he had already had the very best one she had known. That small acknowledgment resonated with the 8-year old boy, even if he didn’t understand exactly why. The wedding was planned for the summer of this year, 2028, and the whole Machado family was excited for it.

“So, listen, I want to talk to you about something but there’s no obligation...or anything...I mean,” Lisa stumbled over her words as she stood in the noisy hallway with Ali outside the basketball court where Drew and Ethan’s team was warming up for their game. It was a Saturday morning in mid-January and the Krieger clan was there in force while Lisa and Sam were there to support Ethan. Ashlyn was still the assistant coach of the team and was on the court with the boys. “You don’t have to come if you don’t want to and we get it...”
“Lisa, what’s up?” Ali interrupted her nervous, rapid-fire delivery.

“The wedding invitations are going out next month and Ethan really wants Drew to be there and we’re not sure how you want to handle it...but Sam and I would both really like it if you and Ashlyn came too.” She finished in a rush and blinked awkwardly at the brunette. “All the kids, the whole family, I mean” she added quickly.

Things had been fine between the Kriegers and the Machados since the two families had mostly severed ties back at the beginning of 2026 when Ali and Ashlyn finally told their friends and family what had happened. The two families were civil and friendly but they no longer socialized with each other outside of the school and sports activities their sons shared. They didn’t avoid one another or anything like that, they just coexisted peacefully like any other parents with kids in the same class.

“Oh, ok” Ali smiled a little too eagerly. She didn’t know what to say or think. She didn’t even know what the wedding date was. “Ashlyn has the Olympics this summer but if there’s no conflict with the dates then I think that would be nice.”

“Right, they’re in Paris this time, right?”

“Yes” Ali nodded. “We’re taking the kids with us again...”

“Wow, that’ll be a great trip!” Lisa enthused sincerely. “Hopefuly the dates work with the wedding. I’ll make sure you guys get an invitation” she smiled.

The horn blew inside the gym signifying the end of warm-ups and both women were relieved.

“Better get back in there” Ali suggested and nodded towards the gym.

“Yeah, don’t want to miss the start of the game” Lisa agreed and started to move towards the door, stepping around small children who were leaving the gym at the same time.

“Thanks Lisa” Ali said, unsure exactly what she was thanking the woman for. “And congratulations.”

Back in the dining room of the big old house Ashlyn and Ali were both still thinking about what to do for Josie’s father-daughter dance in two weeks.

“So, do we ask my dad to take her?” Ali frowned. “Or your dad? Or how does it work?”

“I don’t think there are rules honey. None that I know of anyway.” Ashlyn paused, knowing how much the idea of no rules bothered her wife, just in general. “Maybe we should just ask her what she wants to do.”

“She’s 6” Ali rolled her eyes and sighed heavily. “Do you really think that’s going to help?”

Ashlyn was ready to call her wife on her snark but then saw Ali’s conflicted face and realized she hadn’t meant to sound snarky at all. She really wasn’t sure what to do and was afraid of disappointing their daughter.

“I don’t think it can hurt. She’s pretty good about telling us what she wants” the keeper chuckled and was relieved when Ali joined her.

“Very good point” the brunette nodded and finished putting Drew’s homework and school things back in his backpack for the next morning. “Ok then, let’s ask her and see what she says.”
The next night after getting the other kids tucked in, Ashlyn joined Ali in Josie’s room so they could talk to her again about the upcoming dance. When they had asked her about it at the breakfast table the little girl had been surprised. She told them that she thought she wouldn’t be going to the dance because she didn’t have a daddy. She wasn’t upset, which shocked both moms, she was just very matter-of-fact about it. Ali and Ashlyn had decided to give her some time to think about it before broaching the subject again.

“Sweetheart, of course you can still go to the dance” Ali explained again as she sat next to her daughter on the edge of her bed.

Ashlyn sat at the foot of the bed with her hand on her daughter’s little feet underneath the covers. They had been talking for a few minutes and told her about Ethan going to the mother-son dance with his grandmother as an example.

“Do you know who you want to take you to the dance?” the keeper asked with a warm smile.

“If you want to go to the dance” Ali reminded her. “You don’t have to go if you don’t want to. But you have to decide now so we can make plans. This isn’t the kind of thing you can change your mind about so if you’re not sure yet we can wait and talk about it tomorrow instead.”

“I wanna go” Josie nodded eagerly, smiling at the thought of getting dressed in a pretty dress and dancing. She quickly thought of her favorite person to dance with. “Can Mama take me?”

Ashlyn was surprised and touched by her answer and Ali was smiling at the goofy, shy look on her wife’s face. Neither woman said anything for a long minute and Josie got impatient.

“Can she?”

“I don’t know honey” Ali snapped out of it first, answering her daughter honestly. “We’ll check with the school and find out though, ok?”

“I really want Mama to take me cuz she’s the best dancer” Josie explained as Ali leaned down to kiss her goodnight.

“You’re absolutely right about that” the brunette said softly after the kiss. “You have sweet dreams now little one. I love you.”

Ashlyn moved into Ali’s spot as the brunette moved towards the bedroom door.

“Sleep well baby girl, I love you” the keeper smiled down at the little girl who had just made her feel like a million bucks. Josie choosing her like that took a lot of the sting out of Drew’s differing opinion when it had come to his mother-son dance in January. “And you’re my favorite dancer too, but don’t tell Mommy” she whispered, knowing her wife could still hear them. “That’s our secret ok?”

“Ok Mama” Josie yawned and rolled onto her side, snuggling into the bed. “But Mommy still sings the best.”

The grin on Ali’s face that greeted the keeper as she approached the bedroom door was enormous and cocky as hell.

“Backfired a little bit on you there didn’t it?” she teased quietly as they moved into the hall and closed the door behind them.

“Just, give me my moment” Ashlyn joked back. “Lord knows I don’t get that many, just let me
have this one. She picked me. I feel like I just got asked to the prom by the cutest girl in school” she gushed as Ali hugged her.

But they really weren’t sure what to do about the dance. Ali called the school the next day and was told that it was designed for fathers to have a special evening with their daughters but that other male family members had stepped in where necessary in the past. Ashlyn called Niki to find out what they had done with Penny but they hadn’t had to deal with it yet because Penny was a year younger than Josie.

“Well, what are you going to do then?” Ashlyn persisted. “Next year when you’re in this position?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’ll have one of our brothers take her. That seems like the best thing to do” Niki offered after thinking about it for a minute. “I think if I took her the other fathers might get uncomfortable. It’s also not really fair because I get to go to the mother-son dance and they can’t do that.”

“I didn’t think about the other dads” Ashlyn confessed. “Hmmm, and you’re right. I do get to take the boys to their dances. I still can’t believe we didn’t see this coming. We’re so dumb sometimes” she chuckled and let out a sigh.

“The school didn’t offer any guidance on this?”

“Not really. They just said that, in the past, other male relatives have done it for the other girls that didn’t have dads.”

“Yeah, so male relatives. That’s what they’re looking for” Niki concluded. “Whether or not that’s cool is a whole other thing. I mean, what’s the point of these dumb dances anyway? Do we really want our sons dating us or our daughters dating their fathers? The whole thing is creepy to me.”

“Well, yeah, no kidding” the keeper laughed into the phone. “But Josie loves this stuff. There’s no way she’s not going now. And I really don’t know if it’s cool or not, the male relatives thing” she added, thoughtfully. “She’s got two parents, so part of me thinks I should go with her. But, on the other hand, I get what they’re going for and I don’t really want to blow that up.” She sighed again. “Fuck this. Parenting is hard enough without having to deal with this bullshit” she complained.

Part of what made this decision so important for Ali and Ashlyn was that they would be setting the precedent for all of the father-daughter dances Josie and Lily would have for the whole of their elementary school experience. They didn’t want to mess it up.

“I don’t really care what anybody else thinks or does” Ali said as she released the handles of the rowing machine down in the gym half of the basement that evening. Ashlyn had the luxury of working from home more often than not and could squeeze in a workout whenever she felt like it. But Ali’s schedule meant she had to work out in the evenings if she wanted to stay in shape during the week. “I want to make sure we do what’s right for us.”

“Me too baby” Ashlyn agreed, admiring her beautiful wife’s form as she finished the last set of pulls for the night. “But I also don’t want to make school any tougher for the kids than it has to be.”

“And you think if you go to the father-daughter dance it’ll make it harder for Josie at school?” the brunette stood up and caught the towel her wife tossed to her.

“Yeah, I do. Look, things are better now than they’ve ever been for families with two moms or two
dads, but you know it’s still harder. You know there are kids who tease Drew because of it and they’ll start to tease Josie too in another year or so.”

Ali groaned as she finished wiping the sweat off of the rowing machine.

“Why do people suck so much? God I hate people sometimes” the brunette grumbled.

“I’m all for being loud and proud and I won’t hide who I am, not even for the kids because that’s the last thing I want to teach them” Ashlyn took a big breath. “But I think we really need to pick and choose our battles.”

“I know honey, and I completely agree” Ali smiled and walked over to give her wife a sweet kiss without touching her anywhere but her lips, trying not to get her sweat on her. “I don’t like it, but I agree. There shouldn’t be battles about this in the first fucking place. But I know you’re right.”

“Wow, say that again so I can record it” the keeper teased as she reached for her phone and giggled.

“Oh stop” Ali lightly swatted her chest and turned away, starting to walk towards the playroom and the stairs up to the first floor. “I’ve been thinking about this all day and it’s really up to you more than it is me. I’m not the one who has to go to the dance with all the other dads. I mean, we’ll decide together, but I get that your opinion here matters more.”

“Really?” Ashlyn didn’t mean to sound so surprised as she followed the brunette towards the foot of the stairs.

“Yes, really” Ali chuckled as she climbed the stairs, her wife still behind her. “And quit staring at my ass.”

“No can do, baby” the keeper reached up and patted her wife’s ass, loving the way it bounced right in front of her grinning face. “Not while there’s breath in my body.”

They sat the kids down the next evening after showers and before storytime to talk to them all about their unique family. They were all clean and in their jammies and piled on top of the big bed in the master bedroom. Ali and Ashlyn sat up against the headboard with their children sitting or lying on the bed, in different positions, facing them. The discussion had been had before, more than once, but the twins were certainly too young to understand it before now and Josie might have been too. It would be the reminder that they had intended to give Drew after his mother-son dance reaction the month before.

“So you guys all know that every family is different and they’re all unique and special for a whole bunch of different reasons, right?” Ashlyn began with their tried and true explanation. “Some families have a mommy and a daddy, some have two daddies, some have only one parent, some have two mommies...”

“Like us!” Lily perked up with a big smile on her face.

“That’s right Lily girl” the keeper grinned at the bright child.

“And some families have grandmas or grandpas living with them or step-brothers or step-mothers and some parents work during the day and some work at night” Ali added the next part to the familiar routine.

“And some work in offices...” Ashlyn picked it up but was interrupted by Josie’s clear, excited voice.
“Like Mommy!”

“Yep” Ashlyn nodded. “And some work from home, like me.”

“Every family is different and it doesn’t matter if there’s a mommy or a daddy or a step-mommy or a step-daddy or a grandma or a grandpa as long as they all love each other and help each other be good people” Ali took her turn.

“What about Ed and Cris?” Drew asked, tilting his head a bit.

“That’s a great point buddy” Ashlyn praised him. “Some families have kids that are adopted too.”

“Is Meg our step...step...” Lily stammered over the unfamiliar words.

“Step-sister?” Dodge finished his twin’s question.

“Dodge, you know better” Ali chastised the boy. “You let her finish, she can do it.”

“Yes, Meg is your step-sister but we always just call her your sister, don’t we?” Ashlyn kept going with another warm smile.

“Yeah, we do” Josie nodded while Drew added his own comment.

“Yep. Just our sister, even though she doesn’t live here all the time.”

“Well another part of what makes every family different is that every person is different. No two mommies are the same, right?” Ali moved on to the next portion of the talk. After all the kids nodded along with her she kept going. “No two big brothers are the same, no two uncles are the same...”

“Part of what makes people different is that they like different things. Like you all like your ice cream different ways and you all have favorite colors and tv shows and they’re all different” the keeper pulled Dodge into her lap before he could poke his big brother again and have to pay the price for it.

“Both Wee and me like Paw Patrol” Dodge corrected, trying to be helpful.

“Sure, sometimes we like the same things, but most of the time we like our own thing” Ali chuckled as she spoke. “Like clothes. Drew you wear shorts as soon as you can, as soon as we’ll let you once the weather starts to get warm. And Josie you love to wear sparkly shoes. And Lily your favorite thing to wear is t-shirts...”

“Only short-sleeves” Lily added as if either of her parents weren’t aware of the fact.

“Right” Ali winked at her. “And Dodge you don’t like to wear socks, even when it’s all snowy outside. The point is that you all wear what you feel comfortable in and that’s really important to Mama and me because we want you to be comfortable so you can be yourselves and just concentrate on your school work and on having fun and on growing up.”

“And Mommy and I are the same way. I like to wear some things and Mommy likes to wear different things, because we’re all our own people and we’re just being ourselves.”

“Mommy wears pretty dresses sometimes” Josie beamed at Ali who smiled back at her.

“I do” the brunette nodded. “And Mama likes to wear suits and ties instead.”
“I had a tie at Christmas!” Lily seemed to remember, all of a sudden.

“You sure did sweetpea” Ashlyn grinned at her little blonde girl who looked so pleased with herself. “We matched outfits at Christmas didn’t we?”

“Ah-huh” Lily crawled toward the keeper and got one of Dodge’s feet to her face for her troubles. Luckily it hadn’t been a hard kick. “Ow!”

They all held their breath, waiting for the girl to burst into tears like she so often did.

“Dodge!” Ali yelled, fixing her son with a harsh stare. “Do not kick your sister. What’s the matter with you?”

Ashlyn, who hadn’t seen the kick because his body had blocked her view, lifted him up and put him down by himself at the foot of the bed with her own rebuke.

“You sit down there until you can join the rest of us and be nice and keep your hands and feet to yourself young man.”

“What a dummy” Drew shook his head as he looked at his younger brother. He wasn’t critical of Dodge for kicking his sister as much as he was judging him for doing it right in front of both of their parents.


“Ok, listen” Ashlyn tried to keep it together as all four kids started to get restless. “We’re almost done. Just remember that everybody is allowed to be themselves and to like what they like and it’s ok to be different. We all have to be nice to and respect other people even if they like different things than we do, right.”

“That’s right Mama” Ali took over as the kids agreed with some more nods. “And if somebody at school or on your team or wherever starts to tease you because of what you like or what you’re wearing or even what you think, you just tune them right out. Don’t listen to them. Walk away if you want to.”

“Like my giraffe” Josie touched the birthmark on her neck and looked solemnly at Ali.

“Yes little one, just like that” the brunette smiled at her. “What do you do when someone teases you about your giraffe?”

“I don’t listen to them” she shook her head. “And I walk away and...and...and I tell the teacher or you.”

“Great job Jojo” Ashlyn reached her hand out for a high-five that was really only at hip-level because they weren’t sitting close enough for a true high-five. “I’m really proud of you.”

Josie beamed again, brightening at the compliment and flopping backwards against the bed.

“And if you hear somebody teasing somebody else you can tell them to be quiet or tell them to stop teasing” Ali tried to get to the end of their spiel before their impatient audience was entirely gone. Dodge was now crawling across the foot of the bed towards Josie in her new position while Drew and Lily started quietly tickling each other. “The most important thing to remember is that everybody’s allowed to be themselves and sometimes that means being different than everybody else. Ok?”
“So be nice to everybody, no matter what they like or what they’re wearing or if they have a birthmark or a scar or...”

“Or huge ears or a big zit on the end of their nose” Drew interrupted Ashlyn and made all the kids laugh together at his joke.

“Always remember how much it hurts when you get teased” the keeper continued as the kids started to laugh even louder. “You don’t like to be teased so make sure you don’t ever tease somebody else, no matter what. Got it?”

“We get it” Drew whined and rolled his eyes, giving both his moms an early look at what his teenage years might be like.

“Can we read the story now?” Lily asked sweetly as Ali and Ashlyn looked at each other and sighed.

It was so hard to tell if any of their words were getting through to the kids. Josie got it because she had learned the hard way about teasing. Drew got it but neither mom was convinced he was strong or confident enough to do much about it. But they had done what they set out to do. They had completed the talk again.

The next day they told Josie that Ashlyn couldn’t go to the dance with her because she was a mommy, not a daddy. The redhead had been upset until they told her that she could choose someone else from their family, like Grandpa or Koty or Dom or Ryan, all of whom had agreed to go to the dance. Not surprisingly, Josie picked Koty, her first real crush. They both had a lot of fun at the father-daughter dance at the end of February, with Koty treating his niece like the princess she believed she was. He was touched that she had chosen him and both Ali and Ashlyn knew that the young man was more than ready to be a dad. They also knew he’d make a pretty good one.

And Ali was able to talk with Drew about Ashlyn and her suits and the mother-son dance one night the next week. She was tucking him in after storytime and broached the subject while he was in a good mood and not too tired. She started by reminding him about the two dances they had attended together and then the one he had gone to with Ashlyn last year. His face changed as soon as the brunette mentioned last year’s dance. She saw the anxiety flash across it as he dropped his eyes and looked away.

“Honey, you can tell us anything. You know that” Ali rubbed his arm beneath the covers as she sat on his bed next to him. “We’re not going to be mad at you as long as you tell us the truth. We can’t help you if we don’t know what’s going on though, do you understand?”

“Yeah” he shrugged.

“Why didn’t you want Mama to go to your dance with you this year?”

The boy’s warring emotions were on full display as Ali watched his face change, and then change again. He chewed his bottom lip and rolled over onto his side, facing his mother and the edge of the bed.

“I don’t know” he shrugged.

“So, you didn’t want her to go to the dance with you?” the brunette tried to confirm, careful not to push too hard and to keep a warm smile on her face. “That’s true?”

“Yeah” he admitted quietly and started to get upset. His face scrunched up and his eyes started to get watery while his cheeks got pink.
“Sweetheart, it’s ok” she reassured her sensitive son. “You didn’t do anything wrong. You’re not in any trouble. Ok?”

“Yeah, ok” he nodded as a couple of tears fell down his cheek and into his pillow beneath his head.

“Why didn’t you want her to go with you?”

“I don’t know” he replied but didn’t fool her.

“I think you do know Drew and I’d like you to tell me. It’s ok. I just want you to be honest with me and tell me the truth” she moved her hand to his back and began rubbing comforting circles into it as they talked. She waited a full five minutes for him to answer but he didn’t. He just kept crying softly and chewing on his bottom lip. Finally Ali gave up and did the work for him. “Is it because she doesn’t wear dresses like the other moms?”

Drew’s eyes went wide and his mouth dropped open as he stared up at his Mommy, seemingly shocked that she had figured it out.

“Is that what it is honey?”

“Yeah” he nodded as he burst into tears and let Ali pull him into her lap.

“Shhh...it’s ok sweet boy. It’s ok. You don’t have to cry” she soothed and held him for a few minutes. “Why are you so upset honey?” she asked after his tears had slowed and she had given him a kleenex to blow his nose.

“I feel bad” he squeaked out as he moved back to his own pillow after Ali flipped it over for him.

“Why do you feel bad?” she wiped an errant tear from his cheek and cupped his chin. She knew why, but she wanted to hear him say it so she could tell Ashlyn she had actually heard the words.

“Cuz I don’t want her to feel bad” he shrugged.

“Is that why you left the dance early last year? Did you pretend that your stomach hurt so you could come home?”

He nodded and his face flooded with guilt and worry.

“Well, that wasn’t good” the brunette gave him a look. “You should have been honest with Mama. If she knew you were uncomfortable she wouldn’t have made you stay there...”

“But I couldn’t tell her” he objected. “It would make her sad.”

And there was the sucker punch that parenting always seemed to throw at her. She was trying not to be frustrated with her son, which was hard because his actions and attitude had hurt the woman she loved, and here he had come out with a piece to the puzzle that she hadn’t even considered. He hadn’t lied to Ashlyn to be a jerk, well, other than being embarrassed by her not looking like the other moms at the dance. He had lied to her to protect her feelings. Drew could be difficult sometimes and he could come across as a brat and seem selfish, but deep down he was a sensitive and thoughtful boy. He and Ashlyn had such a strong bond because they had spent more time together than all of the other kids. None of the kids had enjoyed the unique, one-on-one time with Ashlyn that Drew had. Ali had always been envious of the fun they had together. They always shared inside jokes and teased each other and were very close to one another. This mother-son dance thing was the only time Ali could think of when Ashlyn and Drew hadn’t enjoyed whatever time or activity they shared. She thought her son was being short-sighted and narrow-minded about
it, but he wasn’t even 9 years old yet. He was just a kid struggling to understand why his mother dressed more like the fathers. And even if he did understand it, after their discussion about respecting people’s differences, that didn’t mean he was going to handle it well when he was right in the middle of it with all of his schoolmates around him and probably teasing him about it.

“Oh honey, I’m really proud of you for thinking of her feelings like that” she smiled warmly at her son as she ran her hand through his hair and caressed his cheek again. “But you should have told me about it then when you got home. We’re always going to be here to help you figure this stuff out. It’s not easy to know what you’re feeling sometimes when you’re a kid. Even a big kid like you” she nodded at him. “So talk to us and we’ll help you, ok?”

“Ok.”

They spent another ten minutes talking about Ashlyn’s right to wear what she wanted to wear and what she felt comfortable in, just as Drew had that same right, within reason. Ali explained to him about how hard it is to be different sometimes, especially when you’re a kid, even a big kid. She reiterated that it didn’t matter what anybody else thought about Ashlyn’s suit that night, but she knew Drew was always going to struggle with any extra attention thrown his way, for whatever reason. That was going to be his burden as he grew up and hopefully out of caring so much about fitting in.

“It’s hard to be different but if you’re brave enough to do it I promise you, you’ll never regret it. It’s the best feeling in the world to stand up and be who you are, no matter what anybody else thinks or says. It’s definitely not easy, but someday, when you’re older and strong enough to do it, you’ll understand” she gave him another loving smile as he yawned sweetly. “And when that happens I want you to tell me all about it, ok?”

“Ok Mommy” he smiled back at her and snuggled into his pillow, sleep close at hand.

“And next year, when it’s Mama’s turn to go to the dance with you again, we’ll talk about this some more and decide what we want to do, the three of us. No more making up stomachaches. Just honesty. And we’ll figure it out together.” She leaned over and kissed his forehead as she stood up. “Goodnight my sweet boy. I love you.”
Intervention

Chapter Notes

In another weird coincidence, the news stations up here in Boston have been re-airing footage of the coverage from the Blizzard of ’78 for the past two days. Feb 6 & 7 were the two worst days of the storm back then and this year is the 40th anniversary. That freaked me out a little bit, not gonna lie.

February vacation gave everybody a nice little break in the warmth of the Florida sun. Meg joined them after what felt like way too long since her last visit in the month of February. She hadn’t made the trip South with them last year so it was really only one year without a Meg February visit, but it somehow felt much much longer. The teen had decided to stay in DC and keep her mom company last year – another sign of the rapid maturation of Margaret Ann Doucette. This year Hannah didn’t need to be kept company. Her divorce from Dev Karmacharya had been finalized the week before February vacation and the newly-single redhead was celebrating with some friends and trying to start over. She had flat out told her daughter to go to Florida and have some fun in the sun with the Kriegers. The divorce had taken a couple of months to work through after Dev’s father had issued his edict in November. The elder Karmacharya instructed his son to make the problem go away as quietly as possible. He still had tremendous control and authority of the company he founded almost 60 years earlier and he wasn’t about to let his son’s marital problems tarnish the company.

Dev, being the arrogant dick that he was, assumed that Hannah would just revert back to the demands in her initial divorce suit. For a worldly businessman he proved to be remarkably provincial and naïve when it came to his wife. He had underestimated almost everything about Hannah and paid for it dearly. In a last-ditch attempt to talk some sense into her, Dev called her in January after not returning any of her calls since their Christmas night disaster 13 months earlier. Hannah’s lawyer had anticipated the move and had urged her client not to accept the call or talk to the man she had been happily married to for almost 7 years. They had him over a barrel and there was no need to waste time talking with the bigot.

“Dev, you know you’re not supposed to call me. But I’m not surprised you think you still have any influence over me after all this time apart. It was never your ego that was small” Hannah sniped, her voice calm and steady despite the myriad of emotions that were welling up inside her. “Darling, don’t be like that” he tried, but was unable to hide the disdain from his voice.

“Don’t call me darling, you bastard. We could have handled this like adults and had it all finished a year ago but no, you had to be a prick about everything” she spat out hotly, annoyed by the petname he used to use all the time.

“Don’t use that language. You know I don’t like it when...”

“Newsflash Dev” she interrupted, anger rising in her throat and bleeding into her words. “I don’t give a fuck what you like anymore. I changed a lot of things about myself for you and became the wife you wanted me to be and that’s my fault. That part’s on me. You made me believe you were someone else, a good man with a good heart. I should have known better” she paused and tried to regain control, surprised by how hurt and angry she still was. She really thought she had processed
all of her feelings over the past year, but somehow hearing his voice again brought everything right back to the surface. “You tricked me Dev” her voice was softer now. “You fooled me for 7 years before you got lazy...or maybe you just stopped caring what I thought and keeping up your sham got to be too much work for your lazy ass...”

“Hannah, I wanted to talk to you to see if you would finally see reason...” he interrupted.

“Finally see reason? Are you fucking kidding me? You expect me to be reasonable? After all of this?!” her voice was strident and incredulous and she yelled into her phone despite trying very hard not to lose her cool. “You made my life a living hell for 13 fucking months for no reason other than you fucking felt like it. Like it was a game to you. Like Meg and I weren’t even worthy of common courtesy. You don’t have any idea what you put us through. And then, as if that wasn’t cruel enough, you drag Ashlyn and Candace into it? That was it” she huffed, no longer caring about maintaining her composure. “When you did that, I told my lawyer to do whatever it takes to hurt you as much as possible. And she did it. And I couldn’t be happier about it because you deserve it, you fucking asshole. You deserve every bit of pain and suffering and embarrassment you get after this and I hope you fucking choke on your goddamned chicken Karahi curry!!” she screamed and took another big breath. “The world is changing, you antiquated, prejudiced prick, and your narrow view is not what the rest of the world wants anymore. Even if I sign your confidentiality agreement the rest of your clients are going to figure you out sooner rather than later Dev. Before too long it’ll be just you and the hundred other bigoted assholes huddled together against the rest of the fucking world because nobody wants anything to do with you or your bullshit opinions. So I’m getting out now and I’m taking as much of your precious money as I can because you’re not gonna be making a lot of it for very much longer. And I know nothing is more important to you than your money Dev...” her voice had changed to a steely, low, snarl. “And I can’t wait to spend it with all my lesbian, black, jewish, gay, latino fantastic brothers and sisters. And every time we go out we’re going to drink a toast to you, you disgusting little cocksucker. And I...can’t...fucking...wait!” she punctuated each word with a brief, fire-breathing pause as she finished her venomous diatribe.

When she went to hit the ‘end call’ button she saw that it had already been cut off and she wondered when she had lost him. She was pretty sure it was at cocksucker. She had thrown that in there just for Dev because, in his mind, there was nothing worse than being a gay man. She found it ironic that his favorite sexual activity had been for her to suck his cock. She wondered if he even realized what a hypocrite he was. But then, after about 30 seconds, she honestly didn’t give a fuck anymore. Hannah had needed to release all of that anger and was grateful that the dumbass had called her because she would have had to find a way to be satisfied with a strongly worded letter otherwise. And that phone call had been so much more satisfying. As soon as Dev understood that his soon-to-be ex-wife wasn’t going to be nice and accommodating about things anymore, he instructed his lawyer to just get the settlement done. It took another month but by February vacation week Hannah Doucette was a very wealthy woman. She had gotten half of everything Dev had earned during their 7 years of marriage, taking exquisite pleasure in the knowledge that him dicking her around for the past 13 months had only increased her payday.

When it was all said and done, Hannah was a multi-millionaire but not the kind that never had to think about money ever again. She was wealthy enough that she wouldn’t have to hold down a job again as long as she invested her money wisely and made it work for her. The trick for Hannah, who had loved and worshipped money all her life but had an extremely limited understanding of how it really worked, would be to find somebody she could trust to manage her fortune for her. The first thing she did was write Ashlyn a check for all the expenses she had covered for Meg during the past 13 months. The keeper had objected at first but Hannah had insisted. The next thing she did was buy a nice, but still fairly modest, house down in DC for she and Meg to enjoy. Hannah’s plan was to start her own event-planning company and take all of her best clients with her from her
current job. She hoped to have it up and running before the busy wedding season that summer. Her specialty had always leaned towards the corporate side of events but she wanted to expand and get into the events that had more heart and soul to them as well. Everyone up in Massachusetts was eager to find out if the new, enlightened Hannah would endure and thrive or if the old Hannah would come back and be selfish and petty again. At the end of the day, all Ashlyn and Ali cared about was that Meg was happy and relieved. All the rest was just background noise.

February vacation began for the Kriegers on Saturday the 12th and ended the following Sunday the 20th. It was the first time they had been back to Florida since the Thanksgiving disaster and the weight of that night still hung heavy around all of the adults in the extended family. The kids also seemed to have finally figured out that something was up with Uncle Chris.

“Mommy, why is Unky Chris not here again today?” Josie asked Ali Monday afternoon as they sat under the big beach umbrella making another intricate sand castle with Meg. It was just the three of them again, as it had been two years before during April vacation after Meg’s runaway punishment. Josie was on her knees, bent over the castle and digging new sand from the moat in front of her. Meg sat spread-eagled across from her, long arms easily reaching everything she needed both inside and outside the moat. And Ali sat with one leg bent underneath her and the other stretched out so her foot was only an inch away from Meg’s. Ashlyn, Beth, Deb, Tammye, Carol and Mike Harris were all down by the water with the other five Krieger and Harris kids. Johnny, Drew and Lizzy were boogie boarding with Ashlyn and Mike Harris, with Deb standing waist deep in the water cheering them on. Dodge and Lily were just getting used to the boogie board with Beth, Tammye and Carol in the knee-deep water. The twins would be turning 5 in three months and finally reaching the age rule for starting the scarier sports, like boogie boarding and skateboarding. Ali didn’t have the heart to keep them off the boogie boards this vacation. They didn’t really do anything other than lay on them and splash around as they learned to paddle and get the feel of the board under their bellies. They still wore their puddle jumpers, the life jacket and floaties combo that also wrapped around the kid’s body, for God’s sake. They weren’t going anywhere for a while but it still made Ali nervous.

“Well, remember, he’s sick” Ali explained as a pang of anger and fear stabbed at her heart.

“But he should be better by now?” she said, sounding more like a question than anything.

Josie kept working on the sand castle, taking her inspiration from Merida’s castle in Brave which still held her imagination. Meg, who would turn 16 in a few weeks, was quietly working but watching both Ali and Josie’s faces.

“Sometimes it takes a long time to get better from some illnesses” Ali tried to explain as vaguely but honestly as possible. “Sometimes it takes years. But I promise, as soon as he’s better he’ll be back to play with us.”

“Is he gonna come to Disney with us tomorrow?” the 6-1/2 year old redhead tried again, optimistically.

“No love, not this time” the brunette replied tenderly, touched by how much her kids loved and missed their big, boisterous uncle.

“You know what I can’t wait to do tomorrow?” Meg chimed in, hoping to help shake Josie off the trail she seemed intent on following to no good end.

“What?” Josie sat up and fixed her big sister with a curious and excited gaze that made Ali chuckle.
“I want to find Merida and get her to take a picture with the both of us, so I can have my two favorite redheads in the same picture with me” Meg’s eyebrows were up and her face was full of excitement and love.

“Yeah!!” Josie shouted, even more excited at the idea. “Mommy, can we? Can we pleeeeeease?” she turned and leaned on her mother’s bent leg with both hands as she moved up and into the brunette’s face.

“I think that’s a fantastic idea!” Ali grinned at the little girl and kissed her on the tip of her nose. “We’ll have to see if she’s there tomorrow, and what times, so we make sure not to miss her...”

“I already checked” Meg jumped in. “She’ll be in the Fairytale Garden in Fantasyland tomorrow with her little brothers and Angus.”

“Angus too?!” Josie’s little body practically levitated with excitement.

“Yep. So we’ll get your mom to sign us up and pick a time...”

“Is it in the Magic Kingdom?” Josie interrupted, her brain working hard to figure out just how this was going to work. The young Kriegers still spent most of their time in the Magic Kingdom but Drew and Josie, especially, had branched out into the other parks and she was just learning one from the other.

“Yep” Meg chuckled.

Ali reached over with her big toe and poked Meg’s foot to get her attention. As soon as the teenager met her eyes she mouthed ‘thank you’ and gave her a heartfelt smile.

“Mommy, did we go there before? Fairytale Garden?”

“We did” Ali nodded. “Merida wasn’t there but you got to practice shooting her bow and arrows, remember?”

“Oh yeah!” Josie’s face lit up in recognition. “That was hard” she frowned at the memory and began talking animatedly about times in the movie when Merida expertly shot things with her bow and arrows.

Meg and Ali just listened and nodded and agreed, occasionally adding their own favorite parts from the movie.

“Do you know what the very first thing Meg and I ever talked about was?” Ali asked her daughter after there had been a slight pause in the Merida conversation.

Both Meg and Josie looked up at the brunette with adorable curious expressions.

“Ummm, pizza?” Josie guessed, remembering that pizza was Meg’s favorite food when she was a little girl.

“Oooh, good guess” Meg grinned. “I used to love pizza, even way back then, or so I’ve been told.”

“It was the first time we ever met and I was babysitting you at Ashlyn and Whitney’s apartment...”

“How old was I?”

“It was the summer of 2015 so...” Ali did the math in her head. “3-1/2 years old” she finished with a grin. “You were absolutely adorable. Ash had this bean bag chair and you kept running into it,
full speed, and just smashing your little body right into it.”

“Ooooh I want a bean bag chair, can we get one Mommy?”

“Sounds like the brains didn’t kick in until I was older, huh?” Meg chuckled.

“No, you were always smart and cute and sweet” Ali cocked her head as she looked at the teenager in front of her and tried to juxtapose the view with the memory of the little redhead that had stolen Ashlyn’s heart so easily. “And the first thing we ever talked about was...” she paused dramatically and looked from one redhead to the other a few times.

“Mommy! What was it?” Josie asked, incapable of waiting any longer.

“Merida and Angus” Ali replied with a nose-crinkling grin.

“No way” Meg laughed and smiled back. “Really?”

“Really” the brunette nodded, still grinning. “Your jammies had a picture of Merida and Angus right on the front of them and I told you how much I loved ‘Brave’. And you tried to tell me that her horse’s name was Angus but I couldn’t understand what you were saying so you sat up and turned around, you were sitting in my lap in the bean bag because I was going to read you a book” she explained. “And you pointed to your jammies, right at Angus and said his name again until I got it.”

“Fred was Angus at Halloween” Josie shared, looking right at Meg.

“Wow, I’ll bet he made a great Angus to go along with your pretty Merida costume” the teen gave Josie the attention she wanted. “I don’t remember that” she turned back to Ali’s smiling face. “But I remember staying at the house, maybe the first time?” she shrugged, unsure of where the memory actually came from. “And you brought over all of your Disney movies and asked me to take care of them for you that week. I thought that was the coolest thing in the world. That’s, like, my first memory of you.”

“Aw, you’re gonna make me cry” Ali was surprised by how emotional the conversation was making her. “That was a year later, you were 4-1/2 when you and your mom came up to visit.”

“You let me take home ‘Lady and the Tramp’” Meg blinked, fighting some emotions of her own.

“It was your favorite that visit. Ash told me you watched it every single day.”

“That’s what mom told me too” Meg chuckled and poked Ali’s foot with her own again, and they both smiled.

Josie had been listening carefully to the conversation, even though she didn’t understand what exactly they were talking about anymore. But she had heard ‘Lady and the Tramp’ loud and clear.

“We saw Lady and Tramp at Disney!” she offered enthusiastically.

“You did? Both of them? Where were they?” Meg asked, genuinely curious because she hadn’t found anything much to do with the movie when she had researched it online.

“Ummm...” Josie looked up at Ali for help.

“The Italian restaurant from the movie is there, ‘Tony’s’ I think it’s called, right inside the Magic Kingdom entrance” she recalled fairly easily and then thought harder. Lily had wanted to see the
dogs, Lady and Tramp, so Ashlyn had done the research before their trip last year. “And there are
two big statues of them outside one of the resorts...I think it’s the one down by Wide World of
Sports...” she squinted as she wracked her brain. “Ash might remember better. We’ll ask her, ok
little one?”

“Yep. I’ll ask her” she jumped up and took off at a run towards the water, shouting out the question
well before anybody near the ocean had a chance to even hear her.

Both Meg and Ali laughed as they watched her little body make great time as it travelled across the
sand.

“God, she’s so big now” Meg groaned as she smiled.

“Tell me about it” Ali agreed with her own heavy sigh, eyes fixed on her own mother turning
around and making her way out of the ocean towards Josie. The brunette looked at Meg and
smiled, still feeling all the memories they had just shared. “It’s like you blink and all of a sudden
she’s 16.”

By Thursday the relaxation of vacation week at the beach had done wonders to relieve the stress in
even the tensest members of the extended Harris clan. Even Ashlyn had managed to calm down
the fear and worry and anger that boiled so close to the surface when she was that close to her
brother and his situation. It had been a great week so far, with only Lily’s chronic swimmer’s ear
and Dodge’s foot injury dampening it. The little dude had been racing around the beach like a
madman, as usual, and he had stepped on a rock or a shell which normally wouldn’t have done too
much damage. But he had been in mid-pivot so he stepped on it, put all his body weight on it, and
then pivoted on it so it ripped a gash in the sole of his foot about the size of a quarter. That was a
pretty big gash for a 4-1/2 year old foot. But the good news for both kids who weren’t able to
spend as much time on the beach and in the water was that Meg was hanging out on the deck a lot
and skipping most of the water fun that vacation. She never said why, but Deb figured it out and
explained it to Ali and Ashlyn, again.

“Well look at her” Deb began her explanation on Monday night after 2-1/2 days of Meg hanging
out under the umbrella or on the deck, wearing shorts and a t-shirt or tank top the whole time.
“She’s grown up now isn’t she? And she’s not sure what to do with her body so she’s self-
conscious about it and she’s decided to just not deal with it this week.”

Meg, three weeks shy of 16, had gone through puberty and come out the other side of it with a
grown-up woman’s body. She looked a lot like her mother, in many ways. She was 5’10” tall with
big boobs, not quite as big as Hannah’s but twice as big as Ashlyn’s were. She was tall and skinny
and gangly. She had grown up but hadn’t quite filled out yet, except for her C-cup breasts. Ashlyn
knew that Hannah had told her daughter everything she would need to know about her changing
body but it was obvious the teenager was still getting used to it. They decided to leave her alone
about it that week in an effort to not make her more self-conscious than she already was. Maybe on
the last day, when there were no more days to make awkward if things went badly, the keeper
would talk to Meg and try to allay some of her fears or worries about her new body. Maybe. In the
meantime, both Dodge and Lily were happy to have their big sister spend time with them playing
board games and doing puzzles and playing silly, made-up games on the deck.

Thursday was also the first time there had been a sighting of Chris. Mike had heard from one of
Chris’ friends that the big man was going to a party on the beach Friday night and the elder Harris
sprang into action as quickly as he could. He had a plan to try and save his son and he had been
praying that Chris would surface sometime that week while Ashlyn was in town too. The fact that
he had was all the proof any of them needed about how out of touch with reality he was. A somewhat sober Chris Harris would have avoided Satellite Beach and Melbourne Beach like the plague, knowing Ashlyn was in town. This Chris, this drunk shell of the Chris they all knew and loved, was oblivious. Mike made the phone calls he needed to make to call in reinforcements and set up the intervention his son so desperately needed. He went to the beach house and talked with his family members there in shifts so half of them were still out on the beach with the kids, keeping them out of the conversation and safe from the ugliness that was about to descend on them all.

“I can’t believe Kyle and Koty and your dad are all coming down” Ashlyn spoke softly as she and Ali sat together on the couch in the big living room that looked out through the wall of glass and out past the deck to the ocean. It was late Thursday night and they thought everybody else was in bed. “I mean, that’s just...I don’t even know what to say” she stammered a little.

They were sitting side by side and Ali had her right leg draped over Ashlyn’s left, both bent at the knee. They held hands with the keeper using both of her hands and holding Ali’s right hand in her lap, idly running her fingers over the brunette’s forearm as they talked. They were slouched down so the back of their heads were resting comfortably against the back of the couch and they were wishing it wasn’t dark out so they could see past the deck. They had already turned off all the lights in the house so they could see past the glass but it was still impossible to see any farther.

“Your dad and Chris, well, normal Chris, would do the same thing babe. You know they would.”

“And Mike’s driving up from Miami...God, I hope this works. I...I...don’t know what else to do if this doesn’t work” she started to get choked up as she thought about the possibility of really losing her brother, forever.

“It’ll be ok Ash, you’ll see” Ali tried to soothe her anxious wife as best she could. “It’ll be awful and hard but it’ll be ok. We’ll all tell him how much we love him and need him and then, hopefully, he’ll hear us this time.”

The whole family was afraid of the physical damage that could happen, again. The Thanksgiving night mess taught them all that this oblivious Chris was dangerous to them as well as himself. Ali’s broken finger, fully healed by now, ached as she remembered how terrified she had been that night. And Ashlyn swore her throat was sore for the same reason. She could practically taste the razor blades her brother had put there three months earlier every time she swallowed that night in the living room.

“I wanna come too” a voice came from the darkness behind them and they both jumped a mile from the fright.

“Jesus!”

“Holy Shit!”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you” Meg stepped closer and came around the end of the couch to stand next to Ashlyn’s knees as the couple sank back into the couch to catch their breath. “I came up to find my phone charger...”

“It’s ok Meggie” Ashlyn took her hand and pulled her down next to her on the couch, smiling softly at the UNC t-shirt she was using for her pajama top. “We didn’t think anybody was still up.”

“Can I?” Meg asked again, unwilling to let her initial request go unanswered. “Go with you to the intervention tomorrow night?”

“I don’t know Meg” Ali spoke now, voice low and full of concern as she studied her wife’s face in
Ashlyn felt the brunette’s stare and squeezed her hand reassuringly. She turned to look at Ali, faces only a foot apart but still hard to see, and felt the new worry coming from the brunette. She squeezed her hand again and ran her thumb across the back of it as she turned towards Meg.

“How much do you know?” the keeper asked and after Meg told them that she knew Chris had fallen off the wagon last year sometime and that something really bad had happened at Thanksgiving and that Beth had kicked him out until he got sober again, she nodded thoughtfully.

“What do you know what an intervention is?”

“Of course I do. But, I’ve never been to one before” the teen admitted.

“Anything can happen Meg” Ashlyn tried to warn and prepare her without frightening her too much. “You just never know how things are going to go. They’re scary and ugly and people say horrible things to each other sometimes.” The keeper paused again and felt Ali rest her head on her shoulder and wrap her free hand around her bicep. “Why do you want to go?” Ashlyn asked Meg, not sure what sort of answer she was going to get.

“I want to tell him how much I love him. And how much I miss him. And how much his kids miss him. And...and how much I need him” her voice was soft but stronger than any of them thought it would be, including the teenager herself.

It occurred to Ashlyn how much Chris had meant to Meg over the past decade or so. In some ways, he was the closest thing to a father she had ever had. Dev had never really counted. He had provided for her financially but never in any other way. But Chris had been there for her a number of times, and not just at the holidays and vacations they had shared over the years. He and Meg had been texting each other for years in what had started as a shared love of basketball, of all things. Ashlyn knew about it but didn’t really know how close they had become. She knew that Chris was sometimes the only person who could get a smile out of Meg when she had been going through her moody, puberty years. The more she thought about it, the more she started to understand that Chris had been the one person that Meg could go to for a big loving hug no matter what she had done wrong or what kind of trouble she was in. Chris was like Gram had been for Ashlyn, although not nearly as close or intimate. But if they had lived nearer, Ashlyn was sure that Chris would have been that person for Meg.

“I’ll call your mom in the morning and talk to her” the keeper finally replied, her voice tired and flat. “Don’t do anything until I talk to her. Just let me handle it.”

By the time Friday evening rolled around, the whole Harris world was vibrating with nervous anticipation. Tammye was so upset she had to go lie down for a while after dinner. Beth was so anxious she had to eat a bunch of peanut butter toast to keep herself from throwing up. They all seemed to know that this was their last, best chance to save Chris and it terrified them. They tried to keep the evening routine as normal as possible for the six kids who had no idea what was planned for later that night. After they were all put to bed, Beth and Tammye left and went to Beth and Chris’ house in Satellite Beach to get ready for the guests they were expecting. Kyle, Koty, Ken and Mike Christopher had already been hanging out there for a few hours after arriving at different times that afternoon and evening. The big conundrum had been determining who would stay at the beach house with the kids. Carol and Deb had volunteered, not because they didn’t want to be at the intervention, but mostly because they knew everybody else in the family needed to be there more. Deb tried to get her husband to stay with her but he insisted that he needed to confront Chris about Thanksgiving, taking the cue from years ago when they had staged Koty’s intervention. Ken had insisted that everybody that his step-son had injured during his drugged and intoxicated
outburst the night before be there to show and tell the young man how he had hurt them.

When Mike Harris finally got the phone call that Chris had arrived at the party, he put the plan in motion. It took some finagling and some brute strength, but Mike and three of Chris’ friends managed to get the big, angry man into a car and over to his own house in Satellite Beach where almost everybody who loved him was waiting for him. The only way it had worked was because one of Chris’ friends was a cop and he smartly kept his uniform on, even though he was off-duty that night. The sight of law enforcement made Chris stay calmer than he otherwise might have been.

The big living room space was filled with people and Chris sat, still wearing the handcuffs from his cop friend, with his hands behind his back at the far end of the room. Kyle sat on one side of him and one of Chris’ other good friends, who was also a good-sized guy, sat on the other side of him. Every big, strong person in the room was ready to do whatever was necessary to stop Chris from leaving the house that night and the next day if that’s what it took. Mike had taken control while they were waiting for the phone call and told everybody what had happened at Thanksgiving, in general, and warned them that they could probably expect more of the same. He told them all that he understood if they wanted or needed to bail on the intervention, but nobody moved a muscle. There were probably 30 people crammed into the house and some of them stood behind the circle of seated friends and family to make room. Chris sat there, motionless, refusing to look anywhere but the floor in front of him. The good news was that he wasn’t completely shitfaced yet. He had apparently been saving himself for the party and was only a little bit drunk as he sat there in the living room that used to be his Grandparents’.

Mike and Tammye and one of Chris’ friends fed him coffee and Gatorade and water to try and get him all the way sober. He was a huge guy, although he did look thinner and less healthy than anyone had seen in years. It took a lot of liquids and a trip to the bathroom with two friends tagging along to make sure he didn’t do something stupid like try to climb out of the window and make his escape, but after an hour or so they got him sober enough to start the intervention. Just before they started, at 11pm, Ashlyn walked in through the front door with Meg, whose presence drew a few gasps of surprise. But it was the person on the keeper’s other arm who garnered the most attention and surprised whispers. Jenna, Malcolm’s widow, walked in looking furious and sat down with Meg and Ashlyn directly across from Chris. The ten or so people from Beth and Chris’ AA group didn’t know who Jenna was and Beth quickly whispered a brief explanation while everybody else got settled again. Chris’ whole demeanor changed as soon as he saw Meg and Jenna and both Mike and the keeper knew they had a fighting chance of a successful intervention.

They started going around the room, one at a time, and talking to Chris – telling him how his recent behavior had hurt each one of them in some way or another. It took a long time because he had hurt a lot of people this time. At first, he was stone-faced after recovering from seeing the late arrivals, but slowly, one by one, the people in the room started to chip away at his hard exterior. He kept his eyes down for most of it and his hands were still handcuffed behind his back. Nobody wanted a repeat of Thanksgiving. Some of the statements were angry diatribes aimed at knocking some sense into Chris while others were a bit softer. This wasn’t the time to tell him how much they all loved him – that part came at the end. This was the time to shake him until he realized what a mess he had made and was ready to confront the situation honestly.

“I’m so mad at you Chris and I don’t know how I’m ever going to forgive you” Ali began when it was her turn. Her voice was shaking with anger but she kept going as Tammye held her hand from the seat next to her. “You’re so selfish. You’ve made my kids wonder why you’re not around anymore. They ask me where you are and when you’re going to come home. They tell me how much they love you and miss you and I have to bite my tongue to keep from telling them not to waste their time or energy on you.” The brunette took a deep breath and continued, knowing if she
stopped she’d never be able to get started again. “You’ve made my wife’s life a living hell for the past 7 months and you don’t even care.” She talked about how hard it was to live as the sister of an addict and all the times Chris had shown such complete disregard for his sister’s own well-being in those long months. “She was so worried about you when she finally saw you at Malcolm’s funeral that she had a panic attack and missed the whole funeral service. He was her friend too and, because of you, she couldn’t even be present at his funeral. You did that to her Chris. To your own sister.” The brunette paused as a murmur went through the room as people, some of whom were complete strangers to Ashlyn, learned about private details of the keeper’s life and well-being.

“And, finally, I want you to know” she fixed him with a steely glare, “that I would have scratched both your eyes out that night to save her from you. I would have done whatever it took to keep you from hurting her. And the thought of that makes me sick to my stomach. You did that Chris. To both of us.”

Tammye squeezed her daughter-in-law’s hand again as Ali wept quietly. Chris was crying too, for the first time. Everyone knew that the family statements were the hardest for the addict to hear and accept and that’s why they usually went last. The tears continued as he listened to the rest of his family talk about how he had caused them pain and suffering and misery. It was a brutal barrage of disappointment and anger hurled at him for the next half hour as Tammye, Mike Harris and Beth all spoke. Chris was a balling mess by the time his wife had finished. Her words had been even angrier than Ali’s had been.

“I love you so much Bubba, but I fucking hate your guts right now” Ashlyn’s voice was full of barely controlled fury as she spoke to her brother from across the circle. Meg held her hand on one side while Jenna did the same on the other. “Every single word I said to you Thanksgiving night is still true and I can’t believe we’re sitting here in Gram’s house looking at the mess you’ve made of everything. Except now, you’re three months worse and more embarrassing and more disgusting. You were so weak that night that my words turned you into a raging bull. You were weak where it matters most, in your heart and in your mind. Not in your big, stupid body. Any idiot can make their body big and strong, that’s nothing to be proud of if you can’t control it with your weak-ass mind and heart. That raging bull hurt people I love very much that night and I honestly don’t know if I’m going to be able to forgive you for that.” She was quiet for a minute, trying her best to control her breathing so she could finish. She had to say the one thing that terrified her the most out of the whole 7 months her brother had been drinking. She took a deep breath and let it out, almost as if she was getting ready for a deep dive under water. She took another one and then spoke, her voice sounding strangled and foreign as it left her throat. “You almost killed me Chris” she stopped and looked up as angry tears started to gather in the corners of both eyes. “You...almost...killed...me...” she gasped out each word as she cried, never letting her eyes leave her brother’s distraught face. “And I don’t know what to do with that” she added a minute later after taking another deep breath and steadying herself. “I don’t know how to live with knowing that my own brother tried to choke the life out of me.”

The room was silent except for Chris who was blubbering and saying he was sorry, over and over again. He kept it up until he heard the last voice that would speak in this part of the intervention. Jenna, his best friend Malcolm’s widow, spoke slowly and evenly, disdain dripping from her voice.

“How dare you? How dare you take your life and throw it away like this” she shook her head slowly as she continued. “Malcolm would have done anything to have just one more day with our daughter, just one more fucking day...and here you are pissing yours away. I can’t even stand to look at you Chris. And Malcolm? Oh, he’s rolling over in his grave right now knowing that you’ve been using his illness and his death as your pitiful excuse. You’re upset because your best friend died? Well guess what? So are a lot of us. But do you see us giving up on our lives? Do you see us giving up on our wives and our kids? Your fucking kids Chris?! Malcolm would have done anything to be able to spend another Christmas with Sierra. You know how hard he tried to hang on
for that. He was so worried about dying too near the holidays because he didn’t want to ruin them for his daughter. The man willed himself to live long enough so he didn’t die too close to her birthday in October. And you? You have a loving wife who I honestly can’t believe hasn’t left your ass yet. And you have two incredible kids who still think their dad is a rock star. And what did you do for Christmas? You fucking drank yourself stupid instead of spending it with them. I don’t even know who you are right now. But I’ll tell you one thing I know for a fact. If he were still alive, Malcolm would be disgusted with you. He wouldn’t want to be anywhere near you the way you are right now. And I’ll tell you what...” she paused to make sure he was paying attention and hadn’t tuned out all of her painful words. “You’re not allowed to even say his name until you get your shit together again, do you understand me?” she leaned forward in her chair, challenging the big blubbering man from twenty feet away. “Don’t you ever talk about him again. You’re not worthy of saying his name.”

As gruesome as some of it had been, the first part of the intervention had been a success. The goal was to break the addict down and help him understand that his bad actions had consequences and to help him own those consequences. If the addict could admit that he had hurt people and admit that he needed help, then the intervention could go on to the next phase. It wasn’t until this point that Mike let Chris’ cop friend take the handcuffs off of him. He wasn’t going to risk his son hurting anybody else that night, no matter how cruel it seemed to have Chris sitting there crying his eyes out with his hands still cuffed behind his back.

Not everybody in the room had spoken during the first part because not everybody had been hurt by Chris. There were people in the room who were there to show him support and tell him they loved him during the second phase. People like Ken, Mike Christopher, Kyle and Koty all spoke to him and told him they loved him and encouraged him to get help and come back to them. Koty held up his iPad and played a video message Tanner had made that afternoon and sent to him, talking directly to Chris and telling him how much he remembered the help he had given to Koty that Christmas at the big old house. The AA members all encouraged him and tried to remind him that he could beat the demon back again, just as they had done and just as he had done so successfully before. The rest of the family took turns reminding him how much they loved him and how much they wanted him to get better and get sober again. Beth’s plea was the hardest for anybody to hear and Ali was amazed that she had been able to hold it together long enough to get the whole thing out. She talked about their wedding and the oaths they had sworn to each other. She reminded him that Ashlyn had promised her in her best woman toast that he would always take good care of her because he had always taken such good care of his sister. She showed him two blown-up pictures of their kids, just to remind him why the fight was so fucking important. Beth put both of the 5 x 7 prints that Mike had asked Ashlyn to make for her into her husband’s shaking hands. She told him how much they all still loved him and then begged him to go to rehab and get clean and sober again.

There were only two people who hadn’t spoken during the second phase, Jenna and Meg. The widow didn’t want to talk yet. She was still too angry with Chris and she told him that. But she also added, honestly, that she hoped her anger would subside once he got sober and she could tell him how much she loved him then. And, more importantly, her daughter Sierra would have her father’s best friend back in her life again. Ashlyn whispered in Meg’s ear, reminding her that she didn’t have to say anything if she didn’t want to. There was no right or wrong thing to say and Chris knew she loved him just by her being there. The teenager nodded and gave the keeper a small, nervous smile before turning to look at the big mess of a man across from her.

“I love you Uncle Chris, and I miss you and I really need you to get sober and be a part of my life again” Meg spoke clearly, her girlish, teen voice as serious as the broken man had ever heard it. “And the little kids, they ask about you every day. They’re not here tonight but I know they want the same thing I do. I know they’d ask you to get help and get sober and come be Unky Chris
again” she used the cute word the young Kriegers did when talking about any of their uncles. “I never had a dad” she looked down at her lap for a minute as she kept talking, “but over the years, when I’ve thought about what my dad would be like, you know, my dream dad if I could make him up myself” she lifted her eyes until they met Chris’ bleary ones. “He’s always been you” she shrugged and looked, for a minute, like she was 8 years old again. “Please get better. Please.”
Forgiveness & the Flu

The month of March was full of awesome birthdays. Maddox Dwyer turned 4, Penny Cross turned 6, Becca Flanagan turned 3 and Tammye Lanier turned 65. Meg turned 16, got her learner’s permit down in DC and started to practice driving with Hannah, giving both Hannah and Ashlyn lots of worry in the process. Carol had thought about throwing her wife a big party to celebrate her milestone birthday but decided against it. The Harris clan was not in the celebrating mood just yet. Chris had finally seen the light at the end of the intervention, agreeing to go right into Rehab again. Beth, Tammye, and Mike drove him to the Twin Rivers Treatment Center right in Melbourne in the wee hours of the morning and got him checked in. He was a repeat customer and the intake specialist noted that in his file. All three of his escorts had spent time in the very same treatment center themselves. They all knew what he was about to go through and none of them envied him. Detox was the worst and if Chris was as bad as they thought he was, it would take longer than the usual 5 to 7 days. The facility worked on both an Inpatient and Outpatient basis, depending on the program you signed up for. Most insurance plans paid for the 30-day program and nothing more, but if you could afford it you could opt for the 60-day or even 90-day program to help you get sober and stay sober. Chris knew the drill and nobody thought he needed more than 60 days of temptation-free stability and counseling. The whole family was committed to his recovery and made themselves available for weekly family counseling and therapy as well. They met every Friday afternoon as one big family and let the therapist guide them through the steps and exercises and discussions they would need to learn how to trust each other again. After 30 days he was allowed to have Johnny and Lizzy come and visit him on the weekends, as long as the visits didn’t upset either the kids or Chris. Beth brought them in and they all tried to figure out how to be a family again.

While Chris was fighting to regain his life and family, the world kept turning. The second week of March signaled the start of another NWSL season and the Breakers training camp got underway. The other thing that got underway in a big way that week was the flu. It tore through the elementary school in Gloucester and both Drew and Josie got it at the same time. The twins, luckily, were at the separate preschool and avoided the nasty virus. Ali and Ashlyn kept the sick kids as far apart from the twins as possible as they cared for them. Once Ashlyn succumbed to the flu as well, on day two, Ali put Drew, Josie and Ashlyn up in their big bed and left them there to suffer together. The three sickos had all the usual symptoms: sore throat, stuffed up nose, fever, fatigue, and body aches and Ali did her best to take care of them in addition to the two healthy twins and dogs. It was a long week. Ashlyn was sicker than she had been in years. Her immune system still wasn’t as good as her wife’s but it had improved over the years after being exposed to so many germs from the kids. But this time was a doozy. Josie and Drew had come home from school as scheduled on Friday and gotten sick at different times on Saturday. By Monday Ashlyn was down for the count, shivering from fever with her stuffed-up nose and a body that felt like she had just played a very violent 90 plus minute soccer match against the combined thugs of all the NWSL teams. She wished her only pain was from McCall Zerboni purposefully stepping on her back with her cleat. By Wednesday Drew was feeling much better and Josie was getting there too, but the keeper was still really sick. It was the trickiest day of all because Ali had to decide whether to leave the kids in bed with Ashlyn and risk them, especially Drew, keeping her awake because they were feeling a bit better and starting to get bored. Or, did she set them up downstairs for the afternoon and then put them in their own beds that night, risking Dodge and Lily getting infected.

She pondered her decision as she stood inside the master bedroom near the backstairs and watched her three patients. Ashlyn was in her usual spot, the side of the bed closest to the backstairs door,
with her shoulders, neck and head propped up on two pillows to keep her elevated and help her breathe. If she lay any flatter her head got painfully stuffy and her sinuses felt like they were going to explode. She had been trying to sleep propped up like that for two nights at that point and not succeeding very well. Her nose was raw and red and her lips were pale and chapped. The beautiful hazel eyes that Ali loved so much were dim and dull and looked itchy and red. Drew was in Ali’s spot on the side of the bed near the fireplace. He had his pillows from his own bed under him and at least 6 of his stuffed animals surrounding him as he sat almost upright. He was still pale but his eyes were more alert than they had been since Saturday afternoon. He had been the first to get sick so it made sense that he would be the one closest to good health again. His symptoms were mostly gone except that he still got a stuffy nose at night. He was in the phase where your body had almost won the battle with the virus but was weak and hungry and tired from the fight. His appetite had started to come back that very morning and Ali knew he had made good progress when he asked for a grilled cheese sandwich for lunch. Josie was in the middle of the queen-sized bed, between her brother and her Mama and that’s where she was health-wise too. She was sitting up like her brother but she was still breathing through her mouth and was sweating through a mild fever. She also had her own pillows and stuffed animals as well as her favorite ‘Brave’ blanket clutched under one little arm. Josie hadn’t gotten sick until almost dinnertime on Saturday and she always took longer to fight off the colds and flu viruses that attacked her.

Both kids were watching the tv on the low dresser down near the foot of the bed while Ashlyn slept. All three of them looked like zombies in different states of repose. It was just before noon and Ali had come up to find out what her patients wanted for lunch. She had already had a busy morning getting the twins off to preschool, handling a disgruntled new client at work via phone and cleaning up the breakfast mess. After lunch she would start decontaminating Drew’s bedroom so he could sleep in his own bed that night, making the decision after taking his temperature and rejoicing in the fact that for the second time that day it had been just below 99 degrees. His grilled cheese request had solidified the decision for her. She had already decontaminated Josie’s bedroom and been sleeping in the twin bed in there herself since Monday.

“Mommy?” Josie’s scratchy little voice croaked out from the middle of the big bed.

“Yes little one” Ali smiled, despite how sad and sick her baby girl looked.

Josie seemed extra small and fragile in between Ashlyn and Drew. The brunette moved to the other side of the bed by Drew to avoid disturbing the keeper if at all possible.

“My froat hurts,” her small chapped lips and thick tongue tried to pronounce the words as best she could.

“I know sweetheart” Ali sat down next to Drew’s feet and reached over to pat her daughter’s leg. “Just keep sucking on the throat pop...where is it?” she quickly scanned the area around the sick girl, looking for the cough drop that some genius miracle worker had made on a stick for little kids so they didn’t swallow and choke on them.

“I lost it” Josie replied as her bottom lip started to quiver.

“It’s ok Jose, don’t cry, it’s ok baby...” Ali cooed as she got on her hands and knees and crawled up towards the girl, feeling around the stuffed animals and blanket for the throat pop that she had just given her 5 minutes earlier. “Found it” she smiled, holding it up for the redhead to see.

Josie’s face registered a small smile, which her mom knew was the biggest one she could muster, as she reached for the throat pop. The cough drop pop was covered with white fur from the pretty kitty cat stuffed animal near the girl’s hip.
“Let me rinse it off for you first” Ali cupped Josie’s warm, pink cheek and backed off the foot of the bed.

When she came back three minutes later, cleaned throat pop in her hand, Josie was fast asleep. Ali grabbed one of the little plastic bowls they used for the kids snacks that was sitting on the dressing table waiting to go downstairs and be washed, and rinsed it out quickly knowing that goldfish crackers had been the last thing in it. She put the throat pop in it with the stick up and left it on her daughter’s stomach for when she woke up with the sore throat that would hurt even more than it did right now. She pressed a kiss into Drew’s forehead, glad to find it not sweaty or hot anymore, and crawled back off the bed.

“I’ll bring your grilled cheese up in fifteen minutes, ok sweet boy?”

Drew nodded in reply and blinked up at his mother before asking in a quiet, tired voice.

“Can you...”

“Don’t worry, I’ll cut the crusts off for you” Ali cut him off, knowing exactly what he wanted her to do.

He was almost 9 years old and they were trying to teach him to deal with the crusts on the bread he ate because his moms weren’t always going to be there to cut them off for him. But when one of the kids was sick, both Ali and Ashlyn babied them and gave them almost anything they wanted – as long as it would help them feel better and not hinder their recovery. Drew gave Ali a big, grateful smile and the brunette swore she was looking down at her 9-month old baby boy again. She gently ruffled the thick, dark hair on the top of his head and kissed his forehead again.

“I’ll be back up soon. Do you want apple juice or ginger ale?”

Two evenings later, Friday, Ali sat on her side of the bed as she got ready to sleep in her own bed for the first time since Sunday. She was exhausted and she knew Josie probably wasn’t going to sleep all the way through her first night back in her own princess bed, which meant that the brunette would be up with her too. She sighed quietly, trying not to wake her wife who was finally starting to feel better but was still wiped out and sleeping a lot. Ali had just gotten the keeper back into bed after making her sit in the glider chair while she did her best to decontaminate the master bedroom and bathroom before they both went to sleep. Ashlyn had tried to get up and help her change the bed but Ali made her sit back down before she fell down. The keeper was now in the feeling better but pale and exhausted phase of the recovery. She had closed her beautiful hazel eyes and nodded off almost as soon as Ali helped her back into the clean sheets and then went into the bathroom to get ready for bed.

“You’re amazing” Ashlyn rasped out from her side of the bed, her dry mouth and parched lips still not working that well.

“You should be sleeping, babe” Ali looked over her shoulder at her pale keeper who had the tiniest smile on her tired face.

“So should you” Ashlyn coughed and cleared her throat, wincing a bit at the pain coming from the still sore and underused area. “You’ve been a machine all week...I’m sorry honey.”

“I’m just glad the kids are feeling better” the brunette groaned as she swung her legs up and into the crisp, cool sheets, finally settling herself into bed with a heavy sigh. “Ahh, nice fresh sheets” she smiled to herself as she snuggled down into her pillow and pulled the covers up. She reached up and turned off her light before rolling over onto her right side and facing her wife who was flat
on her back, still propped up on one extra pillow.

“Drew’s all better, right?” Ashlyn coughed again, covering her mouth with her elbow in an effort to keep her germs to herself. “And Jojo’s almost better?”

“Honey, just go to sleep” Ali trailed the back of her fingers down the side of her keeper’s cheek and smiled when she felt her wife nuzzle into them.

“Just tell me, then I can go to sleep. I need to know how everybody is...”

“Ok, ok” Ali giggled as she covered Ashlyn’s mouth with her hand, stopping her from talking anymore. “Drew is all better. He’s had two fever free days...”

“Ooooh boy does that sound good” Ashlyn tried to laugh a little and ended up coughing instead.

“Easy does it there All-star” Ali chuckled and moved her hand to Ashlyn’s shoulder while the keeper coughed and took a drink of water from the bottle on her nightstand. “No relapses on my watch.”

“Yeah, ok” Ashlyn nodded and covered Ali’s hand with her own after finishing with her drink. She patted it a couple of times and then left it there, happy to feel her beautiful brunette close to her again after so much time sleeping apart. “Keep going.”

“And Josie’s almost all better. No fever today but her throat’s still really sore and her cough is still waking her up. I don’t think she’ll make it all the way through the night, but we’ll see.”

“What day is it?”

“It’s Friday” Ali chuckled again.

She was happy as hell to even be having a coherent conversation with the blonde. And she was thrilled to be back in her own bed again. Even when Ashlyn was sick she still wanted to be near her. She never slept well when her keeper wasn’t by her side and she was having a hard time not cozying right up to her and snuggling in like she usually would if they were both healthy.

“Oh shit...” Ashlyn coughed again as her eyes opened wider in recognition. “Basketball...”

“Relax babe” the brunette soothed, rubbing her thumb back and forth on her shoulder, her hand still underneath Ashlyn’s. “I talked to Gary and he’s all set for tomorrow” she started, referring to the head coach for Drew and Ethan’s basketball team. Ashlyn was still the assistant coach. “Drew’s not playing, but he can go and get his trophy and be there for the team picture after the game if he wants.”

“Does he want to?”

“Right now, yes. But we’ll see how he feels tomorrow morning. Dad will take him if he feels up to it. He just has to be there for the end of the game...”

“What about Margot? I should call her” Ashlyn interrupted, mind already racing to her assistant coach for Josie’s basketball team.

“We’ve been emailing all afternoon, you’re cc’d on them when you can see well enough to look at your phone...” she paused when Ashlyn turned her head to look for her phone on her nightstand and didn’t see it. “Which is not now” Ali pressed on her wife’s shoulder to get her attention back. “Margot’s ready to coach Josie’s team tomorrow morning. Don’t worry about it...”
“But I have the trophies...what about the goody bags?” the keeper’s voice went up as she started to panic about her team not having the things they expected to receive at the final game of the season.

“Ashlyn, calm down” the brunette’s voice was serious and firm. “It’s taken care of. Margot’s going to pick up the trophies and goody bags tomorrow morning on her way to the game, and before you ask, yes, I did the goody bags.”

Somehow, somewhere, some genius had decided to put together fun little goody bags to give to their young athletes at the end of the last game of the season. They weren’t anything crazy but they were still something that had to be planned, purchased and put together. A couple of fun pieces of candy and a silly toy or two did the trick. It was expected now and it had been on Ashlyn’s list of things to do during the week. The trophies were already in the garage, ready to go, because the youth athletic committee bought those and distributed them to all the head coaches after the second to last game of the season.

“But, how?”

“Help, babe, lots of help” Ali sighed again and then yawned. “You’re not going anywhere tomorrow and neither is Josie so just go to sleep now love, so I can too” she struggled to keep her eyes open as her whole body started to shut down.

Ashlyn turned her head and watched her favorite face start to go slack as sleep crept closer and closer.

“I really want to kiss you but I won’t” Ashlyn said softly as she squeezed Ali’s hand, still on her shoulder. “That’s how much I love you.”

By the end of March Chris had made it through the first 30 days of rehab. Ashlyn flew down for two of the Friday family sessions in March, coming right back home late the same night after the first one, so she could be there to coach Josie’s basketball team Saturday morning. She went to the very first one on March 3rd and then went back three weeks later for another one, after basketball season had ended. That visit she stayed for the weekend and had a solo session with just Chris and the therapist on Sunday morning as well. The big man made good progress and was a model patient, finally. He had been shattered the night of the intervention and he had never felt worse about himself in his entire life.

He and Beth worked hard to keep their marriage together and Chris made more promises about attending AA meetings and being more mindful of his recovery process in everything he did once he got out of rehab. He went through the 12 steps, again, and swore to adhere to the underlying concepts of facing his flaws, owning them, improving himself and sharing that improved self with his loved-ones openly and freely and honestly. The 9th step was always the hardest and this time was no exception. He had a long list of people, some of whom he loved more than life itself, to make amends to. He worked his way down his list as best he could while he was still an inpatient. Once he moved back home at the end of April he expanded his endeavors and apologized in person to as many friends, strangers and family as he could.

The most painful amends came in solo therapy sessions with Chris, the therapist and one other family member. He started with Beth, easily the most important person in his life as well as the person he had done the most harm to during his time off the wagon. They also started working with a couples counselor who specialized in addiction and Chris promised to continue going to counseling with Beth even after his 60-day inpatient stay was finished. They had work to do, but both Beth and Chris still loved each other and wanted to keep their family together and make their marriage work. Chris admitted that his biggest fear, as he had sobered up and started to get his mind back after the horrible detox, had been that Beth wouldn’t want him anymore. That fear
paralyzed him at first but he told her that he knew she still loved him when she brought the kids to see him for the first time. He reasoned that Beth knew how much Johnny and Lizzy meant to him and how helpful they would be for him in his recovery and that if she hadn’t still loved him she wouldn’t have put them or herself through the awkwardness of trying to explain why Daddy still couldn’t come home yet.

The big man had been brought to tears during that first visit when 8-year old Lizzy presented him with a hand-made birthday card. He had completely missed his own birthday at the beginning of February, drinking himself into a stupor without even realizing what day it was. The little girl had given her father a big hug and a kiss and wished him happy birthday. She even apologized for not seeing him on his special day. That just about killed Chris, dead, right on the spot. But he had done a lot of thinking and personal accounting of his own during his first 30 days in rehab. After he had thanked his daughter for her card he reached behind him and grabbed the one he had made for her 8th birthday which he had missed back at the end of January. That was when Beth knew that her real husband was still in there and that he was worth fighting for.

Johnny was 10-1/2 and he was angry with his father, just as Chris had been angry with his own father at Johnny’s age. Chris told him that he understood and that he didn’t blame him one bit for being mad at him. He had a long talk with his kids about his own childhood, much as Ashlyn had talked with Edgar and Cristina the summer before and even before that time. The fact that she had left her own family behind to fly down and attend those meetings spoke volumes about her commitment to her brother and Chris told her how appreciative he was both times she made the trip. But her solo session, two days after the second family session at the end of March, was something entirely different. There were no other family members to focus on or hide behind. It was just Chris, Ashlyn and the therapist.

“Bash...” Chris began but stopped short as if someone had slapped him across the face.

They were sitting in a small meeting room, Chris on the couch with the family counselor off to his left in an armchair. Ashlyn sat across the coffee table from her brother in her own soft, deep chair.
She felt small as she sank back into the comfort and safety of the comfy chair. When Chris abruptly stopped talking after saying just one word, the nickname he had always used for her since they were little kids, Ashlyn looked up and saw the fear in his deep brown eyes. The therapist and the keeper both waited for a long minute, watching Chris as he clearly struggled with some emotions that had just hit him hard.

“Can I still call you that?” he asked in a shallow, thin voice. He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and clasped his hands together, as if he was praying. “I know I don’t deserve to use it anymore. I don’t blame you if you tell me to fuck off and never talk to you again, so don’t feel bad about saying no.”

Ashlyn swallowed hard, surprised by the question. She hadn’t heard him use that name in months. So many months she couldn’t even remember the last time. Chris and Gram were the two people, her two favorite people in the whole world when she was growing up, who called her Bash or Bashy. Since Gram died, Mike had started to use it and Ashlyn didn’t even think he knew he was doing it. It just sort of happened organically, like Gram had passed the right on to him or something. The keeper suddenly missed her Grandmother more than she ever thought possible. The Harris family had never gone through an intervention or recovery without her and Ashlyn thought that was why this one was so fucking hard. Well, that and the fact that her big brother had nearly killed her. That was definitely different too.

“Ashlyn?” the therapist prompted when the silence had stretched on for a couple of minutes.

“Ummm, yeah” she nodded slowly, looking at her brother. “It’s nice to hear you say it again” she swallowed again, wondering why her mouth was so fucking dry. “It’s been a while.”

The look of relief that washed over his face made his sister’s heart clench. He did still care. He did still love her. Even if he had a hard time telling her, which he might, Ashlyn knew the truth just from the way he reacted right there. He leaned back into the couch, exhaled a huge breath and covered his face with both hands to hide the tears that had started to leak from his eyes.

“Oh fuck Bash” he moaned as he scrubbed his face.

Ashlyn couldn’t help but notice that the deep scratches Ali had left outside each eye had disappeared. His nose had healed as well and he looked like himself again, just a little thinner. The only lingering physical ailment from his 7-month relapse was his right knee which he had never gotten properly taken care of. He walked with a noticeable limp now and wasn’t going to even think about getting it looked at until after he was fully recovered from the addiction that had caused the injury in the first place. He said he liked the physical reminder of what an asshole he had been. Every time his knee hurt, which was with every single step, it was proof that the past 7 months weren’t just a nightmare he had made up in his head. The pain was the evidence of the damage he had done, not only to his physical self, but to all those who loved him.

“God fucking dammit I fucked up so bad this time” he shook his head as he dropped his big hands into his lap. ‘I don’t even know where to start, not with you” he shook his head some more and met his sister’s wary eyes. “I heard every word you said to me that night... Thanksgiving night” he paused and took a hesitant breath. “You were so right, about all of it. Every single word you said was absolutely true and it got to me. You got through to me. You were the only one” his voice was a whisper by the time he finished and he had to take a drink of water before he could continue. “You know me better than anyone, even Beth sometimes, especially about this shit...what we went through when we were kids” he idly picked at his water bottle for a few seconds before putting it back on the coffee table in front of him. “And you fucking pissed me off. You made me so mad” his face twisted into sadness and regret as he talked about the ugliness of Thanksgiving night.
“And I snapped. I just lost it. I don’t have any excuse and I can’t believe I did that...any of that.” Tears had started to slowly slide down his face again but he kept on going, his voice forced and strained as his throat tried to close up on him. “It wasn’t me Bash...it wasn’t me, not the real me, not the me I am again now. I don’t know how else to describe it, that other fucking idiot, he...he just took over and went crazy.” The tears fell steadily but he made no move to wipe them away. His forearms were resting on his thighs with his palms up, almost in supplication, without his even realizing it. “I tried to stop. It was like I was watching the whole thing from up above and I was screaming at him to stop, to let you go, to stop hurting you. But he didn’t listen or he didn’t hear me, I don’t know” he shook his head and closed his eyes for a few seconds, tilting his head back and trying to take some good breaths into his lungs. “Fuck. It was like watching a horror movie and not being able to look away or turn it off. And I’m so fucking sorry Ashlyn” he leaned forward again, bringing his hands together and interlocking his thick fingers. He stared honestly into his sister’s pained hazel eyes. “I can’t even begin to tell you how sorry I am. But I know I need to, and I want to, and I’ll keep telling you for the rest of my life. I know I failed you and I failed Gram and...” his throat finally cut off his voice as he thought about the two people who had always been the most important in his life.

The three of them had forged an unbreakable bond when Gram and Gramps had taken their son’s two young children in to live with them. The bond only intensified after Gramps died and it blazed brightly and constantly right up until Gram finally left them too. It had changed after that. Both Chris and Ashlyn had their own wives and would soon have their own families and it was only natural for their bond to adjust accordingly. But it was always there. It would always be there and they both knew it. That bond was why Ashlyn was the first to suspect that something was going wrong with her brother. That bond was why Chris had lost his mind on Thanksgiving night when his sister told him the truth about his miserable self. And that bond was what would eventually lead them back to each other, over time, again too. But it wasn’t going to happen overnight and they both knew it. Chris had gone way too far this time. Both Tammye and Mike had talked about it with him in their solo sessions – how concerned they were about the relationship between their children. Chris knew he was at the bottom of an enormous mountain with no means to get back to the top. All he was hoping for that day in their solo session was to get permission from his sister to start the climb. That was all he could ask for, and even that seemed like way too much.

“I love you so much Bash and I know I don’t deserve you. I’ve always known that” he dropped his eyes quickly but then forced himself to lift them up again. “But I promise you I’m going to do everything I can to become worthy of your...whatever you can find a way to give me. I don’t know if you’ll ever be able to love me again” he shrugged sadly. “Maybe we’ll never get there. Man that would suck so bad” he closed his eyes again and winced as the idea hit him like a mack truck. “But I would never blame you sis” he met her gaze again. “I fucked up and I have to live with it for the rest of my life. But I swear to God...I swear to Gram...I’ll be a better man Bash. I’m not sure how exactly I’m going to do that yet, but I’m not just going to sit on my ass and wait for the people I hurt to forgive me” he shook his head and set his jaw and took a deep breath. “I’m going to do something good for people, not just the people I love. I’m going to start volunteering like Gram did, and make a difference in other people’s lives” his words started to come faster as his excitement shone through the misery of knowing he may have lost his sister forever. “After I start being the best dad I can be – that comes first, that will always come first. I already talked to Beth and the kids about it...” he didn’t know how much Ashlyn even cared anymore so he didn’t want to go on and on about how encouraged he was by his recent reconciliation with Beth and the kids. “You have absolutely no reason to believe me, but I swear...I’m going to be better. I’m going to make you proud that I’m your brother, Bash. I promise.”

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Ashlyn hadn’t said very much in that solo session but by the end of it Chris had received the
permission he so desperately sought. The keeper knew she still loved him and that she always would, but she was so angry with him for so many things that she wasn’t sure when, or if, she would be able to forgive him. Ashlyn had been working with Mattie ever since they had returned home from Thanksgiving and had been making good progress. She knew Chris couldn’t help her find a way to forgive him. That had to come from her and no-one else. He had made his amends, at least his direct amends, and she believed him and knew he was being honest and sincere. He had also promised to make living amends and that was going to be what most of the family paid attention to. In the past, Chris had gotten sober and stayed sober but never really dedicated himself to AA or ‘the program’ or making any big life changes other than not drinking. This time he had promised to do all of those things and had sounded very convincing. He had been completely sincere when he swore his oath to Ashlyn that day in her solo session. The family hoped for the best but prepared for more disappointment. It was a difficult time for all of the Harrises but they rallied together and did their best to take care of each other while they hoped for the best with Chris. The biggest change had been with Johnny and Lizzy. Once they started visiting their dad on the weekends they both blossomed and became mostly happy kids again. Johnny had his moments, sometimes whole days, where he was angry with his father and began to doubt that things would ever be good again for their family. But those moments, and days, lessened over time as Chris continued to show improvement in his second month of inpatient rehab. Every time Beth brought the kids in for a family counseling session they all made progress and both she and Chris became hopeful that they could in fact heal their family and make it good again.

As April came and went and Chris got closer to the end of his 60-day rehab stay, his repair work had really started to hold up. Beth and the kids were happy to have him move home the last week of April and, as nervous as the big man was, he was thrilled beyond words to have been given a second chance with his young family. He had also made great strides with both of his parents and was looking forward to getting out of rehab so he could continue to make amends. One of the first trips he had planned was a drive to Miami to talk with Deb and Mike Christopher and try to find a way to apologize for hurting a man who had been nothing but kind and friendly to him over the past 11 years. Chris knew that Deb would be hard on him and he wouldn’t blame her a bit. If he were in her position he would be hard on anybody who hurt his daughter and her husband or wife the way Chris had hurt Ali and Ashlyn that night.

Ali had been one of the toughest amends for him to make and he knew that there was a very real possibility that he would never be able to repair his relationship with the brunette. The last family session was the Friday before April vacation and Ashlyn and Ali flew down to Florida with all four kids to stay at the beach house for the week. They had taken the kids out of school for the day to attend the family session but knew it was important enough to do so. Meg flew down Friday too, but could only stay for the first weekend before heading back to DC for a basketball camp. Ashlyn, Ali and Meg attended the final family session and it was, overall, a pretty celebratory meeting. Chris had definitely made a ton of progress and seemed to be a new man. A better version of the man they had all known and loved before his latest fall from grace. Ali and Ashlyn went back to the facility two days later by themselves for their own session with just Chris and it hadn’t gone well at all. Ashlyn had made strides towards forgiving her brother and, coming up on the end of the 60-day mark, she knew she would be able to forgive him – just maybe not right away. But not the brunette. Ali could barely contain her anger when the therapist finally urged her to say anything at all. Ashlyn cringed as she listened to her wife rip her brother to shreds for attacking the keeper. Everybody in the extended family knew that Ali’s protective side was nothing to play with. If you messed with her kids or her wife or her family then you were in for a rash of shit. And this time was certainly no exception. Chris had attacked Ali’s wife, her beloved keeper, and as she had confessed to Kyle after Thanksgiving, she wasn’t sure she would ever forgive him.

“Well, you can’t blame her” Whitney said as she stood in the driveway of the big old house the last
Sunday in April. She and Ashlyn were standing shoulder to shoulder, watching several of the kids riding their bikes in the afternoon sun – which is the only reason it was warm enough to be out there in the 50-degree weather.

The Flanagans and Dwyers were visiting for the day following the first week back at school after April vacation. The Crosses were all sick with the flu and had to stay home that day, which was disappointing for everybody. It had been a busy month with Easter Sunday and the Boston Marathon being in the same weekend, which the Kriegers had spent in Florida because of Chris’ rehab. That was another thing Ali was mad about. Their original plans had been to go to Florida on Tuesday, the day after the Marathon, so Ali could volunteer again with her friends. She had missed the Marathon for the past two years and this year, 2028, was the one Ashlyn had promised her she would be able to attend. Of course, that had been before the intervention with Chris had changed the course of everybody’s lives for the next 60 days. They flew home the Friday of vacation week so they could all go to the Breakers’ home opener the next day. It was a big deal because the Breakers were the reigning champions of the NWSL so they had the official presentation of the cup and another banner was raised to mark the incredible achievement. Ashlyn had a prominent part to play in the days’ events and the whole family enjoyed the day spent at the stadium. Then Ali had her ultrasound three days later, the second so far of the year after January’s clear result, while Ashlyn tried to get her softball coaching responsibilities taken care of the first week after vacation. That Sunday with their friends was a welcome respite for both Ali and Ashlyn who hadn’t realized just how stressed out they had both become.

“I don’t blame her” Ashlyn shrugged. “I just want her to be farther along in the forgiveness process I guess.” She took a breath and exhaled loudly. “It’s hard enough trying to forgive him myself, I’d rather not have to worry about her too.”

They both held their breath as Dodge picked up Josie’s abandoned bike and attempted to ride it. Josie wasn’t any bigger than he, or Lily, was but the difference was that her bike didn’t have training wheels on it anymore. That was the appeal for the strong and eager little boy. He was about to turn 5 years old in a few weeks and neither Drew nor Josie had mastered the bike without training wheels before their 6th birthdays. By comparison, Lily was just learning how to ride her bike with the training wheels – keeping to the more normal schedule of her older brother and sister. But not Dodge. He adjusted the helmet on his head so it wasn’t crooked and pushed off, trying to get both his legs pumping the pedals fast enough to keep him going and upright.

“Oooh, almost Dodge” Whitney encouraged after they watched him lose his balance and fall off the bike, bracing himself with his leg to keep both he and the bike off of the ground. “Give it another try big guy” she called out before speaking to her best friend again. “But it doesn’t work like that Ash. Just because you’re ready to forgive him doesn’t mean Ali’s anywhere near as ready.”

“Well if I can do it, she can do it” Ashlyn grumbled, sharing her honest thoughts with the only person she could. “I think she just doesn’t want to.”

“Well then she’s not ready to forgive him. That’s pretty clear then.” They were both quiet for a minute as they watched Dodge fail two more times. “It’s easier for you...”

“It’s not fucking easy for me” Ashlyn interrupted and raised her voice. “It’s not easy at all.”

“I never said it was” Whitney bumped her shoulder into the angry keeper but kept her eyes on her godson’s progress with the bike. “I was trying to say that it’s easier for you, not that it’s easy at all, just that it’s easier for you because he’s your brother and you’ve loved him forever. That’s all.”

“Well what the hell Whit?” Ashlyn turned to look at the side of her bestie’s face, her own still
frowning. “Ali loves him too, just like I love Kyle. I’d do anything for him.”

“I’m not saying she doesn’t love Chris...ugh...” she sighed and rolled her eyes, frustrated because she couldn’t get her point across. “Do you remember the guy I dated sophomore year...”

“Randy Mills, what a douche bag” Ashlyn shook her head as she quickly called the guy to memory.

“Yes, that’s the one” Whitney chuckled. “You didn’t like him very much...”

“He fucking cheated on you Whitney!” the keeper whisper-yelled and turned to give the lawyer an incredulous look.

“Right. And then he apologized and we talked it out and I took him back, remember?”

“Yes” Ashlyn held her breath, annoyed even by the memory of the events. “I never understood that. Thank God you came to your senses 6 months later and dumped his ass for good.”

“Okay. But that’s not what I want you to think about right now. Just bear with me” she put her palm up and pushed it towards the keeper to keep her quiet and at bay for another few seconds. “So when Randy and I made up I forgave him and you didn’t. Right?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“No, Ash, this is the whole point. You were so mad at him. You wanted to kill him because he hurt me. And I forgave him and took him back and you never understood it.”

“Okay, so I’m you and Ali’s me and Chris is Randy...”

“Right. And you love your brother very much. And you’re finding a way to forgive him and repair your relationship, just like I did with Randy.” She turned to look at Ashlyn to help make her point. “Did you love Randy as much as I did?”

“Hell no” the keeper frowned and shook her head.

“Did you forgive him for cheating on me?”

“Never.”

“And that’s how it goes. When your friend breaks up with their boyfriend you never badmouth him because you don’t know if it’s really over or not. Everybody knows the rule. You suck it up and hold your tongue just in case. Your friend loves him and forgives him for stuff you would never or could never...because you don’t love him” she paused when she saw the wheels turning in Ashlyn’s head. “You’ve loved Chris all your life and it’s so much easier for you to forgive him. But Ali can’t, at least not right away. She loves you a hundred times more than she loves him and all she feels is fury that he tried to fucking kill you” her voice had risen as the last sentence came out and Ashlyn noticed. “Sorry. I’m kind of with Ali on this one. I can’t help it.”

Ashlyn stood there as the gears all locked into place in her brain so she finally understood. Whitney was right. She had never forgiven that asshole for cheating on her best friend and she never would. Ashlyn had been so relieved when Whitney had finally ended the relationship so she didn’t have to try to pretend to like Randy any more.

“Oh shit” the keeper’s shoulders slumped at the thought of Ali having to fake it with Chris for the rest of their lives.
“Just...give her some time” Whitney continued when she saw the distraught look on her best friend’s face. “She’s strong and smart and if anybody can do it, it’s Ali. Just give her some time” she advised with a rub of the keeper’s arm.

Before they could say anything else, they both heard a joyful shout and turned their attention back to the driveway. Dodge was up on the bike, pedaling like a champ and grinning like a fool. He had done it, ridden a bike with no training wheels, and done it a whole year earlier than any of his other siblings. Both women shouted encouragement and praise at him as he negotiated the tight turn across the driveway before pumping his legs for the longer stretch of driveway.

“That kid is something else” Ashlyn shook her head slowly in admiration. “Fearless and strong as hell.”

“Just like someone else I know” Whitney put her arm around the keeper and gave her a strong side-hug. “And don’t forget the influence of his awesome godparents” she teased. “I think that’s what makes the real difference.”
Girls Night

Chapter Notes

I don't think this needs a warning but I'm never sure. The ladies get into a conversation about sex but there's no smut.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Alright, lay it on me” Ali slurred as she threw her arm around Sydney’s shoulders and tried not to spill her margarita. “Let’s have it.”

“Ooooh” Carm’s eyes went wide in anticipation of whatever secret was coming next.

“I’ve told you a thousand times Alibaba” Sydney slurred right back at her bestie from the floor of Jessie’s big loft apartment in Somerville. “I’m not having sex with you.”

“Ba-ha-ha-ha!” Erica cackled while Liz smacked her hand down on the coffee table and tried not to spit out the big gulp of margarita she had just taken.

The six friends were gathered around the coffee table eating chips and guacamole and drinking margaritas to celebrate Sydney’s 44th birthday the next day. It was Saturday night, May 6th, and they were all drunk or well on their way to being drunk. It was a kid-free, spouse-free sleepover night that they had all been planning and looking forward to for months. It was almost 11pm and they had started by preparing and eating dinner together before moving to the living room for some drinking games which is when the real damage had been done to their sobriety. In a vain effort to ward off some of the ill-effects they all knew were going to happen the next morning, Ali had brought the chips and guac back out and encouraged everybody to get some more food in their stomachs. She had just plopped back down onto the floor next to her bestest bestie while Jessie topped off everyone’s margaritas.

“Ha!” Ali smacked the coach’s arm and laughed her short, loud, shout of a laugh. “You wish!”

“You know” Sydney considered her the brunette for a few seconds and nodded approvingly with her margarita held out in front of her in some sort of quasi-toast. “There was a time, a long time, where I would have been like, ‘no thank you’” she laughed and then felt a little bad when she saw the hurt look on Ali’s face. “No, I’m not done yet’ she took her free hand and physically tried to turn the brunette’s frown into a smile while finishing what she had started to say. “I just mean you were kind of sheltered in the bedroom and...I don’t know...” she struggled to find the right word.

“Boring!” Jessie supplied, helpfully as they all laughed.

“Yeah, ok, boring” Sydney continued and then had to wait for another couple of seconds to get her train of thought back. “Oh yeah, but now” she raised both eyebrows and gave Ali a seductive wink, “I might be tempted to say yes.”

“Wow, really?” Liz asked, chuckling at the idea and exchanging a look with Erica.

“Well, no, I mean, listen...I love my man and I don’t want anybody but him, but this one” she pinched Ali’s cheek and then sloppily cupped her chin, “if I was gonna take a dip into the other
side of the pool, I think Als here might actually be able to keep up with me!”

They all laughed again, including Ali even though she wasn’t sure how to take what her best friend had just said. She chalked it up to them both being drunk and laughed it off.

“You girls have nooooooo idea what you’re missing” Carm spoke loudly and then smirked. “My only regret is not figuring out I was a lesbian until after college” she rolled her eyes dramatically. “I die when I think of all the time I wasted and all the fun I could have been having!”

“Me too!” Ali shouted in agreement, getting up on her knees to reach across the table and toast with the only other lesbian in the group. “I say that all the time. I would have had so much more fun my first two years in college if I had only known!”

“Oh settle down you two” Jessie got on her knees too, margarita glass held high. “I don’t care what you say or when you figured it out, there’s nothing as good as having sex with the man you love…”

“As long as he’s not too tired…”

“Oh come on” Liz scoffed. “You’ve gotta be kidding.”

“Yeah, get real” Jessie laughed as she scooped some guac up with a chip. “Ummm, can you say ‘penis’?”

“I can, and I can also tell you that everything you love about dick I love about my strap-on” Carm announced while Ali choked on the black olive she had just popped into her mouth.

“You alright Als” Sydney giggled and slapped the brunette on the back. “You and Carm gonna tell us all what we’re missing?”

This was the way it had always been with their group. Jessie, Carm and Sydney were the loudmouths and Ali, Liz and Erica were the quiet and shy ones who needed a little prodding, or alcohol, to get loud or rowdy. Tears sprang to Ali’s eyes as she tried to clear her airway and breathe.

“You can’t be serious?!” Jessie replied to Carm’s claim. “It’s nice that you all have toys you can play with but there’s nothing like the real thing, right girls” she nodded at Sydney and Liz who agreed loudly.

“Oh, right, I’m sorry” Carm looked knowingly at Ali who was still red-faced and trying to breathe. “Nothing like having a dick go limp on you right when things are finally starting to get good” she laughed and clinked glasses with Ali who laughed out loud too. “If they ever get good” she winked at her fellow-lesbian, “am I right Al?”

“Sooollllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllooooonnnnright” Ali threw her head back and laughed. “How many times have you had sex with your...whoever and his real dick, and not even gotten off?!”
Both Ali and Carm knew they had their friends right where they wanted them and the annoyed looks on their flushed faces confirmed it.

“A whole fucking lot is the answer to that question” Carm laughed again.

“Not really” Jessie tried to defend her position but knew their faction had taken a direct hit. “Not any more than it happens to you guys” she pointed back at Carm and Ali.

“Do you wanna tell them or should I?” Ali teased, speaking conspiratorially with Carm but making sure everybody could hear her.

“I have never had sex with a woman and not had an orgasm” Carm proudly announced.

“Ok, you tell them I guess” Ali giggled and blushed.

“Dom always takes care of me” Sydney offered with her own smirk. “That’s never been a problem.”

“Wait,” Jessie looked directly at Carm, “how many women have you slept with? I thought Kacey was your one and only?”

“Umm, I may have experimented once in college...” Carm sat down on her heels after answering the unexpected question.

“No way! Why didn’t you tell us?” Sydney leaned forward excitedly.

“It wasn’t that great” Carm giggled and blushed, which was a true rarity. “Neither of us knew what we were doing, but we still managed to make each other come” she quirked her eyebrow at Jessie. “So even with not great lesbian sex you still get an orgasm, am I right Kriegs?”

“Hell yeah” Ali grinned as she and Carm took big gulps of their drinks.

“Who else here ‘experimented’ with a woman before?” Jessie looked from woman to woman, wondering what other sordid details she had missed from her close group of friends over the years.

“Does it count if she ate you out, made you come and then left?” Sydney asked with her own blush coloring her cheeks.

“What?!”

“Sydney!”

“Get the fuck out of here!”

“How’d you get so lucky?”

Everybody shouted out in surprise, except Ali who had already heard the story.

“I think it counts” Ali giggled, finishing her drink and putting the glass down harder than she intended to. “Too bad you didn’t get to return the favor” she smirked. “That’s my favorite part.”

Everyone whooped it up after the brunette shared something so private and naughty. They all knew it was going to get good if Kriegs was coughing up the details before anybody else.

“Soaaaaa goooooood” Carm agreed with her own throaty giggle. “And it has nothing to do with dick” she quirked her eyebrow at Jessie.

“Ok, alright, I’ll give you that one” Jessie nodded and smiled. “I love when Ev goes down on me...”
“Now just imagine that he knows what he’s doing down there” Ali smirked again, making Carm howl with laughter. “There’s nothing like it my friends.”

“It was pretty good, I gotta say” Sydney shrugged. “Usually when a guy goes down on you he, like, hesitates’ she stopped abruptly. “I don’t mean Dom. He has shit figured out” her eyes went wide and everybody else laughed. “But all the other guys I’ve ever slept with were...I don’t know, afraid maybe?”

“Tentative” Ali supplied the word with a knowing nod.

“Yes!! Tentative. Perfect Als” Sydney gave her bestie a drunken high five. “Not this girl” she shook her head and grinned, remembering her one-sided drunken college encounter. “She went to town down there and it was pretty fucking good” Sydney chuckled. “I think it would have been awesome except I was really in my head about it so I couldn’t relax like I wanted to.”

“Was it really different?” Liz asked, glancing quickly for support at Erica, who had been quiet the whole time but was paying close attention.

“Yeah” Sydney giggled. “She didn’t hesitate at all. You know how sometimes you can tell the guy feels like it’s a chore he has to do to get what he really wants?”

“Or even if they’re really into you” Erica finally spoke up, “you know they’re just doing it to be nice and not because they really want to or like doing it.”

“Yes, absolutely to both of you” Sydney pointed at Liz and Erica while Jessie came back to the room with a fresh pitcher of margaritas. “Not this girl. She ate me out like I was the best dessert she had ever had in her life. And we were just some rando drunk hook-up. I can’t imagine what it’s like if your girlfriend or wife was the one doing it.”

“Amen!” Carm laughed out loud and toasted Ali again triumphantly while they both giggled.

“Ok, so lesbians win the eating pussy point” Jessie conceded as she took her place among her friends again. “Fine. But you can’t tell me there’s a dildo or strap-on out there that feels like the real thing, and I don’t mean just that it stays hard when you want it to” she clarified, not wanting to hear Carm or Ali go down that road again. “I mean, like, the texture and the way it moves...”

“Don’t you miss having balls slapping at your ass while you’re getting fucked?” Sydney interrupted and cackled again as the whole group joined her.

“Not really, no” Ali deadpanned and then chuckled.

“No, not that” Jessie rolled her eyes and laughed at Sydney’s antics as the coach made slapping and grunting sounds and had them all laughing hysterically. “Why do I even bother?”

“So, ok Jess, that’s a fair point” Ali decided to cut their hostess some slack. “You’re right about the texture. The toys have come a long way and some can be very realistic if that’s what you’re looking for, but honestly, if the way the outside of his dick feels and tastes is all you’ve got?” she quirked her eyebrow and paused for effect. “You ain’t got much.”

“Please tell me you’re not one of those gay girls who pretends to give the strap-on head” Jessie rolled her eyes again as she looked from Carm to Ali.

“How much time are you spending watching lesbian porn anyway?” Carm teased her friend and they all laughed, everybody but Ali who had gotten shy and quiet.
“Oh my God” Jessie pointed at the brunette. “You totally suck Ashlyn off when she’s wearing it! Oh my God Kriegs, you’re the last person in the world I would have expected!”

“Hey, I’m pretty sure I would too” Sydney joked, trying to take some of the attention off of her best friend who had obviously gotten shy. “We’ve all seen Ashlyn in her bathing suit, all those muscles and that ink, am I right?”

Erica noticed Ali’s deep blush too and reached over to squeeze her leg under the table. She gave her a soft smile when the brunette caught her eye a few seconds later.

“So, wait, you gotta explain this to me because I have never understood this” Jessie kept going as she sat down again, off her knees, and leaned forward with her elbow on the coffee table. “She can’t feel it, so why in the hell would you lick a rubber dildo or whatever they’re made of these days? It can’t taste good, unless you lube it up, but then what’s the point? Just lick the lube off of someplace on her that actually does feel good? I don’t get it, please explain it to me?” she entreated and Ali noticed that a lot of the bluster was gone from her voice.

“First of all, she does feel it” Carm started, pulling out her phone. “Hey now, I don’t need to see any pictures of you and Kacey with a strap-on” Sydney teased, waving her hands in front of her defensively and spilling her drink. “Shut up” Carm smacked her arm and kept looking in her phone for a picture to show them as she explained about the knob at the back of the harness that is designed to apply pressure to the wearer’s clit as they use the strap-on. She finally found a picture on a website selling sex toys and passed her phone around. “Trust me when I tell you, it feels good” she gave them a wicked grin.

“Al, tell us the truth” Liz asked quietly after Jessie and Sydney had teased Carm for a few more minutes. “I know Carm’s all talk. Is it really hot?”

Ali finished the drink of margarita she had been taking and looked up to find all five faces focused intently on hers. As she quickly moved from one to the next she saw that there was no judgment in any of them. The four straight girls had nothing but curiosity, and alcohol, in their eyes and Ali felt a wave of sympathy for her friends who didn’t get to enjoy sex with a woman. She could feel her cheeks burning and knew her face must have been bright red from the margaritas and her embarrassment, but she heard words coming out of her mouth anyway.

“Yeah, it is” she demurred, still feeling shy and self-conscious.

All four straight girls leaned in closer while Carm laughed quietly and picked up the pitcher of margaritas to fill everyone’s glasses again, starting with Ali’s.

“Like, how hot?” Erica asked this time, emboldened by Liz’s brave question. “Is it your favorite thing... to do?”

Ali paused and looked at her closest friends again, letting her eyes settle on Sydney’s proud face for a second. The coach winked at her and nodded her head as one final bit of encouragement. The brunette smiled shyly and took a big breath and then another drink before answering.

“It’s really hot” she admitted with a sly grin, “but it’s not my favorite thing...”

“Is it hotter sucking it off or wearing it and getting head?” Jessie asked, unable to wait.

“Ummm...” Ali blushed again and giggled. The tiny part of her brain that was still functioning rationally could not believe the turn their evening had taken. “Wearing it, but not because of what
“Why not? I thought you said it feels good?” Liz gave Carm a confused look.

“It does feel good” Ali continued. “It feels great, especially if you’re already worked up a little bit” she giggled again, mostly because she was nervous. “But the reason it’s so hot is because of something else…” she was trying to find a way to explain the concept of the shifting power dynamic most lesbians experienced to the women who had only ever given blow jobs and never received one.

“Spit it out!” Sydney chimed in, eager for the new information. Not even she had talked about this with the shy brunette before. “No pun intended” she cackled when she realized what she had said. Everybody cracked up at the joke and Ali rolled her eyes through her laughter.

“I don’t know how to explain it…it’s about the whole experience, I mean, it’s about love and trust, for sure, but it’s sexy as fuck because of the power you feel.”

“Yes!” Carm agreed and nodded her head vigorously. “Exactly. And it’s not about being a top or a bottom or any of that crap.”

“Wait, so the girl with the strap-on has the power, right?” Jessie clarified.

“Yeah, definitely” Ali grinned. “Do you ever feel powerful when you’re giving Ev a blow job?”

“You mean, besides knowing I could inflict a whole lot of pain on his ass if wanted to?” she replied with a wicked smirk.

“Don’t you mean his dick?” Erica teased and they all laughed.

“Besides that” Ali laughed along with everybody else.

“Then, no” Jessie pursed her lips and considered it for a couple of seconds. “I feel a lot of things, but not powerful. No.”

“Like Carm said, it’s not about being a top or a bottom, at least it’s not that way with us” she looked down for a second, surprised at her own candor.

“What’s it about then?” Liz squinted at the brunette, trying hard to understand.

“There’s just something about...having the person you love...ummm...” she couldn’t believe she was talking about this with them but knew they’d kill her if she stopped now. She swallowed hard and kept going. “Having her give you that power. It’s all about you and the strap-on and her willingly giving up control. I mean, you’re literally standing over her, or kneeling or whatever, I don’t know” she shook her head self-consciously and brought her glass to her lips to buy herself time. She was hoping somebody else would say something. Anything.

“I get that” Sydney nodded slowly. “I see it in Dom’s face when I give him head. I never thought about it as power or control but that’s what it is. It’s almost like being dominant and submissive but without any of the kink.”

Everybody’s mind was racing as they tried to imagine it and the room got quiet for a couple of minutes.

“It’s impossible to describe” Carm finally said. “But Al’s right. When you lock eyes with your girl
in that moment it’s incredible. It’s hot as fuck and I never thought it would be” she chuckled.

“Neither did I” Ali giggled. “I said no thank you at first...” she raised her eyebrows high and giggled some more. “I thought the same thing you did Jess. Exactly the same thing” she nodded at their hostess. “But then I tried it and I saw the light” she finished with a loud laugh, happy to have everybody else join her.

“You ladies should try it” Carm quirked an eyebrow at them. “I’m not saying you have to sleep with a woman to do it either. Some guys will return the favor if you ask them to.”

“What?”
“No way.”
“Get outta here!”
“Really?”

“I’m sure as hell gonna ask him, that’s for sure!” Sydney laughed again.

“Yes, let us know how that goes” Jessie joked and lifted her glass. “I can barely get Ev to use the butt plug!” she laughed along with everybody else. “In the meantime, here’s to strap-ons and all their mysterious ways!” they all toasted and finished their margaritas. “Who’s ready for tequila shots?”

It wasn’t until two hours later when Ali and Sydney were trying to get the living room to stop spinning so they could fall asleep on the air mattress they had sloppily made up that the brunette got to go back and address the question that had started their whole sex conversation in the first place.

“Are you gonna tell me what’s going on with you or what?” she poked her best friend in the shoulder.

They were both on their backs with their heads propped up on extra couch pillows under their sleeping pillows so they could fight off the spins. Sydney was trying her best to keep her eyes open while she waited for the gallon of water she had swallowed to dilute the alcohol in her system. Ali had slowed down her margarita intake right after sharing some of the most personal things about her sex-life. She still couldn’t believe she had done that and blushed at the memory while she waited for Sydney to respond.

“Hey. Syd” she poked her again. “I know you can hear me.” She waited for a minute and watched the coach’s eyes slowly close and then flutter open again when she got dizzy. “I know something’s up and I want you to talk to me about it.”

“Nothing’s up Al, fuck these fucking spins” she moaned and tried to sit up more.

“Hold on, I’ll get you some more water” Ali got up and went to the kitchen. She returned with two sports water bottles full of water for her bestie and helped her sit up more so she was leaning against the front of the couch like a headboard.

“Thanks” Sydney gasped out after taking a long drink and burping. “Sorry.”

“At Christmas you didn’t sound like yourself” Ali forged ahead, knowing she was going to have to do all the work in the conversation. She kept her voice steady and calm and loving. “You sounded like a regular working mom who was starting to doubt her own awesomeness and it bothered me.”

“I’m fine” she replied quietly, patting Ali’s hand next to her.
“Yeah, I thought so too for a while. I thought I was just projecting my own shit onto you and making it up” the brunette held her bestie’s hand between them when Sydney tried to pull it away. “But it wasn’t me. It was you. I’ve tried to get you to talk about it four different times since then and you’ve stonewalled me every damned time.”

“Amateur” the coach chuckled softly and squeezed Ali’s hand tightly as her chin started to tremble.

“Aw, boo, talk to me” Ali switched hands and put her arm around Sydney’s shoulder and put her other hand on her thigh and let her grab hold of it again. “What’s going on?”

“I’m gonna kill you for making me cry right now” Sydney groaned and used her free hand to rub her own head. “My head’s fucking killing me already.”

“Here, move down and then give me your head” the brunette instructed.

Ali helped the coach scoot down a couple of feet in the air mattress and then slipped in behind her, her back against the front of the couch. She sat cross-legged and put a pillow on her lap and then guided Sydney’s head and shoulders back onto the pillow. The brunette began slowly massaging her friend’s head, neck, shoulders and arms.

“Just don’t puke on me, that’s all I ask” she giggled and was relieved when the coach smiled too.

“I make no promises” she tried to laugh but couldn’t quite manage it.

“So why aren’t you shining like you usually do, boo boo? What’s going on? How can I help?” Ali’s voice remained calm and soothing, despite how worried she actually was about whatever was troubling her best friend.

“Oh, you know...just the usual stuff” Sydney shrugged and winced and then relaxed again when she felt Ali’s hands move to her shoulders to ease the pain.

“Yes, like what? Are we talking mom stuff or wife stuff or turning 44 stuff or work stuff?”

“All of it” she sighed heavily. “Not really the turning 44 stuff, although it all ties into that I guess.”

“Feeling old and inadequate are we?”

“Yes” Sydney bit her bottom lip as a tear slipped down her cheek. “That” she nodded. “And I’m so fucking exhausted all the time...I don’t even feel like myself anymore.”

“That’ll definitely take the shine away, that’s for damned sure” Ali sweetly wiped the couple of tears off of her cheeks and went back to slowly massaging her head and neck.

Sydney didn’t say anything else for a few minutes so the brunette shared some stories of her own battle with being tired every minute of every day and still having to take care of four kids, two dogs, a house and a business. It wasn’t competitive, it was supportive sharing so Sydney would be reminded that she wasn’t the only one suffering that way. Both Dom and Ashlyn travelled for work but Dom had been doing more of it since March because one of the younger trainers had left the team and the senior trainers were filling his spot in the rotation. The Revs and Breakers were both in-season and Dom had been going on every third road trip, which was a lot more travel than usual for the young family. Sandi Leroux was always there to help out with the boys but it was never the same. Grammy Sandi was wonderful and Sydney didn’t want to imagine what their lives would be like without her. But she wasn’t Dom. She wasn’t her husband. She wasn’t her other half. The two best friends talked for a while about all the things going on in Sydney’s life from missing Dom to trying to find a new assistant coach before the end of the school year so they could be ready to go
when the team started at the end of August. They worked their way, eventually, to the subject of
Sydney’s dented self-esteem that sounded more to Ali like the result of being a mom with three
kids and a full-time job.

“It kills me to hear you talk like that Syd. You look awesome and you’re still in really good
shape…”

“Not my boobs” the coach interrupted sadly, cupping the sides of her breasts and lifting them back
onto the top of her chest. “These babies are toast. I swear, once I take my bra off they drop right to
my waist” she chuckled sadly. “Poor babies.”

Ali tried to stifle her laugh but only half succeeded. She had never been more grateful for her little
chicken cutlets than after watching her best friend’s fight against gravity. Sydney’s large breasts
were definitely losing the battle.

“Well for Christ’s sake, look at all the hard work they’ve done in the past twelve years! You put
them through three pregnancies and breast-fed three hungry baby boys…”

They didn’t count her miscarriage as a pregnancy. That had been Sydney’s decision. When any of
the moms got together and talked about babies and pregnancies and deliveries her count was
always three. Not everybody knew about her miscarriage so it made the most sense. But every time
Ali talked about it with her she was acutely aware of the far-away look Sydney got in her eye, even
if it was only there for a minute or two. That night, as she spoke those words, Ali squeezed both of
her best friend’s shoulders and held them for a few seconds, telling her how sorry she still was
about her loss. Sydney reached up and squeezed one of Ali’s hands to let her know how much it
meant to her that she remembered.

“And I don’t even want to think about what Dom’s done to them over the years” she teased to
lighten the mood just a bit as the coach returned her hand back down to her stomach. “We’re 44,
not 24 and our bodies do different things now. But Sydney Rae, I’m telling you the God’s honest
truth – you look awesome. Your body is beautiful and I know it probably doesn’t feel it all the
time, but it looks great.”

“Oh Alibaba” Sydney sighed. “You’d say that no matter how decrepit I looked. You’re just too
tie nice to me” she shook her head sadly but gave her bestie a sincere smile.

“No way boo. We promised” the brunette quirked her eyebrow and gave the coach a stern look.
“You swore you would always tell me the truth because I know Ashlyn never will. And I swore to
do the same for you. And I intend to keep that promise, no matter what, because I need you to keep
yours. Don’t mess with me now Syd. This is serious.”

“Oh, ok, alright...geez” Sydney rolled her eyes but was secretly happy to hear that her best friend
really did have her back even though it went against her ingrained desire to be kind. “I remember. I
was just making sure you did too.”

“Hell yes I remember. I’m counting on you so don’t fuck it up and get soft on me in another 5 or
10 years when I’m going to need you most.”

“Deal. I renew my promise” the coach chuckled and held up her hand with her pinky finger
sticking out.

“Deal” Ali giggled as she locked pinky fingers. “I renew my promise.”

A couple of minutes went by as Sydney sat up to drink some more water. When she had finished
and settled back into her personal masseuse’s lap again she admitted a secret she hadn’t really meant to share.

“Patty thinks my thyroid might be messed up.”

“What? Dr. Comello? You’ve been feeling bad enough to go see Patty?”

“Well, yeah, I practically cry every time I have to get up in the morning. I would literally sell my soul for more sleep...”

“Shhhh...don’t even joke about that” the normally logic-based brunette objected to the tempting of fate that always made her uncomfortable. “What are you going to do about your thyroid then?”

“I’m not sure” the coach sighed again, this one because she was glad she had finally confessed her worry to her best friend after sitting on it for several weeks. “I have to think about it some more.”

“Aren’t there different kinds of thyroid...things? Like a strong or a weak one?” she scrunched her face as she tried to remember what she had heard about it. “My cousin Jeff’s wife...”

“Viv?”

“Yeah, Viv had a thyroid problem and she takes medicine for it I think. But the medicine took care of it and she said she felt like her old self again.”

“Easy to say when you’ve only got one kid” the coach moaned, either from the idea of having only one child or in response to how good the massage felt. “And it’s underactive and overactive. Get it right will you?” she joked and they both chuckled.

“Which one do you have?”

“Underactive, if you can believe that” they both laughed again.

It was ironic because Sandi Leroux used to swear that her daughter was hyperactive when she was a kid. She wasn’t. She just had a lot of extra energy to burn and she and Ali did that by running around like maniacs in one of their backyards every day. Sydney had been like Dodge was now – always raring to go and eager to be doing something active.

“So what’s the hold-up? Do you not want to take the medicine? Are there some horrible side-effects...”

“Yeah, that’s part of it I guess. And part of it is I just don’t want to have it” Sydney whined like a toddler and then giggled at how ridiculous she was being.

“Wow, alrighty then” Ali squished her friend’s face between both her hands until she looked up at her. “Go on the medicine and see how it makes you feel. Then, if you don’t like it and you’d rather go back to being tired all the time just stop taking it. Sound like a good plan?” she squished Sydney’s cheeks again and they both giggled.

“Fine. See, this is why I didn’t tell you. You’re always so fucking reasonable and responsible” the coach laughed softly but saw Ali’s face drop a little as she got back to rubbing her scalp. “Awww, don’t pout Als. I need that from you sometimes. I don’t know what I’d do without it...or you. Thank you.”

They finished their late-night chat by talking about Sydney’s boys and how frightened the coach was that James might not be just the laid-back kid they had always thought he was.
“I think he’s just as smart as any of the rest of the kids” Ali commented after Sydney had gotten all of her worry about her middle child out of her system. “And smarter than some” she chuckled. It was an ongoing joke between the two best friends that Evan Cross maybe wasn’t all there. They didn’t admit their callous suspicion to anybody else, not even their spouses. “But seriously Syd, just take him to the specialist and get the tests done. Then we’ll know for sure one way or the other. And then” she paused, bent over and kissed the coach’s forehead, “we’ll know what the next step is.”

“I don’t think I can handle it if one of my kids has a learning disability” she looked up into Ali’s caring brown eyes and blinked. “I really don’t think I can do it.”

“Of course you can. But it doesn’t matter that I know you can. It’s still scary as hell. There’s nothing worse. Not a single fucking thing” she agreed solemnly and continued rubbing Sydney’s temples and forehead and face, the slow even strokes calming and soothing the coach as her emotions swirled. “I almost lost it when Lily had her speech thing.”

“Her mommy mumble?” Sydney giggled softly, careful not to make her headache worse. “So not fair” Ali shook her head. “Why do I get the blame for that? There’s not one bit of my dna in that baby girl!” she chuckled and rolled her eyes.

“Ummm, because you mumble?” Sydney giggled again and reached up to squeeze Ali’s knee.

“Whatever” the brunette sighed heavily and pushed on, not wanting to have the ‘nature vs nurture’ debate again. “The point is, we took her to a specialist and found out it wasn’t that big of a deal. She mumbled and stuttered and we learned how to help her do better about both. The speech therapist was great and we never would have known to take her there if we hadn’t done the testing first.”

“Yeah, you’re right” the coach sighed and closed her eyes. “It’s just that, once we take him...then it’s real. Then I can’t pretend anymore.”

“No, you can’t. So hurry up and get the tests done will you?” Ali poked her in the cheek for emphasis. “Quit screwing around and get it over with so we can help him get better. If he even needs it.” Ali shook her head skeptically. “I don’t think there’s a thing wrong with James. I just think he’s too cool for school” she laughed softly at her own corny words while Sydney groaned and rolled her eyes. “Really though. This is going to sound awful, especially because she’s my kid, but Josie doesn’t usually have patience for kids that aren’t smart or that don’t challenge her somehow...”

“You’re right” Sydney’s eyes flew open at the thought. “That goddaughter of mine doesn’t suffer fools at all. And she and James are inseparable so that’s a really good sign right there.”

“I’m telling you. He’s fine” Ali winked at her bestie below her. “But hurry up and get him tested so we can stop worrying.”

“Alright” she nodded. “Ok.”

“Good. Don’t make me play the godmother card” she threatened with a sharp quirk of her eyebrow. “Because I’ll do it.”

“I know you will” Sydney chuckled and squeezed her bestie’s hand again, holding onto it for longer than usual. “Why do you think I picked you to be godmother to all three of my kids in the first place? I know what I’m doing.”
The two friends finally settled back into bed, feeling better about several things, but mostly feeling safe and connected and loved by their best friend. It wasn’t very often that Sydney let her fragile, anxious side show and there were precious few people who ever got to see it. But that night Ali knew she had helped her bestie feel better both emotionally and physically. Her heart was full and her hands were sore from the marathon massage she had given, but she didn’t care. She would have rubbed Sydney’s pain and stress away if it had taken until sunrise. Ali knew there was nothing she and Sydney wouldn’t do for each other and it filled her with happiness as she pulled the covers up and settled into place. Without even thinking about it she rolled over and wrapped her arm around the coach, spooning her from behind and kissing the back of her head. Sydney grabbed the brunette’s arm and held it tightly to her chest as they mumbled goodnights and drifted to sleep. She loved her husband more than anything and her boys and her friends. Their girls night had been just what Sydney needed to forget some of the stresses in her life for a little while. But the very best part was always the love and support she received from Ali Krieger. It made the coach’s head spin a little when she thought back to meeting her bestie when they were 6 years old. Who knew they would become so important to each other? Who knew they would provide so many things for one another over the course of those 38 years? And the best part was knowing that they would always be there for each other, for the rest of their lives. No matter what.

Chapter End Notes

What does everybody think about blowing the strap-on? Yay? or Nay? Power shift or not?
I've never liked it but maybe I haven't done it with the right person yet. Or maybe I need a less nasty tasting strap-on? lol. (To be clear - I don't mean it tastes nasty because of the girl.)
The Perfect Space

Chapter Notes

Smut warning

Also, I have two pieces of bad news. One is that I've caught up to my damned self and can't promise a chapter every day anymore. Because of some real life situations I've not had the time I expected to write. Two is that I got a new job and am heading out of town for training for a few days so the earliest the next chapter will be posted will probably be Friday or Saturday. A whole freaking week. I know. I'm really sorry. If you've stuck with me this long you know that this is not my preferred method of delivering a story. I don't like it as a reader so I try really hard not to do it as a writer. My sincerest apologies. But I've got lots left to write! Don't worry about that. There will be 5 or 6 more chapters in Part 7 to bring us roughly up to the end of 2028, maybe more depending on how in depth I get into the Olympics in Paris. We'll see. But it's all mapped out. I just need to sit and write it (which I still very much love to do). So I'll be back very soon. I promise. <3

When Ali got home after making all the hungover girls a big brunch Sunday morning, she was tired but happy. She felt completely relaxed and relieved and was surprised by it. She hadn’t realized how uptight she had been. It made sense though, it had been a very stressful 5-1/2 months since their explosive Thanksgiving. Making matters worse, all of their vacation time had been tinged with and occupied by getting Chris sober and then through rehab. No wonder she needed a break. She made a mental note to make sure Ashlyn took some time away too, as soon as possible.

After feeding the kids lunch, she and Ashlyn spent all afternoon playing with them in the basement playroom, and then out in the backyard with the dogs. They ate dinner, got everything ready for school the next day, and then completed the nighttime routine. Ali went into the master bedroom to unpack and get a load of laundry started but by the time Ashlyn had come up to talk to her and hear the details of her girls night at 9pm, she was asleep on the bed, right in the middle of the clothes she had been sorting. The keeper stood there at the foot of the bed and admired her sleeping beauty. Ali was laying sideways across the bed, right in the middle of it, flat on her stomach with her feet hanging off the side by the fireplace. Ashlyn knew her girl must have been wiped out because she never slept on her stomach unless she was really drunk or completely exhausted. The blonde moved to the side of the bed and gathered up all of the clothes, dropping them into the empty laundry basket. She would have started a load of laundry for the brunette but she wasn’t sure what the plan of attack had been with the sorting. Rather than risk it, she just left them in the basket until she could ask her wife about it in the morning. She took another long look at the love of her life as she stood near her feet now. Ali had a long-sleeved Breakers t-shirt on and a pair of comfy sweatpants. Her hair was up in the half-bun/half-pony tail that she used when her hair was just a bit too short to work into a loose bun. She had her glasses on and her right cheek rested on top of her right forearm, giving the frames enough room so they weren’t digging into her face. Her left arm was stretched out straight down the length of her side and she was still barefoot because Lily had made it a game that evening to take Mommy’s socks off and hide them so Ali could try and find them. Lord knew where they would find them now. Ali was usually the one who paid attention to those things so the kids didn’t lose anything too important. The brunette must have been too tired to care about her socks and Ashlyn chuckled at the thought.
As much as the keeper was dying to talk to her wife and hear about the fun night she obviously had, it was clear that Ali was down for the count. Ashlyn debated letting her sleep the way she was for another hour or so before she came up to bed herself, or trying to get her into her pajamas and into bed properly now so she would have a better sleep. She decided to just let her sleep and made her way quietly down the backstairs to put the playroom back together again.

“Oh” Ali’s sleepy voice surprised the keeper an hour later as Ashlyn came out of the master bathroom after getting ready for bed.

“Jesus…” the blonde put her hand to her chest and stopped short near the foot of the bed.

“Sorry” the brunette gave her a drowsy smile as she rolled onto her side and stretched, still in the same place across the bed where Ashlyn had left her.

“You scared me” Ashlyn chuckled and exhaled.

“Come snuggle with me” Ali yawned, reached her left hand out towards the foot of the bed and wiggled her fingers.

“How about we just get into bed, silly?”

“I don’t wanna move…” the brunette whined and pouted, dropping her arm down onto the bed like it weighed 50 pounds and she couldn’t hold it up another second.

“Well, we’re just gonna have to move after we snuggle…”

“Just…come hold me, pleeeease?” the brunette begged and gave her wife her best puppy-dog eyes.

They both knew Ashlyn wouldn’t be able to resist and they both knew it was a dumb plan and they both giggled as the keeper finally crawled onto the bed and spooned her beautiful brunette from behind.

“Mmmmmm…” Ali hummed with a big smile on her face as she pulled her keeper’s arm up close to her chest and scooted back into her front. “That’s what I’ve been missing” she brought Ashlyn’s hand up to her mouth and kissed it softly and slowly, letting her lips linger over each knuckle. “God I hate sleeping without you.”

“Syd didn’t do it for you last night eh?” Ashlyn giggled and pressed a kiss to her wife’s neck.

“How do you know I slept with Syd and not E or Liz?”

“Because you guys always do the same thing” Ashlyn chuckled. “Carm and Jessie share a bed. Liz and Erica share a bed. And you and Syd share a bed. You don’t even need to talk about it anymore, you just all know where you’re supposed to go.”

“Well, I’m supposed to go right here” Ali backed her butt up into her wife with a little more pressure and giggled again. “It was so fun to get away for a night but I missed you babe” her voice was soft and quiet.

“We missed our queen too” Ashlyn playfully squeezed the brunette’s breast and kissed the top of her shoulder, right at the base of her neck, enjoying her warm skin against her lips.

“Hey” Ali giggled and turned her head to the left so Ashlyn could kiss her cheek and the corner of her mouth. “Don’t get me started…we had quite the conversation last night and I’ve been a horndog for you ever since” the brunette chuckled, low in her throat.
“Oh really?” the keeper raised her eyebrows. “Horny enough to come up here and fall asleep at 9pm I see” she laughed softly.

“Oh hush up” Ali reached back and swatted Ashlyn’s hip. “We drank a lot more than we talked and then Syd and I talked while we tried to sober up after everybody went to bed...”

“Oooh” Ashlyn sucked in a breath at the painful thought. “So...4 hours of sleep, 5?”

“5-1/2 but none of it was good. We all woke up because our heads hurt so fucking much” Ali groaned.

“But it was worth it though, right?” the keeper reminded her, giving her jaw a kiss.

“Yeah, definitely” Ali closed her eyes and nuzzled into her wife’s lips.

“So I’m afraid to ask what made you so horny” she chuckled as Ali pulled their bodies closer together with her left arm still at Ashlyn’s hip and ass.

“Oh my God” Ali rolled all the way over to face her gorgeous keeper, their glasses knocking against each other as they snuggled in tight together with their legs intertwined. “No, you don’t want to know” she chuckled again and gave her wife a slow, deep kiss.

“Let me guess...strap-on sex?” Ashlyn giggled when Ali’s whole face registered complete shock.

“How in the world did you guess that?”

Ashlyn thought about keeping the ruse going for a while but the idea of her wife possibly being ready for some sexy time made her keep things short and to the point instead.

“Syd texted me a couple of questions about strap-ons this afternoon” she laughed out loud as Ali rolled her eyes and then joined her laughter.

“Why is she asking you and not me? What a goofball” she shook her head and let her hands start to wander across Ashlyn’s back before grabbing her ass and pulling their bodies together even more.

“I’m sure she wanted an expert’s opinion...” the keeper could barely get the sentence out before laughing at how ridiculous it was. By that point in their marriage Ali knew just as much about strap-ons as Ashlyn ever did.

Ali leaned in and gave her wife another kiss, biting her bottom lip hard as a punishment for the expert remark.

“Ow! Hey, now who’s getting who started?” Ashlyn quirked her eyebrow at her wife and was excited to see her favorite whiskey-colored eyes starting to darken as they stared back at her.

Ashlyn had a million questions about why Sydney and Dom needed a strap-on but she was not about to go down that path when a much more inviting one was appearing right before her eyes.

“I had a good nap” Ali chuckled, low in her throat again, as she gave her wife a searing kiss.

They made out for several minutes, hands slipping underneath shirts and into waistbands while their strong thighs provided ample pressure for some fairly intense grinding.

“If this is what happens...when you go for your...girls’ nights” Ashlyn panted out between kisses, “then let’s get...your next one...scheduled right away.”
“Ash, this is because of you” the brunette mumbled against her wife’s lips as they continued to make out and grope one another, getting more and more worked up. “All you, babe.”

“So, not the strap-on talk from last night then?” Ashlyn grinned mischievously as her wife pulled back to study her face.

“What did Syd tell you?” she quirked her eyebrow at the blonde and then groaned when she felt Ashlyn’s fingers scratch gently at the short hairs covering her mound.

“Not too much” Ashlyn winked and licked across Ali’s lips which she knew drove her wife crazy. “Just that you went on and on and on...” she was interrupted by a bruising kiss from the brunette that left them both breathless. “About how hot it was” she panted out after the kiss. “Damn, baby.”

“Put your fingers inside me” Ali husked out when the grinding stopped being enough for her a few minutes later.

Ashlyn fumbled with the sweatpants and panties in her way, finally pulling away from the turned-on brunette and yanking both pieces of clothing down to her calves. Ali worked her right foot free, using her left foot to help, and then lifted her right leg up and rested her knee on Ashlyn’s hip, opening herself up and groaning loudly when she felt the long, strong fingers of her keeper push their way inside her pulsing center.

“Oh fuck yeah” she closed her eyes and bit her bottom lip at the sensation, pinching and squeezing both of Ashlyn’s breasts under her sleep t-shirt at the same time.

Ashlyn hungrily nipped and sucked at her exposed neck, letting her tongue soothe the bites while she started moving her fingers inside her beautiful brunette.

“God, you’re so fucking wet...”

“I told you, I’ve been ready since last night” Ali smashed their mouths together in another hard, desperate kiss, knocking their glasses together again.

“Off...take them off” Ashlyn leaned her face towards her wife so Ali could take her glasses off and toss them back up by the pillows.

She did the same with her own, but she always regretted not being able to see better without them. Ali loved to watch everything her wife’s body did when they had sex which is why they always left a light on before getting busy. But sometimes glasses just got in the way.

“Shit, you feel so good inside me...mmmmm...” the brunette hummed into the next kiss as she started to rock her hips while Ashlyn increased her pace and began to thrust her fingers up into her aching pussy.

“Better than the strap-on?” Ashlyn asked in a husky whisper up next to her ear as she nibbled on her earlobe.

“Yes” the brunette gasped out as her wife curled her fingers up into her g-spot and expertly stroked her. “So much yes. Fuck babe. Mmmm...right there. Fuck.”

Ali arched her back and threw her head back as she felt her orgasm start to take form, still far away.

“Lift your shirt up” the keeper commanded, nosing her wife’s breast through the garment and pressing it against her nipple.
The brunette obeyed and then held the back of her keeper’s head against her breast as Ashlyn’s mouth covered it and started to bring it to full attention.

“Jesus Christ...yeah babe, mmmmmm...”

Ashlyn started pumping her fingers faster and harder, loving the wet sounds coming from between her wife’s legs. The keeper’s own passion was rising, and pooling, rapidly.

“Damn, I want you in my mouth so bad” Ashlyn moaned around the stiff nipple at her lips as Ali continued to rock her hips and arch her back.

They had already taken a big risk by not stopping to lock the bedroom door to the hallway. Ashlyn was still fully clothed and Ali still had her shirt on so it wouldn’t be disastrous if one of the kids opened the door. It would take the unlucky child a few steps to walk through the narrow entrance between Ashlyn’s closet and the two dressers before he or she could see the bed at all. And if they did, they would be greeted with a shot of Ali’s bare ass but not too much more. More than likely, the moms would hear the door opening and have time to cover up. And that was another unusual thing about their impromptu tryst – Ali always pulled the comforter and covers down to the foot of the bed. She didn’t like getting tangled up in the sheets, for one, but she also knew from experience that it was easier to wash the sheets than it was the comforter if things got really wet and sloppy. It was also handy to have the sheet ready to be pulled up in a hurry, if necessary. But Ashlyn knew she hadn’t locked the door and wasn’t willing to change positions to get the part of Ali that she really wanted into her mouth. Besides, the brunette was close and Ashlyn knew it.

“No, don’t stop...unnnnn...mnmnmnm...fuck babe...don’t...unnnnhh...stop...” Ali’s body moved and bounced with her wife’s fast and powerful pace. She clutched at Ashlyn’s shoulder, digging her fingertips into the back of her sleep t-shirt and wishing it was her bare skin instead. “Oh yeah, so...unnnnn...fucking good...” she gasped when she felt Ashlyn squeeze her other hand between their bodies, moving her fingers down to her clit and rubbing it. “Yes!”

The keeper pumped her left arm hard and fast, while rubbing a finger from her right hand back and forth across Ali’s sensitive nub. She sucked hard on the soft skin beneath her breast, knowing she would leave her mark there and getting even more turned on at the thought.

“You’re gorgeous baby” she panted out as she released the breast and flicked her strong tongue against the erect nipple. “Mmmm...fucking incredible...” she slurped as she felt Ali’s leg tremble in its spot on top of her hip. “Come for me now...I fucking love you so much” she husked out as they both breathed hard. “Come baby, all for me.”

After another minute of hard thrusting and fast rubbing, Ali’s body went rigid for a split second and then began to shake and twitch. She grabbed a fistful of Ashlyn’s shirt, on top of her shoulder, and pulled so hard that the seam ripped up near the collar. The brunette flailed wildly with her right leg from up on her wife’s hip and she rolled more onto her stomach and into Ashlyn’s body as the orgasm travelled through her entire system.

“Ashlyn!!! Yessssss!!!!!” she yelled out as she came hard, all the pent up want and desire from the sexy conversation the night before coursing through her body.

“I’ve got you, sexy. That’s it...” Ashlyn moved her finger away from her wife’s clit and left her hand flat against Ali’s lower abs, loving the feel of the occasional spasm that flared there. She placed soft kisses all over Ali’s heaving chest, enjoying the stiff nipples that poked her in the cheek and chin. “God damn you’re hot as fucking hell, Al.”

The brunette rolled all the way onto her stomach, leaving her right arm limply draped across
Ashlyn’s shoulder. The keeper let her fingers slide out of Ali’s throbbing, drenched pussy and brought them up to her mouth to lick them clean.

“Oh my God...” Ali panted out, sated, her cheek against the comforter as she tried to regain control of her faculties.

As soon as Ashlyn tasted her wife’s sweetness she lost what was left of her self-control. She slid down and knelt between Ali’s outstretched legs, pushing them apart and feeling the twinge in her core at the breathtaking sight in front of her. Ali’s beautiful ass was up and her passion was glistening between her folds and at the top of her left thigh where it had dripped while Ashlyn had fucked her. The keeper quickly lay down on her stomach, barely fitting her torso onto the bed. She let her tongue enjoy the meal it had been craving and her hands went automatically to the perfect ass cheeks that were practically right in her face as she groaned and grunted her excitement and approval. Ali’s body reacted to the first lick and reflexively pulled up for a second before relaxing into the touches.

“Mmmmmmm...so good...” Ashlyn moaned as she tried to be as delicate as possible while her wife recovered from her release. She really wanted to dive in deeper but she knew she needed to start at the perimeter and clean up and in from there. “God I love the way you taste...mnmnmnmnmnm...”

Ali let her heartrate come back down and her breathing come back to normal as she lay there on her stomach. She was exhausted and spent in the best possible way and she felt more relaxed than she could remember in a very long time. Maybe it was the combination of the stress-free night before and the good, peaceful day they had with the kids that had made her feel so weightless and light right at that moment. As she was trying to figure it out, while enjoying the way her keeper’s tongue caressed and loved her most sensitive skin, she felt something warm on her cheek and then her nose. It took her a few seconds to realize she was crying. The tears got bigger and her whole body started to shake as she cried. It had been a while since she had last cried right after sex. The brunette felt fantastic, except for being tired, and she knew the tears were part of her overall relaxation from the night before.

Ashlyn popped her head up when she felt her wife’s body shaking with her tears. She pressed a warm kiss into one ass cheek as she climbed up Ali’s body, supporting herself on all fours and hovering on top of her beautiful brunette.

“Hi there” she grinned, adorably.

“You ok?” she asked softly as she placed a delicate kiss to Ali’s cheek.

“Oh” she whispered back and smiled. “Good tears, I promise.”

“You sure?” Ashlyn wanted to be sure because there had been so much painful, difficult, emotional shit going on that year. She wouldn’t put it past her wife to keep some sort of worry from her just to save her feelings. “It’s ok if they’re just regular tears you know. Or sad tears” she kissed Ali’s cheek again and slowly worked her lips across her jawline and down her neck as the tears started to slow.

“Yeah, I know” the brunette smiled and wrapped her hand around Ashlyn’s arm that was holding her aloft above her. “But they’re good. I’m so relaxed and blissed out, it’s just a total release” she sniffled and rolled over so she was laying on her back.

Ashlyn lifted herself up higher when her wife rolled over and then lowered her body back down to rest on top of her.

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Ashlyn lifted herself up higher when her wife rolled over and then lowered her body back down to rest on top of her.

“Hi there” she grinned, adorably.
“Hi” Ali replied just as sweetly after wiping her tears away.

“I love you” Ashlyn gave her lips a soft kiss and moved the brunette hair that had come loose during their sexy time away from her neck.

“I know” Ali sassed back with a giggle.

“Oh, I see how it is” the keeper couldn’t help but chuckle. “I come up here to go to sleep and you sweet talk me into snuggling with you...”

“Oh, you loved it” Ali interrupted with another giggle.

“Then you seduce me so I’ll give you an orgasm...”

“An incredible, cry-face powerful orgasm” the brunette corrected and moved her hands down to squeeze Ashlyn’s ass for emphasis.

“And now you’re all sassy about it too?” she shook her head and pretended to be appalled by it all. “I don’t know Krieger, you’re really pushing your luck” she frowned playfully and gave her wife another kiss.

Ali giggled through all of it but then, once their lips were together again, she deepened the kiss and had them both panting for air after a couple of minutes.

“I’d rather push something else” the brunette purred as she licked the sweet spot behind her wife’s ear.

“Oh yeah?” Ashlyn shivered at the touch and the sultry sound of her brunette’s voice. “What’s that?”

“The strap-on...” she whispered, hot breath doing wild things to Ashlyn’s ear. “Into your hot, wet pussy...”

The keeper felt a gush of passion between her own legs and swallowed hard as both her body and mind responded to her wife’s tantalizing suggestion. She kissed Ali hard in what might have been the most passionate kiss so far that night. Then, without warning, she rolled off of the brunette and jumped off the foot of the bed.

“Hold that thought” her voice was excited as she quickly stripped her sleep shorts and shirt off before starting to walk away.

“Where are you going?” Ali propped herself up on her elbows as she enjoyed the sight of her gorgeous, naked keeper.

“Gotta lock the door for this one, for sure” Ashlyn winked.

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The Engen Foundation was finally starting to click on all cylinders since Ali first told Whitney and Ashlyn about it back in April of 2026. The very grateful lawyer spent the rest of 2026 doing the background research and work to get the non-profit organization set-up. She had taken a course during law school about non-profit legal offices so she had a good idea of what she wanted to do and how to go about getting it done. She worked every law school connection that she had made and nurtured over the three years since she had graduated in 2023. She picked the brains of some of the smartest people she had ever known and asked questions of several of her former professors to
make sure she was doing everything the best way possible. With two years’ worth of funding from Knight-Harris, The Engen Foundation opened for business in January of 2027. Whitney hired one of her former classmates, Vanessa Reynolds, to work as the primary attorney at the Foundation. Vanessa was incredibly bright and passionate about helping the poor and she was the first person Whitney thought of when Ali told her about the funding that was available. Vanessa brought in a colleague she had been working with at her previous job to be the second of the two lawyers Whitney wanted to have working in 2027. Once Whitney added two paralegals and an office manager to the team, the inaugural version of The Engen Foundation was complete.

The team was in place but they didn’t have a place to call home until October of 2027. For those first 10 months of 2027 they worked from home and met weekly at Knight-Harris. It was far from ideal but it was better than nothing. The dozens of less fortunate people who received expert legal advice and representation that year didn’t care where the lawyers and paralegals did their work. They were just grateful that they didn’t get chewed up and spit back out of the legal system for not having the right color skin or a big enough bank account. Whitney and Vanessa had both been searching all year for an office space that was big enough but not too big so that they couldn’t afford it. It also had to be close enough to K-H for Whitney to be able to divide her time without spending half of her day sitting in traffic. They also wanted it to be near the subway system so the clients they were expecting to need their help could get there without a car. It was a frustrating task and both lawyers were starting to get discouraged.

Ali Krieger didn’t have too many contacts left in the construction world. It had been about a decade since she last sold windows and doors to contractors and architects and many of her customers had retired or changed their business model or simply forgotten the attractive and attentive brunette sales rep who had taken such great care of their projects for them. Ali reached out to Sarah Warren, the architect and her ex, for any advice or inside information she might have that could help Whitney and the Foundation find the perfect office space. It took Sarah a couple of months before she heard about a medium-sized office in an average, 3-story brick office building in Kendall Square, Cambridge, that was about to be rehabbed and redecorated by the new building owner. Her architectural firm had passed on the project because it was too small for them to waste their time, but Sarah told Ali about it and the brunette jumped into action.

“Al, don’t tease me now” Whitney sighed heavily as she got out of the car after listening to the brunette instruct the car service to wait for them and drive around the block if he had to move the car.

“Would I drag you here during your maternity leave unless it was for something important and awesome?” Ali quirked her eyebrow as she shifted 3-month old Tommy Flanagan and his carseat to her right hand.

It was mid-September 2027 and Ali had taken the office space negotiation on herself so the new mother could try and focus on her baby boy and nothing else. Negotiating was the brunette’s specialty and the building owner had been pleased to lease the 2nd floor of the building, one medium-sized office, to The Engen Foundation without having to do the planned rehab or redecoration. All that needed to be done was for Whitney to formalize the paperwork and take care of the financial requirements Ali had arranged.

“This can’t be real” the lawyer shook her head skeptically as she stood in the first-floor entryway and looked around.

It housed a men’s room, ladies’ room, utility closet, and small bank of post-office box style mailboxes on the other wall. There was a flight of stairs leading up to the second floor and then up to the third floor and that was it for the entryway. There was a clear glass door leading into the
first-floor office which was occupied by a busy Optometrist and his staff. The third floor, accessible only by the old wooden staircase, as was the second floor, was the home of two smaller businesses – an accountant’s office on one side and a tailor’s shop on the other. It was the kind of building that had been around for a very long time and was never very schnazzy but had been built well and was sturdy and reliable. There was a lot of dark old wood everywhere you looked, starting with the beautiful old stairs and the wood paneling in the first-floor entry way and second and third-floor hallways. It was old and looked lived-in and well-used but it was solid. It was the type of building often described as having ‘good bones’.

The two friends slowly climbed the stairs to check out the second-floor office, Tommy sleeping contentedly through the whole adventure so far. Ali put a key into the clear glass door, just like the one on the floor below, and pushed it open wide with a nose-crinkling grin she couldn’t contain anymore.

“It’s real Whit. And it’s yours if you want it...well, I think it’s close to your budget. I did my best with the owner but it might be a little bit more than you wanted to spend” the brunette stepped through the door when she realized Whitney was in some kind of delayed shock or something. She put Tommy’s carseat down in the middle of the empty space and turned back to look at the stunned lawyer. “Whitney!” she took a step closer to her, snapped her fingers in front of her and whisper-yelled.

“I don’t...how?...” she stammered and finally walked through the door.

Ali moved behind her and closed the door, hoping for a little bit of privacy while she filled in the lawyer. She put her arm around Whitney’s shoulders and walked her over to the wall of heavy, historic-looking doublehung windows with deep windowsills that looked over the busy side street below. It was a beautiful mid-September morning and the sun was streaming in the windows, leaving tall, rectangular spots of yellow on the dark floor. The brunette filled Whitney in on how she had learned about the office space in the first place.

“So I just made him an offer without going through the rehab work on the space” she shrugged as she finished. “Most of the work was cosmetic and, as far as I understand it, The Engen Foundation isn’t about the fancy or the frilly stuff so there’s nothing really needed here except some fresh paint” she kept grinning at Whitney as the blonde started to walk around the space, inspecting it. “He’ll have to put the elevator in to bring the building up to code for handicap accessibility, but that’s his problem, not ours. If he wants to go ahead and do that then great. But this office space doesn’t need to be tied into that work anymore.”

“Why not?”

“Well, because we want to lease it as is. I guess it’s been empty for a while because the two prospective tenants that liked it were insisting on a lot of redecoration in here, both times. They wanted interior walls moved and a private bathroom installed and lots of extra aesthetic things like new storage cabinets and expensive carpeting and rugs.”

“Even I know not to waste beautiful old wood floors like this” Whitney chuckled as their good fortune started to sink in. “He was happy just to start making income from it again I bet. Lucky us!”

“Exactly. I told him we were ready to move on it right away and he really loved that too” Ali checked her phone and texted the office back quickly. “The details are all here” she handed the lawyer a manila folder and winked at her. “It’s lucky timing mostly, but it’s the perfect location...”

“Al, are you kidding?” Whitney’s eyes went wide. “It’s in Kendall Square, four blocks from the
subway, there are two different bus stops on Mass Ave, one in either direction, there’s a public parking lot 2 blocks that way” she pointed towards the other side of the building as the excitement in her voice rose higher and higher with every benefit she named. “And it’s five minutes from the Knight-Harris office. It’s too perfect!”

“It’s a little bit more than you wanted to spend but I don’t see how you can pass it up” Ali put her hands on her hips and smiled, happy to see her friend finally catching up and coming to her senses after the surprise. “I love you and I say this with nothing but love in my heart...I know you’re tired and not getting nearly enough sleep these days” she nodded at the sleeping baby still in his carseat in the middle of the floor. “But this is a good thing Whit. I swear. If I could have done all the paperwork for you and taken care of the financials I wouldn’t even be asking you what you think right now. I’d be giving you the keys to the Engen Foundation office instead.”

Whitney did appreciate the space for the perfection that it was and as she thought more and more about it during the car ride home Ali had arranged with the car service for she and Tommy, she realized that there was no choice to be made. It was the biggest no-brainer she had come across in her post-soccer life and by the time she got home and nursed Tommy she made an appointment with the owner of the building to start the process of formalizing the lease agreement right away. By the end of October 2027, after official inspections and contract signings, the Engen Foundation had become the official tenants of the second-floor office in the busy Kendall Square area of Cambridge. There were several colleges and universities in the area so Whitney expected to have ample interns and law clerks at their disposal as well. She even started the procedure of becoming one of the official ‘jobs’ that law students could take to earn their pay during their studies. She envisioned ‘interning at the Engen Foundation’ becoming as popular and well-known among the law school students as ‘working at the library’ or ‘clerking for professor so and so’. When 2028 began, The Engen Foundation was completed furnished and stocked and ready for business. Their name was added to the big, ornate nameplate on the outside of the building near the entrance, as well as to their mailbox inside. It was officially official and Whitney, Vanessa and the other four people who were working there every day could not have been more pleased with the new location.

By the time May 2028 was upon them, the Engen Foundation was helping dozens of people every single week and garnering all sorts of praise for the excellent work they were doing. One of the interns that worked at the Foundation that Spring semester had done an elaborate presentation about the good things happening there for his final grade and one of the local news stations had picked up on it.

“You did a good thing baby” Ashlyn patted her wife on her hip as they lay together on the L-shaped couch in the front living room, “finding that office for them.”

It was late, but they wanted to stay up and watch the news segment about their friend and her amazing Foundation on the 11pm news. The keeper was stretched out along the longer half of the couch with her feet down near the recliner and her back in the corner of the couch while Ali lay on her right side along the other half of the couch with her head on her wife’s lap facing the tv.

“Sarah’s the one who found it. I just didn’t let it get away” she chuckled and smiled as her keeper petted her arm and shoulder and then her head. “That feels nice” she practically purred as Ashlyn started to gently massage her head and play with her hair.

“Well, however you want to pass around the credit is fine, but I know you made that happen Al. Sarah didn’t just decide to start looking for office spaces for Whitney. It was you pulling the strings and you’re incredible and I love you so much honey.”
“I’m just glad they got the space they needed. It really bothered me that they were trying to get anything done when they were all spread out and working from their own apartments and homes. That was ridiculous” the brunette rolled her eyes, even though Ashlyn couldn’t see them. “That’s an awesome thing she’s got set up and it deserves its own home. Look at how many more people they’ve been able to help just in the first half of this year. It’s more than four times what they did all of last year.”

“Are you worried about her not being at Knight-Harris as much?” Ashlyn asked the question that made her the most nervous.

“Nope” Ali replied simply as the last commercial ended before the very final, feel good, ‘new in the community’ story aired on the news. “She’s like me, and you. She’ll do whatever she has to do to get both things running smoothly. She’d rather die than let the legal department at K-H slip even a little bit.”

“You’re absolutely right” the keeper agreed with a thoughtful nod and a big smile. “I’m so lucky that my bestie and my wife get each other. It makes me so happy, I can’t even tell you.”

“Yeah, we’re pretty awesome and we make a great team” Ali agreed with her own heartfelt smile. “All three of us...oooh, here it is” she stopped and sat up to focus on the tv. “Turn it up.”

Ashlyn did as requested and cried happy tears as she watched her best friend appear on the 3-minute news story to end the nightly broadcast. The keeper wasn’t one to take the good things in her life for granted, and she had a very healthy appreciation for Whitney Elizabeth Engen Flanagan. But that night her heart burst with love and joy for her best friend. Whitney had finally done what she had always hoped and wanted to do with her life. She was making a real difference, every single day, in the lives of complete strangers who couldn’t have needed her help more. It was everything the lawyer had dreamed of and Ashlyn knew it. She sat there on the couch with tears in her eyes, the good kind of ache in her heart, and a big, dimpled grin across her face. She had never been more proud of Whitney in her life.
Breaking Rules

Chapter Notes

Thanks for your patience and the well wishes. Hope to have the next chapter up in a couple of days if everything goes well. Missed you guys!
P.S. This one’s a little long but I didn’t want to cut anything out.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The very next weekend was the twins’ 5th birthday. It fell on a Saturday so they had another big backyard party full of rambunctious little kids and a huge water slide/bounce house combination. The kids loved it. The grass, not so much. Ashlyn had long ago given up on the idea of having a well-manicured lawn in the backyard. It was just impossible with 2 dogs and 4 little kids. The front and side lawn, everything from the street to the fence basically, looked really good and she took pride in that. That would just have to be enough. Deb came up a few days early, as she often did, and got settled into the Manchester condo for the summer season. Mike had retired in December but was still consulting on a handful of key clients. He wouldn’t be coming up North until late June this year because of a golf trip with one of those key clients. Deb didn’t mind. It wasn’t that she didn’t miss her husband, but she was happy he was going on what was arguably the golfer’s dream vacation. The client had been one of Mike’s good friends for several years and had invited the recent retiree on the trip as a thank you for all of his hard work over the years. They were spending an entire week golfing in Los Cabos, Mexico at one of the most exclusive, expensive, and most amazing golf resorts in the world. Jack Nicklaus designed it and Mike was giddy with excitement as the mid-May date got closer and closer. Of course, he needed to make sure the person from his firm that was taking over for him didn’t screw anything up in the month after the vacation too. That was the tricky part. Mike had to get his friend and client comfortable with the new guy, which was no small task and just took time. Then he could come North.

Tammye and Carol decided to stay down in Florida that May to be there for Chris and Beth and the kids as they continued working back to a normal life together. Mike Harris flew up to Boston instead, eager to see the grandkids and visit Gloucester after he had missed the trip at Christmas. Ken and Vicki were there too, as always. Ken turned 69 years old this year and was finishing up his final year of coaching and teaching in Ipswich. He wouldn’t call it retiring and didn’t want a party or any sort of celebration at the end of the school year in mid-June. He planned to keep doing his US Soccer scouting work for the men’s youth teams, but there were two other scouts that had joined him in the Northeast over the past five years. He didn’t travel nearly as much anymore and, although it had been a tough transition at first, he was becoming more and more ok with staying closer to home. He loved being a Grandpa and spending time with the precious little hearts and minds who looked up to him so much.

It hadn’t been arranged, and it hadn’t even been discussed by Ali and Ashlyn or anybody, but Ken Krieger was filling some of the missing father gaps for the young Krieger kids. Ashlyn was especially thankful because she had always felt bad that Sydney had grown up without a father. It had just always made her heart ache whenever she thought about it. She worried sometimes if her own kids missed having a dad. There were lots of good men in their lives and the keeper hoped that would be good enough to make up for the missing father in their daily lives. Both Ali and Ashlyn talked to the kids about it if they ever thought something was amiss with one of them. They didn’t go into any details and all four kids accepted the family storyline that their family just had two
moms instead of a mom and a dad. One wasn’t better than the other, they were just different. But Ken Krieger had done everything humanly possible to make himself available to his daughter’s kids. He was there for every sports game he could squeeze into his schedule. He went to holiday concerts and music recitals and everything any of the kids performed or competed in. And Vicki was usually right there with him. Now that his time was going to be a lot more free he’d be able to attend even more of their games and activities, which was a good thing for everybody. Ali and Ashlyn were both capable moms who had become very adept at multitasking and dividing and conquering as they raised their kids. But they were still only human and they couldn’t split their bodies in half to go to all of the different kids’ games if the start times overlapped each other. Having Ken and Vicki there was the perfect solution. And a Godsend. When they couldn’t be there to help out, Ali and Ashlyn had to rely on other parents to shuttle their kids from one practice or game to the next. They were all in the same boat and all the moms knew they’d need to count on one another at some point during the next several years. It was the living embodiment of ‘it takes a village’.

“What do you mean 6?” Mike Harris chuckled as he gave his daughter a quizzical look.

“I mean 6” Ashlyn clarified in an even voice, meeting her father’s dancing blue eyes and instantly seeing Gram’s eyes in them. They weren’t the same hazel color but they had always danced the same way her grandmother’s had. “They can’t skateboard until they’re 6 Dad.”

“But they snowboarded at Christmas...Johnny told me they did” Mike furrowed his brow, trying to understand as they stood there in the kitchen after lunch on Sunday.

It was the day after the twins’ 5th birthday party and Ashlyn and her father were in charge of Dodge and Lily until dinner time. Ali and Deb were shopping for Drew’s birthday while Josie was at rehearsal for her recital at the end of the month and Drew was at Ethan’s for the afternoon. It was also Mother’s Day and Deb and Mike had both made sure the kids made cards for their moms. Grandma made breakfast that morning while Papa kept the kids busy putting the finishing touches on those cards, just to give Ali and Ashlyn the chance to sleep in a little bit. It had been a good morning with four happy kids, two lazy dogs, two helpful grandparents and two very appreciative and grateful moms. After lunch it was back to the normal, busy routine. It was mid-May and the ocean was way too cold to get into, especially for the twins, so going to the beach was out of the question. Mike wanted to do something fun with them before he flew back home the next day and he and Ashlyn had been wracking their brains trying to come up with something fun and exciting that Dodge and Lily hadn’t done yet. Mike wanted to take them skateboarding at the skatepark over by Gloucester Harbor, but he didn’t know the rules.

“No, Drew and Josie snowboarded with Johnny and Lizzy” Ashlyn clarified. “Dodge and Lily skied.”

“But...”

“Dad” the keeper shook her head and met his eyes. “Don’t.”

“I think skiing is harder than snowboarding” he added quickly. “That’s all I was going to say.”

“It’s better to teach little kids to ski first” Ashlyn patiently explained. She knew where her dad was coming from because she had reacted the same way until she had listened to Ali’s argument and read a few of the articles the brunette had recommended. “They don’t have enough balance, and their heads, especially with the helmets, are so big that it makes it even harder to stand sideways on the board and stay upright. They fall right over. The kids ski for two years and then, when they’re 6 and their balance is better, then they try snowboarding.”
“Dodge has terrific balance” the elder man continued. He wasn’t being argumentative, he was honestly trying to work out the situation in his own mind. “He’ll be up on the boogie board as soon as the water’s warm enough” he leaned against the kitchen counter and crossed his arms over his chest as he thought more about it. “And Lily’s not too far behind him.”

The blonde couldn’t disagree, well maybe about how far behind Lily really was – she wasn’t that close to her brother when it came to most physical things, but nobody was. Dodge would probably be able to get up on his knees on the boogie board in another couple of months and she knew it. He had incredible balance to go with his superhuman strength and extraordinary coordination. Not to mention his fearlessness. If anybody could start skateboarding a little early it was definitely Dodge.

Mike saw the glimmer of consideration in his daughter’s eye and tried to play it cool and not scare it away.

“But, if you think he’s still too little to give it a try, I get it” he shrugged his shoulders and picked up the half-eaten bag of chips to walk them across the tile floor to the pantry and put them away.

Ashlyn’s competitive nature flared at the unspoken challenge that had just been tossed her way. She knew Dodge could do it. Why did the rules all have to apply to every single one of the kids anyway? She and Ali were all about treating each child uniquely, based on exactly who they were as individuals. Dodge was different than his siblings when it came to his physicality. Ashlyn knew it and she knew Ali did too.

“We’ll just go and see if he wants to try it” she said, trying to keep the excitement out of her voice. “We’ll let him try getting on it a couple of times and then go over to the swings” she reasoned, referencing the playground right next to the skatepark.

Barely an hour later Ashlyn and her father were grinning like idiots as they stood 6’ away from each other watching as Dodge worked hard to balance on Drew’s skateboard between them. The skatepark was medium sized and made of smooth concrete and it was fairly busy that Sunday afternoon. The keeper opted to use the flat paved area that surrounded the actual bowl and other elements to stay out of the way. They each gave him a gentle push towards the other once he was in position and ready for another trip between them. He wore his bike helmet and all of his protective gear: knee pads, elbow pads and wrist guards. All of the Krieger kids had that same equipment and they started using it as soon as they started learning how to ride a bike with training wheels. The twins inherited their elder siblings’ first sets of gear although Josie hadn’t even outgrown hers yet. She and Lily and Dodge were practically the same size still. The little blonde girl had decided not to try skateboarding yet, even though Ashlyn had offered to just push her around on Josie’s board, keeping both hands on her hips the entire time. That’s where Dodge’s fearlessness came in. Lily didn’t like feeling unsteady on the skateboard and wanted off as soon as the keeper had put her on it. But Dodge’s eyes were focused and intense as he concentrated on keeping his balance.

“Mama, you promised” Lily whined after thirty minutes of watching her brother move slowly back and forth between her mama and Papa.

“I promised after five more minutes and I set the alarm to make sure I didn’t forget” the keeper replied as she watched her youngest son slowly make his way towards her. “When the alarm goes off we’ll go swing, all of us.”

“But Maaaaaaa...” she whined and stomped her foot down from her place a couple of feet away from Ashlyn, towards Dodge and the skateboard. She wasn’t in the path of the fledgling skateboarder but standing about two feet away from him as well, just off to his left side. She crossed her arms in a huff and stuck her bottom lip out as far as it would go. “I wanna swing
“Wee, stop!” Dodge yelled at his sister, still focused on the board and his balance and his Mama in front of him. His face was a big aggravated frown as he spoke sharply to Lily. “I’m tryin to do this! Just shut up!”

“That’s enough Dodger” Ashlyn chastised her son, even though she completely agreed with him.

‘Shut up’ was a bad word in the Krieger clan. Neither Ashlyn nor Ali had ever used it with each other or the kids. They both disliked everything about it. The keeper had never used it too much anyway, but Ali especially avoided it. In all of her sales experience and communications training she’d ever had at every level, it was agreed that there was no good outcome from using that phrase. The only thing it was ever good for was a fight or, at the very least, a heated argument and neither was productive at all. In fact, just hearing her brother use the bad word sent Lily into her own little outburst. Before Ashlyn could even react, Lily took a step forward, face scrunched up and red with fury, and pushed Dodge as hard as she could. She put both hands on his outstretched left arm, he was still trying to keep his balance, and shoved him off the skateboard to his right side.

“Lily no!”

“Hey now!”

Ashlyn and Mike both yelled at the same time as they tried in vain to catch the boy before he hit the pavement.

Dodge lost his balance and sent the skateboard shooting towards Ashlyn’s ankle as the force of the push made him leave his feet and fall fast and hard. He managed to turn his body to the side so he could see what was coming next. He braced himself with his right arm and both Ashlyn and Mike prayed that the wrist guard would be enough to keep him safe. The skateboard to the ankle slowed the keeper just enough so she couldn’t get her long arms close enough to grab any part of the boy. She was only an inch short and she really thought she could snag his left hand as it flailed past her, but he had pulled it into his body as he turned to try and brace for impact. Mike did his best to close the distance too, but he was almost 5’ away by the time Lily pushed Dodge and couldn’t get there either. The boy landed in a heap, accompanied by the sickening sound of hard, safety-gear plastic scraping across the asphalt pavement. He ended up on his back and his face erupted into tears when his body finally came to rest. He clutched at his right arm and rolled onto his left side as he bawled. The only thing that made the tears stop for a split second was the sight of Lily standing there looking shocked and sorry as hell. She had stepped closer to check on her brother but stopped when she saw the look he gave her. Anger flashed across his face as he tried to get up and exact some revenge, but it was just a flash. The pain he felt when he sat up made him cry hard again as Ashlyn knelt beside him to look at his injured arm.

“Maaaaa-maaaaa, it hurts” he wailed and lifted his right arm towards Ashlyn.

“I know it does baby boy” she cooed, trying to soothe him as she pulled him into her lap, carefully cradling his right arm. “Don’t move it, ok? Just be still, little man” she leaned down and kissed the top of his sweaty head as soon as Mike got his helmet off.

“I’ll go get the Jeep” Mike stuck his hand out for the keys and noted how worried his daughter was when she just handed them over without even a warning to drive it like the precious baby it was. “Be right back.”

“Papa...” Lily spoke quietly to her grandfather, knowing her Mama would be angry with her.

“You don’t say a word young lady” Ashlyn interrupted her with fury filling her features. “You stand right where you are and do not move a muscle or make one single sound until I tell you to”
she snapped.

Mike had paused, wondering if he should take the little girl with him, but started jogging towards the nearby public parking lot when he heard his daughter’s instructions. No confusion or doubt there at all. Not one bit. He did not envy the trouble Lily was in.

Two hours later Ali walked quickly into the emergency room at the hospital all four children had been born in. It was in Winchester, where Whitney and her family now lived, and very near Ali’s old house in Stoneham. The brunette had fumed the entire 45-minute drive from Gloucester and was still trying to get her anger under control as she scanned the busy room for faces she recognized.

“Mommy!” Lily called out and ran across the waiting room, throwing herself into the brunette and bursting into tears.

Ali knelt down and hugged her daughter, kissing her cheek and trying to get her to calm down and breathe. She glanced above Lily’s blonde head and gave Ashlyn a questioning look. The keeper rolled her eyes and shook her head, frustrated that the person who caused all the trouble in the first place was now getting Ali’s attention before the injured party even did. Ali knew from talking to Mike what had happened. Dodge had been crying too loudly for Ashlyn to be able to even hear her wife over the phone so she just handed it to her father from the backseat as he drove them to the hospital. Now, as the entire waiting room looked on, Ali comforted her daughter and then held her hand as they both walked over to Ashlyn, Mike and Dodge.

“Hi baby boy” Ali bent over and kissed her son’s cheek, her heart breaking at the sight of his red, tear-stained face. It was so unusual to see him this way that it made her hold her breath.

“Mommy” he whimpered from his place curled into Ashlyn’s lap, head on her shoulder and damaged right arm cradled carefully against his little body. Both of the keeper’s hands were on guard, ready to deflect anything that came near her injured son. “I hurt my arm” he announced, weakly, as if the brunette had no idea why they were all there.

“I heard” she said softly and kissed him again. “I’m so sorry, sweetheart. But we’ll get your arm all fixed up again, ok?” she looked over her shoulder to try and assess how much longer they might have to wait. It was 5:30pm and the ER seemed very busy.

“I skateboarded too!” Dodge added proudly, still not feeling well enough to give it his usual enthusiasm though.

Ali turned back to face him as her temper flared again. But as soon as she saw the happy, accomplished look on his tired face, she melted. There would be time to argue about that later. Right now all she wanted was to comfort her son and get him seen by an ER doctor. She gave the boy a bright smile and cupped his cheek as she spoke sweetly to him.

“I heard that too. I’m proud of you honey. Was it fun?”

“Ah-huh” he nodded.

“Krieger?” an ER nurse called out.

“Here! Right here!” Mike jumped up and made sure to get his attention.

“Want me to take him?” Ali asked her wife, unable to keep the sweetness in her voice, even though she really did try.
“No, I’ve got him” Ashlyn replied as she got ready to stand up with the 5-year old still nestled into her chest. “It’s just easier” she started to explain, “he’s already all snuggled in.”

Ali nodded, knowing her wife was right. She took Ashlyn’s arm and helped to pull her to her feet. If she knew her wife, she knew the keeper hadn’t let Dodge out of her arms once since the accident and she knew exactly how heavy he was.

“Thanks” Ashlyn gave the brunette a lopsided grin, hoping the sign of kindness meant she wasn’t in too much trouble after all.

“Mike, can you take Lily home for us?” Ali asked her father-in-law.

Ashlyn got her answer as the brunette completely ignored her comment and grin.

“Sure, yeah, of course” Mike nodded at Ali and said a quick goodbye to Dodge as Ashlyn started to carry him towards the waiting nurse. “Listen,” he lowered his voice and spoke directly to Ali, “it was my idea, my fault” he shook his head sadly. “She told me it was against the rules...”

“And that’s the problem” Ali answered evenly. She gave him a quick hug and then kissed Lily goodbye as the girl held her Papa’s hand. “Thanks Mike” she leaned closer and whispered into his ear “it’s after dinner and she hasn’t eaten and if she gets whiny on the ride home you can take her to McDonalds if you want, there’s one right as you get on the highway from this exit. But there’s food at home too. Totally your call.”

There wasn’t much worse than a hungry, cranky Lily Krieger and Ali knew it. The girl was one wrong move from a full-blown tantrum and the brunette felt terrible putting Mike in the line of fire. They didn’t eat at McDonald’s often, but the chicken McNuggets were Lily’s favorite and Ali quickly typed her daughter’s order into a text and sent it to Mike as she hurried to catch up to Ashlyn and Dodge.

“But nurses are girls...” Dodge cocked his head as he studied the male nurse who had called them into the curtained ER area.

“Wow, what did I miss?” Ali chuckled nervously as she stood next to Ashlyn, both of them next to Dodge who was lying on the gurney like a big, brave boy. The nurse stood on the other side with a grin on his face.

“Dodger, you know better than that” Ashlyn softly corrected. “Some doctors are boys and some are girls...”

“Dr. Patty is a girl” he agreed with a small, thoughtful nod.

“That’s right” Ashlyn chuckled. “And nurses can be girls or boys too, just like every other job there is.”

Both moms glanced apologetically at Ramon, reading his name tag and smiling sheepishly.

“You’re right though big guy” Ramon smiled kindly at the patient. “Most nurses are girls, but some of us are boys. What do you want to be when you grow up?”

“Police officer!” Dodge answered loudly and then winced as Ramon finished taking his vitals and getting everything ready for the doctor.

“Nice” the nurse grinned at the boy. “You like helping people, just like I do.”
“Yep” Dodge smiled proudly.

Ashlyn felt a wave of emotion sweep over her and she swayed a little bit as she stood next to the bed. Nobody noticed except for Ali and she reached down and took her keeper’s hand, squeezing it and rubbing her thumb across the back of it to try and let her know it would be ok. The blonde wiped a couple of stray tears away with her free hand and took some deep breaths.

“Are you ok babe?” Ali whispered into her ear, pressing a kiss into the top of her t-shirt covered arm and staying close while Dodge was distracted by Ramon and their conversation about how great police officers were. Ashlyn swallowed and nodded her head after blinking a few times. “It’ll be ok” Ali soothed. “He’s ok. He’s right here with us and he’s ok.”

The keeper’s mind was reeling but hearing Ali’s soft, concerned voice so close was enough to steady her. She knew from personal experience that just because the brunette was being sweet and kind to her now, it didn’t mean that she wasn’t going to get her ass chewed out when they got home. But that was ok. She deserved it. She broke the rules and Dodge broke his arm and there was nobody to blame but herself. But for now, for right this minute in this ER curtain, she was thankful to have her loving wife right there by her side. She knew Ali was afraid she was going to have some sort of PTSD episode, but she wasn’t going to. At least she didn’t think she was going to. Her primary emotion was guilt and remorse, not fear or panic. Maybe it was because broken bones didn’t really worry her too much? Maybe it was because it was Dodge – their destructo-boy, who never seemed to be kept down for very long for any reason? Who knew for sure why, but this situation wasn’t striking terror in the keeper’s heart.

“I’m ok” she turned her head and whispered back, trying to show Ali with her eyes that her words were true. “I promise. I think I’m just hungry or something. It’s been a long afternoon.”

It was just after 8pm when Ali carried a sleeping Dodge into the big old house that night. She had texted her mom to let her know that the kids could stay up to see him if they wanted to, which, of course, they all did. Even Drew, who could be so fickle with his feelings about his little brother, was concerned and anxious to see him. Whitney had brought dinner over for the three Kriegers as they waited in the ER curtain for Dodge’s fiberglass cast to be applied. Both moms had told the lawyer not to bother but they were thrilled that she hadn’t listened to them. They were starving, as was Dodge – even though he had enjoyed most of the dinner tray Ramon brought for him. The hospital didn’t like to give kids medicine, even something as benign as Children’s Tylenol, on an empty stomach.

“Wow, it’s a zoo in here” Whitney’s eyes were wide as she finally made her way back to the little family.

“Mother’s Day” Ali sighed heavily as she got up and waited her turn to hug the lawyer hello. “All sorts of kids and dads trying to do things with fire and knives for all the moms...” she chuckled. “Lots of kitchen accidents today apparently.”

“That makes way too much sense” Whitney shook her head and then gave Dodge a big hug and a kiss. “I heard somebody rocked his first skateboard today” she enthused, getting a broad smile from the patient. “Way to go little man” she high-fived him, careful to use her right hand over by his healthy left hand.

“You are a lifesaver Whit” Ashlyn mumbled around a mouthful of cheeseburger.

“What are Godmother’s for?” Whitney winked at her godson and giggled as she helped him with his own cheeseburger – still his favorite thing to eat.
All three kids ran to the mudroom as soon as they heard it open from their comfy spots in the front living room. They had been tiredly watching ‘The Incredibles’ which was one of Dodge’s favorite movies. He liked to say he was a combination of Dash and baby Jack Jack and nobody could really argue with him. Both Deb and Mike had been touched when Drew chose it, especially for Dodge.

“Hey guys” Ashlyn spoke quietly as she ushered them all back into the front living room so Ali could bring the patient in and sit with him on the couch. “He fell asleep on the ride home so keep it down, ok?”

“Oh, poor baby boy” Deb cooed as she hugged Ashlyn once the keeper had greeted all three kids and both dogs. “And poor Mama too” she patted the keeper’s cheek.

“Thanks guys” Ashlyn said to Deb and her father. “Were they ok tonight?”

“They were just fine” Mike smiled warmly. He and Deb had already decided not to tell them about the fight Lily and Josie had gotten into.

Lily was lashing out because she felt so guilty about hurting her brother and Deb had finally suggested that everybody should just leave her alone and give her some space. Then she used her own body as a buffer between the angsty girl and her big brother and sister.

“Yeah, well, you can tell us the truth later then” Ali rolled her eyes and sighed again.

“His cast is blue like mine!” Drew yelled, forgetting to be quiet.

“Shhhh...” Ali chuckled when she saw how excited their oldest boy was. “He picked his favorite color, blue” she nodded as Dodge started to wake up and stretch a little bit as she held him. “And back when you were just a little guy” she reached out and poked Drew in his belly and made him giggle shyly, “you picked blue because that was the color of Mama’s team and you wanted to match her when she got her cast put on.”

“Mama had a cast too?” Josie asked, wide-eyed at the new information.

“Yep” Ashlyn grinned. “Mine was on my leg though. Drew broke his arm, just the same way Dodge broke his today. Right here” she pointed half-way up her own forearm.

“It was my other arm though” Drew remembered as he took a step even closer and gently touched the back of Dodge’s right hand.

Dodge had the same sort of ‘clean break’ fracture in his forearm from breaking his fall – just as Drew had back when he was 2. The wrist guard had done its’ job and protected Dodge’s delicate wrist, but there was no way to stop the impact from hitting the ground. The blue fiberglass cast started half-way up his hand, so only his knuckles and fingers and thumb were sticking out of it, and continued up his arm to just below his elbow.

“And lucky for you, you’re right-handed so it wasn’t too bad for you, breaking your left arm” Ali smiled again, moved by the tenderness Drew was showing his little brother.

“But he’s right-handed” Josie came closer too, standing next to Drew and leaning against Ali’s knees. She pointed at Dodge’s right hand as she spoke, concern creasing her face. “That’s bad, right mommy?”

“It’s a good thing school’s almost out” Deb chuckled.

“We’ll have to see how he does with the cast” Ali shrugged after giggling at her mother’s
“Maybe it won’t bother him at all and he’ll be able to hold onto his pencil…”

“Or crayon...” Josie added, knowing that her little brother’s favorite writing implement was indeed a blue crayon.

“...or crayon” Ali corrected herself, patting the redhead’s hip affectionately, “just fine. We’ll have to wait and see.”

“Alright guys, let’s get up to bed” Ashlyn finally ended the sleepy show and tell. “It’s a school night and it’s already very late.”

Deb helped her herd the three conscious kids to the front stairs and then followed her grandchildren up to the second floor.

“Here, let me carry him up” Ashlyn moved to the couch and lifted the sleeping patient into her arms.

“I’ll make sure mom doesn’t read more than one quick one tonight” Ali sighed as she hefted herself up off of the comfy couch.

Deb had a bad habit of letting the kids sweettalk her into reading more than she was supposed to. Grandma didn’t put the kids to bed very often so whenever she got the opportunity, she tended to let the rules slide a little bit. Normally, Ali loved that her mother did that and that the kids expected it from her, but not tonight. It was already late and Lily had been a brat and refused to take a shower or a bath. Monday morning was going to suck bigtime and the last thing they needed was overtired kids on top of it.

There were four very different conversations that happened that night. The first was between Lily and her moms after Grandma finished reading the second quick book. Ali let Ashlyn take the lead because she had been the mom on duty when the accident happened, but she sat at the foot of the bed with a stern look on her face to support her wife. Lily had been stand-offish and distant and ill-tempered ever since the accident at the skatepark. Deb had texted both moms just so they had a heads up before getting home. The working theory was that the 5-year old knew she had been very bad and was very upset that her brother had been hurt because of it and she just didn’t know how to process those feelings and emotions.

“It was kind of scary when Dodge got hurt, wasn’t it?” Ashlyn tried to get her to open up after going through the hard and stern part of the talk first.

Both moms had explained why Lily’s behavior was wrong and then they had taken away her kids’ kindle for two weeks as punishment. And, because they knew their daughter very well, they clarified that she couldn’t use anybody else’s kindle or the household iPad either. They had used this punishment before, only for a week though, and it had proven very effective. This longer, two-week punishment was a lot but Lily had broken so many of their most important rules that one week was definitely not enough. She had pushed her brother and caused him to get hurt. That was the most obvious one. But the one that was just as important to Ali and Ashlyn was that Lily had acted out in anger. She didn’t want to wait her turn and she lost her temper when her brother told her to shut up and she physically acted on it. They had been trying to teach Josie, and all of the kids really, about controlling her temper and not hitting or pushing or responding in any violent, physical way. Lily knew she had been very bad and didn’t put up much of a fuss about her punishment.

“Ah-huh” Lily nodded from her place in bed, all snuggled up with stuffed animals surrounding her entire pillow and head of the bed like a zoological halo. “He flew far” she offered meekly.
“That’s what happens when you push somebody like that” Ali spoke softly, rubbing her daughter’s legs beneath the covers. “I know you didn’t mean to hurt him, but what happened today – this is exactly why Mama and I are always telling you guys not to hit or push or kick or throw things. We know somebody’s going to get hurt. And then the person that did the hitting or pushing or kicking or throwing is going to feel bad about hurting their brother or sister or friend or schoolmate or whomever.”

“Dodge’ll be ok sweetpea” Ashlyn brushed some of Lily’s hair away from her face and gave her a soft smile. “He might be mad at you for a little while...”

“But he said shut up” Lily reminded her moms when she started feeling guilty again.

“Yes he did and he’ll get punished for that” the keeper continued evenly. “And tomorrow morning you’re both going to apologize to each other for what you did wrong. Ok?”

“Um-kay” she frowned into her pillow a bit.

“But you’ll forgive each other because you love each other very much” Ali leaned forward and pressed a kiss into her daughter’s hand as it clutched her current favorite golden retriever stuffed animal under her arm. “And I love you both very much and everything’s going to be ok baby girl.” She patted her little butt and stood up. “Now go to sleep. We have to get up early tomorrow and take a shower...”

“Which means we have to brush your hair out first...” Ashlyn added with a quirk of her eyebrow, knowing that was the real reason the girl didn’t want to take a shower that night. She didn’t mind the shower at all, she just hated having her hair brushed out.

“Awww, Mama...” Lily pouted.

“We could always get your hair cut instead...” the keeper challenged, seriously.

“Nuh-uh” Lily shook her head.

“Well, we don’t want to hear one complaint from you in the morning then” it was Ali’s turn to warn the little girl. “Got it?”

“Yeah” she sighed.

“Alright, go to sleep Lily girl” Ashlyn bent down and gave her a big, sloppy, loud kiss on her cheek that made her giggle. “I love you.”

The second and third conversations happened simultaneously as Mike and Ashlyn talked in the living room and Deb and Ali chatted in the kitchen. Mike apologized again to his daughter for pushing her to break the rules while Ashlyn told him for at least the tenth time that it wasn’t his fault. Deb and Ali talked about Lily’s behavior and what the best plan of attack might be if it continued after making peace with Dodge in the morning. Grandma hugged her daughter hard before making the fifteen-minute drive back to the condo for the night. The fourth conversation was the one neither mom wanted to have and they postponed it as long as possible. It was Mike’s last night and he and Ashlyn stayed up to watch a surfing competition being broadcast live from Hawaii. It provided just enough of a distraction so they could pay attention to it while still talking about random things without having to go into too much detail. Ali had excused herself and gone up to bed after spending a little bit of time with them. The brunette was fast asleep by the time Ashlyn crept up the backstairs and quietly got ready for bed. The keeper stood in front of her dresser, trying to change into her sleep shorts and t-shirt without waking her wife up. She used her
phone to light her way and just about jumped out of her skin when she heard Ali’s voice.

“I’m awake.”

It sounded sleepy and raspy, which was usually one of Ashlyn’s favorite versions of her wife’s voice. But there was an edge to it that made the keeper swallow hard as she tried to get her heart rate to calm down in the dark.

“Jesus!” Ashlyn put her hand to her chest and dropped her phone into the open drawer, smacking her other hand on the bottom of the drawer as she instinctively tried to catch it.

Ali had a flash of déjà vu as she remembered startling her keeper in a very similar manner just the weekend before. That had ended up with the two of them tangled together, naked, and extremely satisfied. Somehow the brunette knew that wasn’t going to happen tonight. She was so angry with Ashlyn that she had found it hard to even tell her mother what had happened when she first got the blonde’s call that afternoon. It had been a long time since Ashlyn had broken one of their rules and Ali didn’t think she had ever broken such a big one that involved the kids’ safety.

“You scared me. Fuck!” the keeper cursed as she tried to shake the pain out of her hand. She quickly finished getting dressed and fished her phone out of the drawer before walking to her own side of the bed and standing there awkwardly. She put her phone down on the nightstand and looked at her wife’s back. “Do you want to talk or do you want me to go sleep upstairs?”

“Don’t go upstairs” Ali sighed and rolled onto her back, turning her head to look at her wife. She rubbed her face with her hands and then reached for her glasses. When she sat up and then turned back around to face Ashlyn again, she saw that she was still standing there next to the bed with her arms at her sides, looking like a little kid afraid to wake their mom or dad up in the middle of the night. “Are you just going to stand there?”

“Al, look” Ashlyn started talking fast as she reached up to grab the back of her own neck with one hand, nervously shifting her weight from one foot to the other as the words flew out of her mouth. “I’m sorry. I fucked up. I broke the rule. I broke our rule” she emphasized the ‘our’ because she knew how much Ali hated to always be the heavy when it came to the rules and discipline with the kids. “I know you’re mad at me and I don’t blame you one bit. I’d be pissed off too. But I’m telling you...” she paused for the first time and took a shallow, gasping breath, “you can’t possibly be any more disappointed in me than I am with myself.”

There was an awkward pause while the keeper switched hands and grabbed at the back of her neck again, dying for her wife to just get it over with. Whatever it was. But Ali just sat there, propped up against the headboard with the covers pooled around her waist and her hands in her lap. Ashlyn had to look away from her nipples – she could see them through the tight-fitting sleep tank, hardening as they adjusted to the cooler air above the covers. Truthfully, the brunette had been almost absent-mindedly admiring Ashlyn’s biceps as they flexed in each arm that the blonde brought up to the back of her neck. Neither woman claimed to understand the intense pull their bodies still had over one another, they were just grateful for it. But now was not the time to be ogling each other and, as if the words had just flashed on a screen in front of them, they both looked down for a minute to collect themselves.

“But why?” Ali shook her head slightly and then tilted it just a bit to one side as she looked at the keeper.

Ashlyn leaned her body against the side of the bed, letting her thighs support her as they pressed into it. She idly trailed her fingers across the lightweight blanket with one hand, the other still gripping her neck. Why was definitely the question and she had tried all evening to figure out why
she had chosen to break the rules. She didn’t have a good answer and she knew Ali would be upset no matter what she said. Fuck it. She was just going to say exactly what she had thought when she made the decision.

“I just knew he could do it” she shrugged in exasperation and let both arms drop to the blanket, palms up. “And I was right too.”

The hint of defiance in her voice made Ali’s anger spike.

“It’s not about being right Ashlyn. It’s about keeping the kids safe and following the rules that we both agreed on to do that” her voice rose with every word, even though she was trying to stay calm. “It’s not like we don’t have two older kids to point at as proof that our system works…”

“System? They’re kids, not computers or...or...robots” Ashlyn fumbled with her words as her face became more animated. “And being right sure as hell does matter! He’s stronger than the other kids and you know it. Why do we have to limit him? Just so he fits into the ‘system’?” she mockingly used air quotes and regretted it as soon as she saw Ali set her jaw in response. “I don’t think that’s the right thing to do. I’m sorry” she finished with a flurry and folded her arms across her chest with a defiant nod.

“I don’t want to limit him either!” Ali yelled, unable to let the second jab of defiance go unchecked. “I never said I did. And you would have known that if you had fucking discussed it with me before just doing your own thing, as usual!”

“What the hell does that mean?” the keeper stood up straight and put her hands on her hips.

“Oh, please” Ali rolled her eyes. “Don’t play dumb. You know as well as I do that you pick and choose when you enforce the rules.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it. I haven’t done that for years. We’d get eaten alive by those kids if we weren’t on the same page and showing them a unified front” she had started pacing back and forth next to the bed. “You just can’t let that go, can you? How many years do I have to do it right before you stop throwing the fact that I screwed up with Drew at first in my face?”

There was a tense pause as the brunette fought hard to keep her mouth shut until her brain caught up to it.

“You’re right, alright?!” Ali yelled back, leaning forward and gesturing animatedly with her hands.

But Ashlyn kept pacing and fuming, thoughts clanging around inside her head as she tried to put them into some sort of rational order.

“Wait, what?” she stopped and turned to look at the brunette. They both had fire in their eyes.

“You’ve been really great about the rules” Ali admitted as she slumped back against the headboard with a frustrated sigh. “I’m sorry I said that. But that’s not the point” she squinted at the blonde. “This isn’t about the past, it’s about today. Your dad told me that you knew it was breaking the rules and you decided to do it anyway. What the fuck Ash?”

“Thanks Dad” she thought she said quietly enough for her wife not to hear.

“Don’t be mad at him“ Ali challenged. “He was trying to defend you. He tried to take the blame himself.”

“Yeah, ok” Ashlyn sighed again, loudly this time. “And yeah, you’re right – I should have talked to
you about it first. That’s on me too...”

It was quiet for a minute as they both thought hard about what to say or do next.

“I still don’t understand why today was the day you decided to just start doing it differently. What happened?” Ali’s voice was calmer as she tried to dial it down and get the discussion back on track.

Ashlyn heard the difference too and knew just how hard it was for her wife to do that. Ali from 10 years ago would have just kept going on her tirade and the discussion would have devolved into a shouting match that would have ended with hurt feelings and words that should never have been said. The keeper knelt on the foot of her side of the bed, angled to face her wife while she tried to explain her mindset that afternoon.

“I think we need to make new rules for Dodge” she began simply. “I’d like to talk about that, maybe not tonight, but sometime soon. Can we do that, please?”

“Yes. I think so too” Ali agreed with a nod. “I don’t want to hold him back now any more than I did when he and Lily were babies and we were trying to decide how to wean them. Do you remember that?”

There was a small smile starting to form on the brunette’s face and Ashlyn frowned as she tried to get her brain to go back four years in time.

“Yeah, he was ready to give up the bottle before Lily was ready to give up my breast and you wanted to wean him on his own instead of making him wait for his sister and weaning them together.”

“Exactly” Ali nodded. “And he hit all his milestones early compared to all three of the other kids.”

“He’s riding a bike without training wheels a whole year before Drew or Josie did. He’s just physically more advanced than the other kids. That’s how I knew he’d be able to skateboard today” Ashlyn dropped her eyes, regretting the unfortunate injury again. “I just knew he could do it and I thought having my dad there would be really special and fun...and it was” she smiled sadly and lifted her eyes to look into her favorite amber ones.

“Until it wasn’t” Ali chuckled, holding her wife’s gaze for several seconds.

“And the only reason he fell was because Lily pushed him” the keeper quickly reminded the brunette. “He was doing great. His balance was incredible” she enthused, unable to stop herself from getting excited about her son’s improvement in just the first half-hour he had ever spent on a skateboard. “I can’t wait for the 10 weeks to go by so he can try again” she looked hopefully at her wife.

“They said 10-12 weeks and we’ll see how soon Patty says he can skateboard again after that” Ali quirked her eyebrow at the blonde. “I doubt it’ll be right away after getting his cast off.”

“You know what I mean” Ashlyn smiled shyly, happy they were talking about this without the anger anymore.

She crawled forward and straddled Ali’s lap, hoping it wasn’t too soon to bridge the tangible gap between them. When Ali was mad at her the keeper definitely didn’t want to be right in her face like that. Not a good idea. But the brunette let her wife settle onto her lap and even hold both of her hands there. The keeper took a deep breath before continuing.
“I’m really really sorry that I didn’t talk about it with you first” Ashlyn’s sincere words landed on Ali and tamped down any lingering upset inside the brunette. “You deserve better than that and I won’t do it again” she lifted up Ali’s hands and kissed them both.

“Thank you for apologizing” the brunette smiled and blinked at her wife as she felt Ashlyn’s soft lips on the backs of her hands. “I’m still mad, but I understand why you did it, I guess. It was your dad’s last day with them and it was important to him...”

“I still should have talked to you about it. I know that Al. I get it. We could have just had this conversation last night or this morning and...”

“And Dodge would still have a broken arm” Ali laughed softly, still surprised that Lily had pushed him right off the board.

“Yes, but you wouldn’t be mad at me about it. God, I hate when you’re mad at me” Ashlyn exhaled and caressed her wife’s hands with her long thumbs.

“Well...” Ali started to make an obvious point.

“I know, I know. Quit doing things that make you mad. I get it” she rolled her eyes playfully and giggled.

“So smart” the brunette smiled again, bigger this time, and leaned forward to kiss Ashlyn’s lips softly.

“I love you and I’m sorry” the keeper kissed her lightly again. “And I love you” she brought their lips together in a slow, deep kiss that was heartfelt and full of love, but not heated. “Happy Mother’s Day baby...”

“Oh my God” Ali’s eyes opened in shock. “Is it still Mother’s Day?”

Ashlyn giggled and looked at the digital clock on her wife’s nightstand.

“It is, for another 12 minutes.”

“This is the longest day in forever” Ali groaned and hugged her keeper tight for a minute.

“Wanna celebrate the last 12 minutes by falling asleep with me?” Ashlyn asked adorably as they pulled apart.

“Yes please” Ali pulled the covers down on Ashlyn’s side so the keeper could get underneath them. “And you’re going to need your rest, All-star.”

“Oh really?” Ashlyn couldn’t help but smirk as she settled under the covers and got into her position as the big spoon behind Ali’s little spoon. “And just why is that?” she wagged her eyebrows, thinking her wife was giving her some sort of promise of sexy times in the very near future.

“Because you’re going to need all your strength and patience to brush out Lily’s hair in the morning and get her showered” Ali deadpanned, but Ashlyn knew she was completely serious.

“Oh God” the keeper whined at the unpleasant thought. “That’s awful and uncalled for, and I totally deserve it” she sighed, resigned to accept her own punishment. “Fair enough.”

“And you’re also in charge of teaching your son that his cast is not a cool new weapon he can use
to terrorize his siblings or the dogs” Ali tried to milk it for all it was worth, knowing she was pushing her luck but also that her guilt-ridden wife would let her get away with it that night.

“Or us” Ashlyn added with a weary chuckle. “That’ll definitely take both of us to get that message across, but I’ll take point on it” she sighed and kissed Ali’s bare shoulder, exposed by the sleep tank. “It’s gonna be a long 10 weeks.”

“10-12 weeks babe” Ali giggled and snuggled closer to her keeper. “Get it right.”

Chapter End Notes

First, thanks for all the nice comments and emails and Tumblr posts about the new job. You guys are so sweet and I love this little community we have here. <3 To answer your questions, it's another sales job just with a different and better company. I think I've said this before, but maybe not...I sell windows and doors, just like Ali did in the story. My new job is focusing on bigger commercial buildings though so I'm working with bigger commercial contractors and architects rather than the 'Georges' from the story. Sarah the architect is who I'll be calling on most often - in a big firm in downtown Boston, working on big huge buildings, etc. It's exciting and a little scary because I have to learn a whole new product offering as fast as I humanly can. Gulp! :) But it's a good move for me and I'm very happy about it. So thanks again!

Second, I'm sooooooooo bummed about Ali not being allocated anymore this year. Not a surprise at all, but it still sucks. And no call-up again for She Believes. I was secretly hoping Jill would just give her the two caps to get us all to shut up and go the fuck away. Apparently not. But - my warrior princess seems to be handling it very well. She seems so happy in all her recent posts and I love that. My queen is still a queen even if some witch has decided otherwise. Fuck her, we all know the truth. Kriegs could and should still be playing (and starting) on the USWNT. Boom. There's the dirty truth. I'm going to try and find solace in that. Wish me luck.

Third, tell me what you're thinking of all of Ashlyn's new ink!!

Fourth - Lord almighty Ali's a beautiful woman. They both are, but you all know which side of the toast I put my butter on. :)
The Best Laid Plans

Chapter Notes

Yayyyyyyyyy NWSL Preseason is finally here!!!!!

The weeks went by quickly. Ashlyn scrambled to get the garden planted, not giving it quite as much time as she had last year but still hoping it would flourish nonetheless. Two weeks later it was Memorial Day weekend and they celebrated Drew’s 9th birthday with another big backyard party and number 9 cake. Ashlyn went to the Mental Health Initiative office to shoot several public service announcements about May’s Mental Health Awareness month. She also coached both Josie and Lily’s softball teams to the end of their seasons in early June. Ali had taken on the job of assistant coach for Dodge’s baseball team that year. It was the first year the twins could play either sport and both moms enjoyed being involved with them. School got out on Thursday June 15th and, now that the twins were in school too, the whole family, including Deb, went out that afternoon to celebrate another successful year in the books. That weekend was a busy one indeed. Saturday the 17th was Kyle’s 45th birthday but he had begged Nathan not to throw him a big party. He just wanted to hang with his family up in Massachusetts after the NYC Kriegers had experienced their own very busy Spring and end of school season. Edgar and Cristina were doing very well but the two dads were still struggling with being parents. They didn’t have the luxuries of time and a shared past on their side so when they made a mistake with the kids it seemed that much bigger to all four of the family members.

The 17th was also the day of Josie’s 7th birthday party which both Ali and Ashlyn were more than grateful for. More than the usual amount of appreciating their beautiful daughter’s existence. The little redhead’s birthday was actually on Monday the 19th but all the kid parties had been moved to weekend days as soon as they started having their little friends and classmates start coming to them. The thing that the two moms were extra thankful for this year was that the 17th also happened to be Sam Machado’s wedding day. They let Drew go to the wedding with Ethan under the strict condition that Ethan’s Nana was in charge and would call either Ashlyn or Ali if they needed to come over and bring him home. Ali bought the new couple a nice gift from their registry and Ashlyn gave Drew the responsibility of making sure the card stayed with the gift all the way to the gift table. Granted, he was only going from Ashlyn’s Jeep to the front door of the hotel where Nana Machado stood waving her arm, but still... Their little boy was growing up way too fast for either of their liking and he was excited to attend such a big, fancy event by himself. His moms both knew what a big deal that was for their shy boy. It was a testament to how comfortable Drew was with Ethan and his family, and Ashlyn and Ali were both grateful for that. It was moments like that one when they realized that they had done the right thing by making sure the two best buddies could remain friends even after Sam ruined everything.

Then on Sunday the 18th the fourth year of The Academy kicked off up in New Hampshire. Nobody working at The Academy could believe it had already been four years. Where the hell had the time gone? Tommy Flanagan, just a little newborn last year, turned one at the end of June and was getting ready to start walking soon. Meg attended her final week ever of camp, unless her college team someday attended, at The Academy during the invitational Week 4. It was July 9th through the 16th and it was for girls in grades 6 through 11. Meg would be a junior in high school in the Fall so she would be too old next year. She came up to the big old house for the week before and spent that fun 4th of July week with everybody, hanging out at the beach and helping out at
Johnny and Lizzy Harris came up to stay with Ashlyn and Ali for the first two weeks of July as well, matching Meg’s stay almost exactly even though it was totally a coincidence. The big old house was packed to the gills at the beginning of July but everybody was happy about it. Ashlyn was excited for Meg to hang out with Johnny and Lizzy more because they didn’t see each other too much because Meg was spending most of her free and vacation time on soccer. Tammye and Carol came up too, more because they wanted to rather than because anybody thought Johnny and Lizzy couldn’t handle the direct flight by themselves. The Grandmothers took Meg’s room when the teen insisted on sleeping on the pullout couch in Ashlyn’s studio. Johnny took the extra twin bed in Drew’s room and Lizzy took the extra one in Josie’s room, just as they always did. Chris had been living back at home for all of May and June and things had been going well, for everybody. Johnny was still the biggest skeptic but Chris encouraged him to wait until he was good and ready to fully trust him again both as a man and as a father. The big man had made a promise to Beth that he would focus on his family and their marriage until he had convinced her that he was truly, radically changed this time. And he had done that for two solid months. He had tried to get his old job back at the surf shop, the shop he had worked at for so many years and had designs on buying when the older owner finally decided it was time to sell. But that owner, Harvey Primo, told him no. Chris had gone in to make amends and the man he had known since he was a teenager had refused his request flat out. Harvey said it was for his own good and that if Chris really intended to be a new, better man he needed to change a lot of things in his life. He made Chris a deal that if he made the changes that they discussed that day – Chris had laid out his whole master plan for giving back to the community and helping out other addicts and people who were struggling, that he would reconsider giving him his managerial job back at the beginning of next year with a long-term plan of buying him out and taking over co-ownership of the surf shop in about five years. Harvey would remain as co-owner but leave everything to Chris to run. Chris had six months to prove that he was more than just talk and apologies. It was going to be a lean 6 months without Chris’ paycheck and the family had a decision to make.

“You want to do what?” Beth asked, her jaw dropping on the floor that first week of July when he and his wife took advantage of their time alone to really talk through everything they wanted to do in the future, both short-term and long-term.

“I know it’s scary hon, I know it is” Chris got out of the arm chair and knelt down in front of his wife as she sat on their living room couch. “But let’s face it, you took care of the kids by yourself on just the income from the florist shop for almost 6 months already...”

“Yeah, but that was just the three of us” she interrupted with a frown as she tried hard to resist the charm of the man she loved on his knees in front of her. “We weren’t feeding you. And your mom and Carol helped out with the kids’ expenses a couple of times” she dropped her eyes in shame at the memory of her mothers-in-law paying off her Toys-R-U's layaway at Christmas and then buying the kids new sneakers for basketball in January and cleats and equipment for baseball and softball in March. “But I have a list of everything I owe them.”

“Beth, I know how hard that was” he swallowed hard on his own shame and self-loathing, “and you’re right, we’ll pay them back – I’ll pay them back. But I feel like this next 6 months is some kind of test for me and I’m ready for it. I’m so ready for it sweetheart” he held both her hands in his as his big brown eyes lit up with an energy and a light that she had never seen there before. “I know I don’t have a leg to stand on, but if you can find a way to trust me, just this one last time, I’ll show you. I’ll show you how different everything will be from now on.”

“I do trust you” she felt a stab of fear strike her heart as the words left her lips, but kept going. “I think it’s great that you want to volunteer at the rehab center and set up the afterschool program for...
the kids. I know you’ll help a lot of people out and change a lot of lives, but I’m not sure how we can make that work with just the money from the shop...”

“I’ll help out at the shop when I’m not at the center” he countered. “So you can have some time off too. You deserve a break after everything I put you through...”

“Well that’s definitely not going to help our finances any” she frowned at her husband again. She wanted to say yes because she could see how important it was to him but they couldn’t live off of his good intentions alone.

“I’ll pick up some odd jobs then” he shrugged. “I’ll do whatever I need to do to put food on our table for us while I’m doing this Beth. I promise I’ll take care of our family. I don’t care if I have to sweep the streets at night to make it work. I’ll give up my sleep for the next 6 months if that’s what it takes.”

They both knew he could get some seasonal work if he wanted to, whether it was working for the DPW again on a sanitation crew or with a local construction company doing some other menial labor job. He could work shifts picking up the local beaches again like his father had done several years ago when he wasn’t doing so well after Gram died. Beth knew all of this but something still held her back and she wasn’t sure what it was.

“Where are you even going to have the afterschool program? Have you thought about any of those details?” she wasn’t accusatory, she was simply gathering information.”

“Harv hasn’t said yes yet, but by September I know he will” Chris grinned and his dimple appeared in his left cheek. “When I take over the shop that’s where it’ll be anyway so we may as well start it there” he shrugged as his eyes continued to blaze with excitement. “I don’t know how to explain it babe, but I just know this is what I’m supposed to be doing now. This is my next step, I can feel it...it’s almost like...like...” he paused and glanced down nervously. “It feels like something is guiding me along this path and now that I’m awake I can finally follow it. I know that sounds crazy...”

“Ok.”

“What?”

“Ok” Beth nodded and smiled as she watched her husband’s face explode into an even bigger grin. He bent his head and kissed both of her hands in her lap, mumbling around them as he spoke.

“Thank you so much honey. I promise I won’t let you down again. I promise.”

Kyle and Nathan also brought the kids and Peaches up to Gloucester for their annual beach vacation that July, but they pushed it back a couple of weeks. Instead of coming for the week of 4th of July and the week before or after it, they came for the last two weeks of July and the first week of August. The change in plans was to take advantage of Ali and Ashlyn and the kids being in France for the summer Olympics during those three weeks. Kyle and his family would take care of the dogs while they stayed at the big old house, including Ken and Vicki Krieger’s dog, Bandit. Ken and Vicki were making the trip across the pond to help Ali with the kids while Ashlyn did her soccer expert thing covering the USWNT in their quest for another gold medal. Ali had threatened her brother with bodily harm if he let his dog destroy her house. Peaches was getting better as she got a little older, but she still wasn’t as well-trained as Luna had been or as Persey, Fred or Bandit were. Maybe having those three as a good influence would help the young pup figure it out.

Deb and Mike Christopher were supposed to make the trip to France as well. The plan was for each
grandparent couple to get a week of vacation all to themselves and then spend the other two weeks with Ali and the grandkids. The brunette was hoping that she could get some time away with her wife during the one week when both grandparent couples would be around together. It had been a very good plan, but life reared its ugly head and thwarted even the best laid plans. The Thursday after Josie’s birthday party and Sam and Lisa’s wedding and the beginning of The Academy, Deb Christopher got some bad news. Mike was still down in Miami, planning to come up to the Manchester condo the following weekend after returning from his fantastic golf vacation and getting everything in order for his last big client. Two days before his flight to Boston, Thursday June 22nd, everything changed.

“Mom, slow down” Ali bent over and pressed her free hand against her other ear as if blocking out the sounds from the Knight-Harris lobby might make her mother’s rate of speech slower.

Whitney stopped when the brunette beside her did, glancing at her own phone to check the time. They had a big meeting with a new client who was considering signing with K-H primarily because of the work the Engen Foundation was doing. Ali wisely insisted that the woman behind the Foundation accompany her to the meeting to try and close the deal with the hot, young tennis player who was supposed to be the next big thing in the WTA. The plan was to have the meeting at 10:30am then stretch it into a nice lunch afterwards if everything went well. If the rising superstar still had any doubts after lunch, they would take her and her small entourage, her mother and two older sisters who were all extremely protective of the youngest sibling, to visit the Foundation so she could see it for herself.

“Oh my God...ok, mom...it’ll be alright. I’m sure he’ll be ok. They said he’s stable now, right?” the panic in her voice bled through even though she was doing her best to stay strong for Deb who was freaking out. “Alright. Pack a bag. I’m sending Ashlyn to get you and bring you in to the airport. I’ll meet you there and we’ll go see him.”

There was a pause and Whitney took a step away and called Marcy Hopkins, Ali’s trusted back-up and Executive Manager for K-H. Both she and Ali spoke into their phones for another minute and then looked at each other as they ended their calls.

“Whit, I’ve gotta go” the brunette’s face was pale as the reality of the situation started to settle in. As urgent as everything was, Ali couldn’t get her feet to move.

“I know” the lawyer nodded calmly at her troubled friend. “I already called Marcy. She’s on her way down. She and I will handle Keegan. Don’t worry about a thing here...”

“It’s Mike, he...he...had a heart attack. He’s only 66 years old” Ali stuttered as tears started to form in the corners of her eyes.

Whitney put her arm around the brunette’s shoulders and walked her into one of the two small meeting rooms on the other side of the lobby so the managing partner could cry in private. As soon as she closed the door behind them, Whitney wrapped Ali in a hug, telling her how sorry she was to hear the sad news. They embraced for only about a minute before the lawyer physically felt Ali’s spine stiffen as she got control of herself again and pulled back from the hug.

“Fuck. Thanks Whit” she sniffled and carefully wiped underneath her eyes to make sure her mascara hadn’t run down her cheeks. “Neither of us has time for this right now...”

“You’ve gotta call Ash” Whitney nodded at her. “I’ll keep you posted on the Keegan meeting” she opened the door and looked out to see Marcy hustling off the elevator on the other side of the lobby. “Let me know if you guys need anything else.”
Ali Krieger took two deep breaths and then got to work making arrangements to get she and her mother to Miami as fast as possible. She booked two seats on the earliest direct flight she could find, which wasn’t until 1:30pm but it would take Ashlyn at least 90 minutes to throw a few things in a bag for her and then go pick up Deb in Manchester on her way to the airport in Boston. If the security lines weren’t too long they would just make it. The keeper, to her credit, jumped into action as soon as she had heard her wife’s frantic voice.

“He’ll be ok baby. He’s stabilized now, right? He’ll be alright” she tried to soothe over the phone.

“That’s exactly what I said to my mom and it doesn’t sound any better the second time” Ali sighed anxiously. “I love you so much Ashlyn...” she paused, overwhelmed by emotion at the thought of something like this happening to her beloved keeper.

“I love you too” Ashlyn replied sincerely if a little breathlessly. She had run from the office above the garage across the driveway and up the backstairs and was out of breath as she began packing for her wife. “Let me go, and you do whatever you need to do there, and I’ll meet you at Logan with your mom as fast as I can. We can talk more when I’m driving.”

When Ali finally saw her mother at the airport almost 2 hours later, Deb fell apart in her arms. Ashlyn had pulled up to the drop-off curb and unloaded the two carry-on suitcases, mindful of the state cop whose job was to make sure every vehicle stopped there for as little time as possible. The keeper stepped quickly to the two women and wrapped her arms around both of them, kissing them each on the cheek or head that she could reach.

“I’ve gotta go” she gave them another squeeze and then stepped back.

“Thank you, babe” Ali pulled her head up and met her wife’s kind, worried eyes. She puckered her lips and tilted her head to the side so Ashlyn could give her a quick kiss. “I love you.”

Ali got the full story from her mother as they waited anxiously in the security line for Jet Blue. Deb had gotten as many details as possible from Mike’s golfing buddy, Jim, who had been with him when it happened. Mike had just completed a round of golf at the club and was about to take a shower in the locker room. Before he could even get undressed he felt a tremendous pain in his chest and then the tell-tale sign of radiating pain down his left arm. Well, tell-tale for men who are suffering a heart attack. The warning signs for women are completely different. It was so severe that he fell to the floor and knocked himself unconscious. An ambulance had been called right away and Jim described exactly what had happened before Mike fell so they knew he was having some sort of cardiac event. They stabilized him in the ambulance and rushed him to the ER for whatever came next. Deb had already received the call from the intake nurse at the ER down in Miami. She had spoken to them and given her consent to treatment before Ashlyn had even gotten to the condo to pick her up. She explained that she was up in Boston but would be getting on the first flight to Miami.

“Please don’t let my husband die before I can see him...” she had begged the nurse over the phone. “Please.”

As her mind processed a million different things during the almost four-hour flight from Boston to Miami, Deb kept wondering why she had phrased it like that. She hadn’t just asked the nurse not to let her husband die. She had asked her to keep him alive until she got there. Deb couldn’t imagine why she had said it that way. Of course she wanted Mike to live even after she arrived. Who wouldn’t want that? No matter how often Ali tried to shake her off of it, the worried wife kept running those words through her head over and over and over again. Deb was sure it had something to do with her own mother but she just didn’t have the energy to connect all the dots yet.
It was 6:30pm before they made it to the hospital and Deb was a wreck. She hadn’t eaten lunch and wouldn’t let them stop for dinner, not that Ali wanted to stop either but she knew her mother was hanging on by a thread. The brunette finally shoved a protein bar in her mother’s hand and insisted that she eat it during the drive from the airport to the hospital in their loaner car. God Bless Ashlyn. Ali hadn’t had time to think about reserving one, but the keeper made the arrangements and texted her wife all the confirmation information. Ashlyn responded to her wife’s texts just after the plane had landed and was taxiing to the gate.

Ali: how are the kids?
Ashlyn: Good. Ticked that we didn’t go up to camp this afternoon.
Ali: Thank God you were home. If I hadn’t had that big meeting today, you’d have been up in NH and then I would have been totally fucked.
Ashlyn: Hmmm...don’t think I like the idea of you being fucked while I’m in NH. Unless you’re in NH with me. ;)
Ali: ha ha very funny
Ashlyn: seriously, call me anytime. I won’t bug you with Facetime tonight, but you call us when you can.
Ali: I will. I love you so much. xxoooox
Ashlyn: me too baby. Xx Enjoy the Jeep! ;)
Ali: Ashlyn!

Ali wouldn’t have minded renting a Jeep. They always made her think of her wife and she would have welcomed it that evening. But Ashlyn, thoughtful as ever, knew that Deb sometimes had a hard time getting into and out of the higher or taller vehicles. She wasn’t a spring chicken anymore. Deb would be turning 68 in two weeks and she much preferred the ease of getting into and out of her own Suburu or the Suburu minivan that Ali usually drove. Of course, when they got there, a representative from Suburu was waiting for them with a sign that said ‘Christopher – Krieger’ and a set of keys in his hand. Ashlyn had arranged for the same exact type of Suburu Deb drove up in Manchester, just so she might have one less thing to worry about or be confused by during the next few days. Deb didn’t even realize it as she slumped into the front passenger seat with an exhausted groan, but Ali knew just how considerate her keeper had been.

By the time they arrived at the hospital, Deb had a bit more color in her cheeks, thanks to the protein bar, and seemed to be more alert. Ali and Deb both listened intently as the young cardiac specialist explained what Mike had gone through already that day. The brunette heard familiar words like myocardial infarction or MI, and coronary artery and blockage. She heard new words like cath lab and angiogram and angioplasty and STEMI and stent and percutaneous coronary intervention or PCI. And they hadn’t even gotten to the medication part of the day yet. Ali knew that a lot of this must be feeling like déjà vu for her mom. Deb’s own mother had died from a heart attack when Ali was a senior in high school and it had been sudden and traumatic. Some of the lingo was new but the series of events inside her mother’s ailing heart were the same as what had just happened to her husband. Except Mike had survived because he got emergency care so quickly. Maybe that’s why she had worded her plea to the nurse over the phone the way she had. Maybe she didn’t expect him to live because her mother hadn’t lived through her own myocardial infarction.

When they were ushered into the waiting area of the cardiology floor, Deb and Ali saw Mike’s first wife, Lorraine, and their daughter Lori sitting there restlessly. It was a small, white room with outdated magazines and pawed-over daily newspapers scattered around the end tables and a few white padded chairs. It reminded Ali of the all-white setting and scene in ‘Willy Wonka and the
Chocolate Factory’ when Mike TV gets miniaturized to the dismay of his mother. It was creepy to see in real life in 2028. All four women stood and hugged each other hello. Mike’s buddy Jim had called both Deb and Lorraine to tell them what had happened so Ali shouldn’t have been surprised to see them there, but she was anyway. She knew that Lorraine was there to support Lori, more than she was to help Mike. While that sounded harsh, Ali was sympathetic towards the ex-wife. She had been a struggling single mom and she always felt like Mike was flaunting his money around in front of the kids. Mike wasn’t, but it sure felt that way to Lorraine. They were two very different people coming at the world from two very different places and their divorce had been a bitter one. They really lived completely separate lives except where their kids, Donnie and Lori, were concerned. Likewise, Deb and Lorraine had never become friends either. Lorraine had always been suspicious of the interloper’s intentions when it came to her children, even though both Donnie and Lori tried to explain to her that Deb was terrific. Lorraine gradually came to accept that Deb wasn’t the devil and they fell into a cordial relationship based on nothing more than facilitating the kids’ schedules. Now that Donnie and Lori were all grown up, 29 and 27 years old respectively, the two older women had very little interaction. Ali decided that she was going to be the buffer between Lorraine and her mother if it came to that. She knew how tempers could flare and words could fly in stressful times like this and she didn’t want her mother to be subjected to any of that if she could help it.

“Have you seen him yet?” Deb asked anxiously after they had all hugged hello and sat back down in chairs facing each other across the small 10’ x 15’ room.

“No” Lori shook her head. “Not yet. He’s in the recovery room. We’re waiting for him to get moved to his room.”

“We just talked to the doctor and it sounds like everything went well” Ali spoke up, hoping to start a full exchange of information and avoid any territorialism that might spring up. “The cath lab and the angiogram and now the angioplasty. Is that what you heard too?”

“Yeah” Lori nodded. “His blood pressure is low I guess so that’s why it’s taking him longer than usual to leave the recovery room” she shrugged.

“It was the same when he had his appendix out a few years ago” Deb added. “He spent forever in the recovery room because his blood pressure was so low.”

“Ok, well that’s good then” Ali surmised. “It’s nothing new, nothing specific to the heart attack.”

“You guys got here fast” Lori smiled weakly at Deb, genuinely glad to see her step-mother and step-sister.

“Not fast enough” Deb shook her head and frowned while Ali rolled her eyes to try and lighten the mood a little bit. It worked and Lori giggled which made Deb aware of the shift in the room. “I knew I should have learned how to fly a plane when I retired” she chuckled.

“Oh geez, that’s all we need. The not so friendly skies wouldn’t know what hit them with Debbers up there” Ali laughed and bumped shoulders with her mother, relieved when Lori and Lorraine both joined her too.

“What? I’m friendly” Deb protested with another tired laugh.

They chatted together for the next two hours, still waiting to see Mike. Donnie was in Europe for work and wouldn’t be able to come home for several days. Lorraine had given him the update once the angioplasty had been completed and told him not to change his plans unless something changed drastically. The last thing Mike would have wanted was for his rising star son to let his heart attack
become a hurdle on his fast track to success. Deb called one of her friends from the club and asked her to bring some real dinner over for the four of them so they didn’t pass out before they even got to see the patient. At about 11 pm Lorraine got up and said her goodbyes. She had to work in the morning but told her daughter to call her if she needed anything. The three remaining women did their best to arrange the chairs and themselves in a comfortable position for the rest of their long wait. Lori came over and sat on the other side of Deb and they all stretched their legs out in front of them on the other row of chairs.

It was almost 1 am when the nurse finally came in to tell them Mike had been moved to his own room and that they could go see him.

“Only two of you at a time though” the nurse cautioned as the women were putting the chairs back where they belonged and tidying up after themselves as quickly as possible.

“No way” Deb shook her head and walked towards the nurse to challenge her, and probably give her a piece of her mind.

“Mom, it’s ok” Ali tugged on her arm. “You guys go first, I’ll wait” she smiled and tried to defuse the situation.

“No way Alex” Deb shook her head again and pulled one young woman under each of her arms. She turned them all to face the middle-aged nurse and peered at her name tag. “Listen, Maureen, we’ve been waiting here for hours and I’m taking both of my girls in to see my husband, right now” her mouth formed a firm line and her eyebrow went up just a bit as she gave the nurse an expectant stare. “Please tell us the room number.”

Ali and Lori both stifled nervous, giddy giggles as they all followed the nurse to Mike’s room without another word being spoken.

“Wow, so it was a major heart attack?” Ashlyn clarified as she spoke with her wife over the phone Friday morning.

“Yeah, I guess they don’t really call them that anymore” Ali yawned into the phone. “Sorry. God, I’m tired.”

“Well go back to sleep baby. I didn’t mean to wake you up.”

“No, I want to talk to you” Ali stretched and made another one of the keeper’s favorite sounds in the whole world – the tiny, half yawn/half squeal sound she made as she stretched after first waking up. “I should get up anyway. We’re taking shifts and I have to be back in two hours.”

“So what do they call them then?”


“If they don’t call them major or minor heart attacks anymore?”

“Oh, right” she chuckled and yawned again. “It depends on what kind of artery was blocked and then it depends on how blocked it was, basically. So if it was completely blocked it’s a STEMI. A ‘ST elevation myocardial infarction’. The less serious heart attacks are the NSTEMI or non-STEMI ones where the artery is only partially blocked and the heart doesn’t get damaged as much as with the STEMI.”

“Seriously? We couldn’t stick with major and minor?”
“I know, right?” she giggled. “Like it’s not scary and complicated enough already” Ali sighed, feeling fresher and better just from talking to her wife for 5 minutes.

“And they think he can go home in a few days? Really?”

“Yeah, he had a STEMI but it wasn’t complicated by anything else, well, except for the blow to the head from the locker room floor.”

“Ouch, is his head ok?”

“Yeah, nothing serious, thank God. Just a bump but no concussion or other brain injury. And it was a major heart attack but he got treatment really fast so they were able to limit the damage his heart took. They did an angioplasty and put a stent in the artery, which is a fairly simple procedure they do with a catheter so it’s not major surgery or anything. He could probably go home tomorrow if it wasn’t for the bump to the head. They just want to watch him an extra day and make sure that all the meds they’re giving him for his heart don’t fuck up his head too.”

“How’s your mom?”

“She’s ok. She’s fighting us on going home and getting rest and eating real food and all of that stuff” Ali explained as she sat up in the guest bedroom at her mother’s Miami home. “I miss you when I’m in this bedroom” she grinned even though Ashlyn couldn’t see her.

“Wow, Al, horndogging it even when we’re talking about infarctions and your mom?” the keeper teased. “That’s bad, even for you.”

“No, I don’t mean like that” Ali chuckled. “But I wouldn’t complain about it either” she flirted back and made Ashlyn giggle. “No, but really, I miss you and I wish you were here. Everything’s always better when you’re here” she confessed softly. “It was so sweet what you did for my mom with the car babe...just, so sweet. Thank you honey.”

“Oh, you noticed that did ya?” Ashlyn grinned and Ali could practically hear it in her voice.

“I did. And the note you packed for me. And you even remembered the socks I like to wear with those new sneakers...you’re just the best Ashlyn. I know I tell you that a lot, but after yesterday and last night, I don’t know” she shrugged, feeling extra vulnerable right at that moment, “I guess I just want to tell you it all the time. And I don’t want to be away from you and I don’t want you to ever get hurt...or leave me...” her voice got softer and softer as she spoke until her emotions choked her throat closed.

“Aw, sweetheart” Ashlyn cooed into the phone. “You’re not gonna lose me, not if I have anything to say about it. Why do you think I let you feed me those disgusting smoothies and eat all that damned rabbit food?” she tried to joke but could hear her wife’s sniffles. “And I love you so much it hurts, Alexandra. I love you and I miss you and I can’t wait to see you whenever you come home.” She paused for a second. “Um, just when is that again?” she teased.

Ali laughed her short, loud, shout of a laugh and wiped the tears off of her cheeks. “Monday night. I just want to make sure mom can do this by herself before I leave her all alone.”

“I thought Kyle was coming down? And isn’t Lori staying for a while too?” Ashlyn’s questions were warm and sincere, not pushy or needy. “And she has all of her friends too. All those ladies from the club love to help each other out in times like this, don’t they?”

They talked for several more minutes about Deb’s schedule and getting it coordinated for her. Ali thanked God for the hundredth time that her mother was still the youngest 67-year old she had ever
Deb was sharp as a tack and still very fit and physically strong. Her back bothered her every once in a while but that was it besides the basic, general slowing down of the aging human body. It wasn’t like she had to lift and carry Mike anyplace. The recovery for the heart attack was basically to rest for a few weeks, with some minor increasing physical exercises prescribed by the cardiologist. He couldn’t do anything too strenuous, like play golf or have sex, for six weeks, but other than that he would just feel more tired than usual as his heart muscle began to repair itself. The big changes would have to come with his diet and exercise. The young cardiologist, who Ali was pleased to see was a woman, had told Mike right off the bat that if he didn’t make these changes to his lifestyle that he would be one of the 20% of heart attack survivors who suffered a second, usually fatal, heart attack within three years of the first. Ali knew her mom wouldn't let that happen and hoped Mike would embrace the changes and make her mom’s life easier in the process.

“Alright, I’ll see you Monday night honey” Ashlyn started to end the call, even though she felt the same longing for her wife that Ali did. “And when you get home we’ll cuddle up and be close and you can do your octopus mode thing on me and we’ll never be apart ever again, ok?”

“Promise?” the brunette’s voice was so tiny that Ashlyn felt her heart burst.

“I promise baby. You and me forever, clothing optional.”
And so began what would later be referred to as ‘the summer without Grandma’. Nobody was very happy about it but everybody understood why Deb wanted and needed to stay in Miami and take care of her husband. She admitted to Ali that she wished the heart attack had happened while Mike was up in Manchester because he had truly grown to love his summers up there. He had been looking forward to his first summer after retirement a lot and now here he was rehabbing from a heart attack and learning how to eat and exercise properly instead. Kyle and Nathan brought the kids down to Miami for the 4th of July that year and stayed for ten days so they could celebrate Deb’s birthday with her on July 9th as well. It gave Kyle a good chance to check in on Mike and make sure his mom was doing ok in the stressful caregiver role. The Gloucester Krieger family did their best to enjoy the Horribles Parade on Saturday July 1st and then the 4th of July that Tuesday, without most of the extended Krieger clan. But they had Meg as well as Johnny and Lizzy and Tammye and Carol staying at the big old house for those two weeks too, so it was a wonderful visit for everybody.

Johnny and Lizzy both seemed to be normal and happy 10 and 8 year old kids and Ashlyn was more relieved than she could have imagined. She had been getting updates from her mom and dad about the kids, not wanting to ask too many questions of Chris and Beth and make them think she was judging them or checking up on them. Even though Chris had been drunk, albeit not a stumbling fall-down drunk, at Thanksgiving and wasn’t really himself, she had heard every word he hurled at her that night. Some had been easy to let go, and others had not. It hadn’t been the first time Chris had accused her of judging the Florida Harrises from up on high. The keeper worked with Mattie as much as she could that busy Spring and Summer, desperate to not let her brother’s bullshit bring her down. Part of what they talked about was her relationship with her brother and how important it was in her life. As they had both grown up and changed there had been the occasional rift between them and it had always been because of Chris’ wounded pride or ego.

“It can be hard sometimes to grow up in the shadow of a successful sibling” the therapist explained in one of Ashlyn’s sessions that June. “Some people handle it better than others.”

“But I wasn’t successful when we were growing up” Ashlyn countered thoughtfully. “I wasn’t successful until I was in my 30s. When we were growing up he was the big man on campus and I was the skinny little sister always tagging along.”

“Sometimes that can compound the situation” Mattie nodded. “If Chris has always seen himself as your hero or even your savior based on some of the stories you’ve shared with me previously about
your difficult childhood, then it would make it extra hard for him to accept his new role, in your shadow."

“But...”

“It’s not a reflection on you at all Ashlyn. In fact, there’s nothing you can do about it. It’s all in Chris’ mind and it’s entirely his situation to deal with.”

“But I don’t want him to hate me” she admitted, softly, dropping her eyes to her lap.

“I don’t believe he hates you.”

“You didn’t hear him that night...”

“You know you can’t trust anything he said that night. He was drunk and out of sorts and definitely not himself” the therapist countered gently. “He’s told you that and you’ve told me that as well. Do you really think your brother, in his right mind, would have attacked you like that?”

“No” she shook her head firmly. “Never.”

“Good” Mattie nodded again. “I don’t think he would either. So if we follow that logic through the other parts of Thanksgiving night, doesn’t it makes sense to assume that those comments he made weren’t to be believed either?”

The keeper was chewing on her bottom lip as she thought hard about the therapist’s words and wished more than anything that they were true.

“But he’s said it before. He’s accused me of coming down to Florida and acting like I’m better than him, or them, before.”

“So is it just that one part of what he said that night that’s upsetting you now?”

Ashlyn was quiet for a minute as she thought hard about the question. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Do you think you’re better than your brother or the rest of your family?”

“No, of course not.”

“And can you think back to what you were doing or talking about with Chris when he said he felt like you were judging them?”

“He’ll tease me about it sometimes but that doesn’t bother me. It’s when we’re arguing about something and he throws that in my face when he’s angry or upset. That’s when it pisses me off.”

“So give me an example of when that’s happened before” she smiled warmly at the blonde, encouraging her to continue and do the work.

The keeper was quiet again, thinking hard. She realized it had only happened one other time, aside from the more harmless and occasional teasing.

“It was at Gram’s house, well his house, and we were talking with my mom about my dad and his new girlfriend. He wanted to bring her to Thanksgiving that year.”

“Is that Lydia, or someone else?”

“Yeah” she nodded. ‘It was the first time I had heard about Lydia” Ashlyn clarified. “And I found
out she was a bartender at a bar on the beach and that my dad had been spending a lot of time hanging out with her there. At the bar.”

“I see. And is that what you were arguing about, with Chris?”

“Yeah, he got mad at me when I said I thought that was a terrible idea and I was worried about dad’s sobriety. And he told me that’s why dad hadn’t told me about Lydia yet – because he knew I’d give him a hard time about it. That’s when Chris said I was always judging him and them” she looked down when she felt a wave of sadness pass over her.

“And that was the end of it?”

“Well, yeah, I think so. Mom told him to calm down and stop putting words in my mouth, and then we changed the subject or someone came into the room or something. I can’t remember.” She paused and then chuckled softly to herself. “I was pregnant so I probably had to get up and go pee.”

Mattie laughed, glad her client was able to hold onto her sense of humor even as she worked through some of the toughest parts of her life and relationships.

“And you didn’t discuss it further, maybe later during your visit?”

“No” she shook her head slowly. “There never seems to be enough time” she sighed sadly. “And, honestly, I think I probably was just trying to forget he said it. I didn’t know how to take it at the time” she looked up shyly at the therapist. “You know how I need to sit with things a little bit sometimes.”

“I do” Mattie smiled. “And I know you know that there’s absolutely nothing wrong with that.” She waited for a few seconds before continuing her probe. “Do you think your mother or father agree with Chris about this? Do they think you’re judging them too?”

“I have no idea” Ashlyn shrugged. “I never would have thought Chris did if he hadn’t opened his big, fat mouth though, so who knows?”

“Ashlyn, I think the best thing you can do is to talk to your mother and your father and your brother about this, individually. Ask each of them about it. Tell them it’s something you’re concerned about. Start a conversation with them instead of assuming that there’s a problem when, in all likelihood, there might not be.”

“You don’t think this is a problem?” Ashlyn started to get defensive and frustrated.

“Let me clarify that” the therapist sat forward and put her hand out to calm the angst coming her way. “I believe the problem is something for your brother to deal with, not you or anybody else.”

“So it’s his crap, not mine?” the keeper squinted as she tried to work her mind around the concept.

“Yes” Mattie nodded. “That’s my opinion. I think he’s developed some kind of inferiority complex around you. It could be something as simple as a financial inadequacy in his mind” she shrugged. “It’s impossible for me to know exactly what his issue is, obviously, but he needs to work with his therapist on it. But don’t take my word for it. Talk to your parents about it and let me know what they say.”

They talked more about Chris’ recovery and the progress Ashlyn continued to make in her efforts to forgive her brother for attacking her 7 months earlier. It hadn’t been easy for Ashlyn to get over the horror and disappointment of that Thanksgiving night. She still had occasional nightmares about it but they were few and far between and not as intense as the old nightmares she used to
have about the River of Blood after Josie’s harrowing birth. Slowly but surely Ashlyn and Chris had begun talking more regularly instead of relying on texting once a month to sustain their relationship. They made time for each other, beginning with Chris making the first call every week since he had been released from the rehab center. At first it took Ashlyn a day or two to return his call. Then, as they made more and more progress, she cut down the response time significantly until she got to the point she was at now – she tried her very best to actually take his calls. They talked about his plans for the future and his scary but necessary 6-month trial period for the rest of his life, as he referred to it. Ashlyn wanted to offer to help financially but she knew that would always be a sore subject for the proud man and instead kept her mouth shut. They talked about Malcolm a lot. And that always led to his widow, Jenna and their daughter Sierra. As much as Chris needed to get his life together for himself and his own family, he owed it to Malcolm too. Jenna’s words at his intervention were some of the ones that haunted him every night as he tried to fall asleep. The truth was he could almost recite all of what was said to him that awful night when he broke into a million pieces in front of his closest friends and family. But there were some words that rang out a little bit louder, like Jenna’s and Meg’s and Beth’s and, of course, Ashlyn’s. The big man had a lot of work to do to repair so many of the things he had broken, both physically and emotionally, but it was easy for everybody to see that he was really trying hard to do just that.

“Well it seems like you two are well on the way towards trusting each other again. That’s wonderful to hear Ashlyn. Excellent work.”

“Thanks” the keeper dropped her eyes and began picking at the inseam of her jeans. “I love him a lot and he’s worth the effort.”

“I’d say the fact that your niece and nephew are coming for a two-week visit in a few weeks is a good sign that he feels the same way about you” Mattie grinned. “How’s Ali doing with it? Has she been able to start finding some peace about Chris yet?”

“I don’t think so” Ashlyn slumped in her seat a bit as another sad sigh slid across her lips. “Why, has she said anything to you?”

“Ashlyn, you know I’m only asking about this from your point of view. You’re worried that your wife will never be able to forgive your brother. Let’s focus on that” the therapist carefully chastised.

“Ugh, fine” the keeper leaned back against the couch in a frustrated huff. “No, I don’t think she’s changed the way she feels about him. But I’m not sure.”

“Have you talked with her about it?”

“Not really. I don’t want to pressure her about it. I know her. She’ll try to do it for me even if she’s not ready to forgive him and that’ll never work. It’ll probably just make her resent him more” Ashlyn explained with a resigned sigh. “And that’s the last thing I want. I need to let her work through this on her own schedule...but it’s killing me.”

There was a noticeable pause and the keeper finally looked up at her therapist who was just sitting there with a big grin on her face.

“What’s so funny?” Ashlyn asked a little defensively.

“It’s not funny. It’s wonderful” Mattie beamed. “Think about what you just said to me and then compare it with what your answer might have been to a similar question 10 years ago or so.”

Both women were quiet for a couple of minutes while Ashlyn did what the therapist asked and
replayed her answer in her head. Then she thought back ten years, to before Drew was even born, and imagined a much different type of answer.

“Holy shit” she met Mattie’s amused yet proud gaze. “I’ve really come a long way, haven’t I?” she asked shyly, unable to keep a small smile from her face.

“You certainly have. I’m proud of you Ashlyn. You’ve worked very hard and I hope you realize that everything you’ve achieved here is because of that. Nothing in here is ever easy but you’ve never been afraid to dig in and do the work. That’s a tremendous credit to you. Don’t ever undervalue that. You have a lot to be proud of.”

“I’ll try to remember that when I feel like crap and everything seems dark and gloomy” the keeper’s bashful smile grew wider. “Thanks Doc.”

The front living room was quiet and tense and full of children who were equal parts in love with and afraid of sharks. Ashlyn sat in the corner of the big L-shaped couch on Saturday afternoon, July 8th, as they were just finishing hour two of the Shark Week shows she had DVR’d throughout the week. It was pouring rain outside so a shark marathon had been an easy substitute activity for the last day of the Harris visit. Johnny and Lizzy Harris were eager participants and they considered themselves, as true Floridians, the experts on the subject. Ashlyn could practically hear her brother’s boastful voice in their words and it made her really happy. Not to be outdone, Drew tossed out every shark fact he knew over the course of the two hours – even waiting until the piece of trivia was pertinent to whatever was happening on the screen. The keeper could not have been more proud of one of her offspring if she tried. She had kids all around her, two on each side, then a dog on each side, then Meg at the other end of the long side of the couch by the recliner and the front of the room. The teenager held Dodge on her lap in an effort to keep him from causing trouble with his siblings and cousins. Rainy days indoors were the daredevil’s worst nightmare come true and he had done a very good job sitting relatively still through the first two shows. Tammye had squeezed herself next to Fred on the shorter end of the couch by the mudroom and Lily was sprawled out like a straight, big spoon behind him with her head on Tammye’s lap.

Ashlyn had her arm around Drew who was tucked into her left side, but the keeper’s primary goal with that hand was to keep Lily’s feet away from her big brother as they all sat, or sprawled in Lily’s case, close to each other. These snuggly times were wonderful but they could devolve into skirmishes and tears in the blink of an eye. Lizzy was on Ashlyn’s other side, head leaning against her right shoulder and upper arm with her big brother next to her. Johnny was focused on the big tv but he idly patted Persey who was curled into a tight ball between he and Meg on the end. Carol was in the recliner, fascinated and horrified by the shark shows. It was her first real foray into Shark Week and the spell it held over the Harris siblings and their offspring. She had seen brief clips of shows over the years but she had never sat and watched an episode before. She and Ali were going to make cookies with the kids but there had been so much turmoil among the kids trying to decide whether to watch Shark Week or make cookies that they all compromised. Ali and Carol would watch two Shark Week shows and then make cookies and any kids that wanted to join them in the kitchen were more than welcome. Ali was sitting in the new-fangled bean bag chair on the other side of the coffee table with Josie laying right on top of her, lengthwise. After reminiscing about bean bag chairs with Meg and Josie that February, Ali had bought a couple of the medium-sized Yogibo ones that were basically new and improved bean bag chairs with soft, flexible, cotton fabric covers that you could take off and throw in the washing machine. That was a must if you had kids. It was a distinct upgrade over the old plastic bean bags. The red Yogibo lived in the basement playroom and the muted green one spent most of its time upstairs in the front living room or the family room. Fred didn’t like them because he got too hot if he tried to curl up in one and Persey
didn’t like them because the sound of the microbeads, or ‘beans’, freaked her out. Honestly, both moms were surprised the Yogibos hadn’t been destroyed by the kids yet. The favorite indoor game, since March when Ali had first brought them home, was to stand on the couch and launch yourself into it from as far away as possible. Ashlyn was impressed by how durable they were as well as how far her kids could jump.

Ali had been surprised that Josie and Lily wanted to watch Shark Week. Josie hardly ever wanted to do that and Lily only sometimes joined her Mama to watch. Something about Johnny and Lizzy getting excited about watching with their beloved Auntie Ash had compelled both Krieger girls to participate. Ali loved having Josie lay on top of her like that. The girl could still be very snuggly, but she was 7 now and usually more interested in doing her own thing. The brunette knew it was just a matter of time before her tiny girl, her little one, grew out of afternoons like that one. Ali relished the way Josie absent-mindedly played with both of her hands as she lay on top of her. The redhead’s small fingers working their way around her mommy’s hands, slowly spinning the rings on her fingers and then tugging Ali’s fingers too. It was the same habit the brunette had, pulling on her fingers when she was nervous about something, but Josie did it to her own tiny fingers when she was bored or thinking about something else. Ali barely watched the tv. She spent her time listening to her family all around her and trying to commit the whole experience to memory. The brunette couldn’t see anybody on the couch except for Johnny, Persey, Meg and Dodge and she kept her eye on the little daredevil, ready to correct his behavior if Meg couldn’t or didn’t want to. But the teen seemed to have the situation under control. Ali was always surprised by how much better the kids behaved for everybody else except their two moms. It was frustrating as hell, but the brunette knew it was the ultimate compliment. She and Ashlyn got the completely unfiltered and raw versions of their children and neither of them wanted it any other way. Ali smiled like a fool for almost the entire two hours as she submerged herself in her family and their rainy afternoon. It was these random, unscheduled, special times that made the unending messes, impossible peacekeeping decisions, and constant exhaustion of motherhood all worth it – and then some.

The room stayed quiet and tense as the last ten minutes of the second show played out on the big tv screen in front of them. Even the chatterboxes and trivia kings seemed to know something important, and probably frightening, was about to happen to the underwater diver who was slowly and peacefully gliding through the water next to a beautiful coral reef. Ashlyn gave Drew a little squeeze when she felt him tense up – he was their biggest chicken and she wondered if he had a vivid imagination fueling his fears as she herself did. She squeezed him to let him know she was right there and he was safe from the unseen shark they both knew was coming for the diver.

“You better get ready” she whispered into the top of his head so only he could hear her.

Right as the diver got to the edge of the coral reef, the steadily intensifying music changed radically and a huge, great white shark suddenly appeared front and center from the other side of the reef. It was like two people crashing into each other as they approached a street corner from two different streets with a big building blocking their views. There was no way to know the other person was there until you made contact. The whole room screamed at the scary surprise on the tv as the diver flailed in terror and tried to reverse his course and hide behind the coral reef, hoping the giant maneater would pass him by. Persey jumped higher than everybody else and launched herself off of the couch and over the coffee table in an acrobatic and desperate leap. She made a quick lap of the room, assessing the danger, and then curled up underneath Ali’s legs when the brunette bent her knees up to make room for the terrified dog on the floor at the bottom of the bean bag.

“Oh my God!” Ashlyn laughed out loud and clutched at her own chest, just as shocked as everybody else had been. “You guys were so scared!”
“And you weren’t?” Tammye challenged with a chuckle.

“I knew there was a reason I didn’t watch these shows” Carol shook her head and laughed as she got up from the recliner and walked towards the mudroom on her way to the kitchen.

“Caro was scared too!” Josie exclaimed, and giggled up at Carol walking past her, as she caught her breath from her own scream.

“I almost peed my pants!” Lily laughed as she sat up and disentangled herself from Fred who had barely moved a muscle during all the ruckus around him.

“Well go to the bathroom sweetie” Ali urged, over her shoulder. “Don’t wait til it’s too late” she giggled and patted Lily’s leg as the girl trotted past her, taking the long way through the front hall to the bathroom.

“I didn’t think that diver was going to get out of the way in time” Meg’s eyes were wide from the surprise. “He tucked himself into that coral like a ninja!”

“I thought a moray eel would jump out and get him if the shark didn’t” Lizzy added excitedly. “Maybe it did and they just didn’t show it.”

“That was a great episode!” Ashlyn enthused with a big grin on her face. “And I haven’t even seen that one before.”

“That was awesome!” Dodge agreed, hopping off of Meg’s lap with a burst of energy from all the fear-induced adrenaline that was coursing through his body. For a moment it looked like he was considering jumping on top of Josie and Ali but one cautionary look from his Mommy convinced him otherwise. “I have to pee too!” he laughed and grabbed his penis through his shorts, earning a silent and stern look from Ali.

“Well go to the bathroom then son” Ashlyn chuckled as the boy ran out of the room and into the mudroom on his way to the same bathroom Lily was using.

There was a bang and all the grown-ups held their breath for two seconds until they heard Lily giggle.

“Watch out Wee” Dodge directed loudly. “I have to pee!”

“But I have to wash my hands still” Lily countered as she kicked the plastic step-stool closer to the sink so she could reach the faucet and the soap pump.

“I don’t care” Dodge shrugged and started to use the toilet.

It would be hard to remember the last time any of the four young Krieger children had peed behind a closed bathroom door in the big old house. None of them cared about peeing in front of anybody else in the family and that included all of the grandparents and both uncles and their families. Pooping was different and they all closed the door and wanted privacy for that, but not peeing.

“Can we watch another one?” Johnny asked hopefully and both Drew and Lizzy joined in the request.

“We can, but we have to take a break first and do some exercising and jumping around” the keeper explained.

Normally she would have made them all go outside and run around the house three times before
they could watch the next episode, but the pouring rain made that a no go. Or did it?

“Go back and wash your hands Dodge and flush the toilet please” Ali instructed the boy as he walked back into the front living room two seconds after Lily did. “And keep your cast out of the water.”

“I did” he lied and looked away.

“No you didn’t” Ali shook her head at him. “We don’t lie in this family. Now go back and do both those things right now young man.”

“Dodger” Ashlyn frowned at the boy for lying and he knew it.

They all heard the toilet flush and the water come on for a total of four seconds and then Dodge was back.

“Ok, everybody up!” the keeper stood up with a smirk on her face that made Ali nervous.

“Oh boy” Meg giggled. “I know that look. She’s gonna make you all run around the house now.”

“How did you know that?” Ashlyn looked at the teen in true amazement.

“Because you always make us do that Mama” Drew laughed as he got up.

“But it’s raining out” Josie pointed out as sat up, making Ali grunt beneath her.

“Oh, ow Jose” the brunette squirmed. “Get off my chest” she lifted the girl’s hand, supporting most of her body weight, off of her breast and then patted her hip with a silly smile on her face as Josie grinned sweetly back at her.

“We can run inside the house!” Lily suggested with a big grin.

“No, there are too many of you and you’re too big” Ashlyn shook her head and pretended to try and find a solution. “Well” she shrugged, acting it out, “I guess we just can’t watch any more tv today then.”

A chorus of child dissent filled the room while Tammye and Meg laughed at the spectacle. The 6 kids were all standing around Ashlyn like she was the pied piper getting ready to lead them off on an adventure. Ali stood up and gave her wife a questioning look, getting a playful wink in return.

“Well, then you’re going to have to run around the house outside in the rain” the blonde offered, half expecting lots of pushback.

“Ok, let’s go!” Dodge yelled and started to run towards the mudroom door.

To both Ashlyn and Ali’s surprise, all of the kids followed him, excitedly giggling and trying their best not to push and shove their way to and through the doorway to the mudroom.

“Three full laps!” Ashlyn called out as she held onto Fred’s collar to keep the dog on the couch. Persey wouldn’t run away if she decided to join the kids, but Fred would go exploring if he wasn’t restricted by the fence. “It’s not a race so just take it easy. No pushing or shoving. I don’t want to hear about anybody doing anything mean or no more tv for any of you” she winked at her mother who just shook her head and chuckled.

“Wait!” Ali just managed to grab the back of Dodge’s t-shirt and guided him into the kitchen. “We need to cover your cast up” she explained as she ducked quickly into the pantry where they kept
their recycled plastic grocery bags to re-use for what seemed like a hundred different things every week.

“But Mooommmmyy...” he complained loudly as Carol came over to make sure he stayed put.

She opened the junk drawer next to the refrigerator and fished out a rubber band as Ali appeared again, sliding the bag over his entire right forearm and gratefully taking the rubber band from Carol.

“Ok, there you go” the brunette giggled and patted his butt as he ran barefoot out the mudroom door, desperate to catch up to the other kids.

They were all barefoot actually. That’s just how they rolled in the big old house, especially in the summer. It was good and bad in this instance. No shoes or socks were going to be harmed in the rainy run, but the mudroom was going to be a complete mess when they were all done. Ashlyn walked out onto the small covered entrance outside the mudroom door and waited for the first lap to be completed. Meg followed her, laughing and enjoying the silly fun. In just a minute, Drew and Johnny came flying around the front of the house with Persey right behind them. Lizzy, Josie, and Lily were next and not too much later. Lizzy and Josie both looked very serious while Lily giggled adorably. And Dodge brought up the rear with a look of fierce determination on his face.

“One lap down, two to go!” Ashlyn called out and clapped enthusiastically.

Tammye and Carol went to the front porch to cheer them all on while Ali went to the side door in the family room, happy that Ashlyn had put the gate up to keep Fred in the front living room. This way Ali could stand in the open doorway to cheer for the kids without having to stand outside in the rain. None of the spectators were surprised to see Dodge in third place as the second lap finished. Lily had drifted to a carefree last place and seemed to be laughing more at Persey who had passed the boys in the lead and caught up to the little blonde girl at the beginning of the boys’ final lap.

“Let’s go girls!” Ashlyn shouted more encouragement. “Are you gonna let those boys beat you?”

“Come on Josie!” Meg cheered. “Keep going Lizzy! You got this!” She chuckled at the last place runner and encouraged her too. “Way to go Lily!”

As soon as Lily had made her third and final pass by the family room side door, Ali moved to the mudroom and got six big beach towels out of the storage cabinet above the washer and drier. She handed two each to her wife and Meg as she stood beside them and smiled at the soaking wet runners who had just rounded the front porch and were heading for the finish line in front of Ashlyn. Drew was first, beating Johnny by just a few seconds and Dodge came across about ten seconds after that. To no-one’s surprise, Josie had found an extra gear somewhere between Ali at the side door and the finish line and pulled ahead of her cousin Lizzy for a clear-cut fourth place finish. It was a big deal because Lizzy was a year older. Josie’s face was one enormous grin as she ran into Ashlyn’s arms and the waiting towel. Lily finally made her way to the end of the run and Ali chuckled when she saw the pretty wildflower in her daughter’s hand. Of course she had stopped to pick a pretty pink wildflower, probably from the edge of the woods on the other side of the house by the dining room.

“Great job you guys!”
“Way to run girls!”
“Excellent running!”
“Nice work everybody!”
“You were all so fast!”
All four grown-ups and Meg congratulated the kids as they wrapped them each in a towel and hugged them.

“Drew, since you were the first one back, you get to go close the gates. Thank you buddy” the keeper informed the winner of the race, even though it hadn’t been a race.

“Aww Mama, why do I have to close the gates?” Drew whined.

“She just told you, silly” Tammye kissed the top of his head and nudged him towards the gate by the kitchen. “Hurry up and we’ll all change into dry clothes and have a snack.”

“Oooh”, his face lit up, sensing an opportunity, “can we have sundaes?” he looked expectantly at both of his moms, watching them exchange a look he couldn’t quite read.

It was almost 3pm and a big sundae would definitely put a dent in their dinner appetites, but it wouldn’t be the end of the world. Besides, it was the last day for the Florida Harrises and Meg was going to the fourth week of The Academy the next day too. Ali was grateful that her wife let her be the one to share the good news instead of the one always barking out the rules and restrictions.

“All six kids cheered loudly and started to move towards the kitchen.

“Whoa whoa whoa” Ashlyn stopped them. “Drew?” she quirked her eyebrow at him and he rolled his eyes and took off at a sprint to close both gates. “And the rest of you hooligans, stay in the mudroom and take your wet clothes off. When you’re dry, go up and get dressed and then come back down to the kitchen. Got it?”

“And wash your hands before we do sundaes” Carol added, knowing they were going to have to do it once they got to the kitchen and there would just be a logjam at the kitchen sink.

Everybody hurriedly stripped, Johnny and Lizzy both a little shy but not enough to make a big deal out of it. The whole thing went so fast that they had their towel wrapped around them in no time. Just as they were all almost dry, except for Drew who had just started to take his wet clothes off, Persey trotted into the mudroom, right in the middle of all of them, and shook her wet coat all over everybody, making them squeal and giggle and complain.

“That was awesome” Drew laughed from his spot by the mudroom door where he had watched the whole thing.

The kids all trotted upstairs with their towels wrapped around their shoulders. Josie let hers fly behind her like a cape while Dodge and then Lily dropped theirs completely and took the stairs completely naked. Tammye hustled to the foot of the stairs and got a couple of pictures of the parade of grandchildren in various states of nudity, several cute butts on full display, and completely unaware.

“So how come you didn’t run?” Ashlyn teased Meg as they bent over the freezer drawer at the bottom of the refrigerator, digging out the tubs of ice cream. “Afraid Dodge would beat you?” she giggled.

“Nah, can’t risk an injury before camp tomorrow” Meg laughed at her own lame excuse. “Drew’s the speedster anyway. Just because Dodge is so strong doesn’t make him faster. Geez, are you slipping in your old age or what?” she elbowed Ashlyn in the ribs as they carried the ice cream over to the nook table and waited for Carol to finish wiping it off before putting them down.
“Ouch” Ali chuckled as she followed them with chocolate sauce, chocolate sprinkles, rainbow sprinkles, whipped cream, and caramel sauce. “Doucette takes the point” she giggled and pecked her wife’s lips when Ashlyn turned to help her with the fixings.

“Old” Ashlyn scoffed at the teen. “You’re lucky it’s pouring rain right now or I’d take you outside and show you how not old I am.”

“Oooh, good one” Meg laughed. “Even your comebacks are old” she giggled and grinned at her step-mother as their playful banter continued.

“Allright smartass” Ashlyn lowered her voice in case one of the younger kids somehow made it downstairs that quickly. “This week at camp, you and me, head to head...” she began to challenge, still keeping things mostly playful.

“Oh cut it out’ Tammye interrupted with a swat to her daughter’s butt as she carried over bowls and spoons and ice cream scoops. “You’re not messing with her last week at The Academy. You leave her alone now” she gave Ashlyn a challenging look.

“Ha ha” Meg taunted.

“And you, miss thing” Tammye transferred the look right over to the teen. “You just worry about yourself and keeping your body in good condition. You could learn a thing or two from her about that” she nodded in Ashlyn’s direction as she spoke to her granddaughter. “She could have played three or four more years if she hadn’t broken her leg.”

Ali was about to chime in with her own playful advice when they all heard another big bang, this time from upstairs. They held their breath again, waiting hopefully to hear laughter or some other reassuring sound, but instead they heard tears. Both Ali and Ashlyn bolted up the backstairs and ran across their master bedroom into the second-floor hall where they were met by Drew who was running from his room towards the middle of the hallway where the top of the stairs to the first floor were.

“What happened?”
“Who’s hurt?”
Both moms asked immediately.

“Umm, Johnny fell, and...” he swallowed nervously.

“Just tell us what happened Drew. The truth” Ashlyn spoke sternly to her son.

“We were jumping from bed to bed and he missed” he shrugged and guiltily dropped his eyes to the floor.

They hurried into Drew’s bedroom at the front of the house and saw Johnny cradling his arm with tears running down his red face. He was on the floor, leaning up against Drew’s bed with the three girls and Dodge standing around him in a semi-circle and both dogs anxiously wagging their tails at him, one on each side. Both Ali and Ashlyn bolted up the backstairs and ran across their master bedroom into the second-floor hall where they were met by Drew who was running from his room towards the middle of the hallway where the top of the stairs to the first floor were.

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two beds were at a 90 degree angle from each other so the farther back towards the foot of the beds you went, the greater the distance became. Great game for a rainy afternoon. Nobody owned up to creating the game but both Ali and Ashlyn were sure it was Drew and Ethan earlier in the summer. The first time Ethan had hurt himself after missing the jump, Ashlyn had put the kibosh on the game. Even she could see that it was going to be trouble. The fact that there was a window so close to both beds made her feel sick when she thought about one of the kids landing on the bed and bouncing right through the window. Drew must have been showing off for Johnny this afternoon when they went up to change into dry clothes. It explained why he didn’t want to tell his moms the truth right away too.

“Johnny, are you ok?” Ashlyn tried to keep the fear out of her voice as she knelt next to her nephew, pushing Persey out of the way. “Is it your arm?”

“He hit his elbow hard on the floor when he missed the bed” Drew offered meekly as he stood slightly behind Ali.

The keeper helped Johnny move his arm around and bend his elbow a few times to make sure nothing was broken. There was an angry red scrape on the back of his elbow and the area was slightly swollen, but it seemed like he would live. The relief Ashlyn felt was quickly replaced by fury as she fixed her eldest son with a hard stare.

“You know you’re not supposed to jump on the beds. The windows make it too dangerous and I can’t believe we’re having this same conversation again!” she raised her voice as she looked at Drew who was trying to hide behind Ali.

“Who was jumping on the beds?” Ali asked as she moved aside, exposing Drew to the rest of the room.

“Not me Mommy” Lily shook her head, her face serious.

“We were getting dressed” Lizzy nodded over her shoulder towards Josie’s room across the hall.

“And were you jumping on the beds in there?” the brunette put her hands on her hips and looked from Lizzy to Josie, raising her eyebrow at the redhead.

“Nope” Josie shook her head. “We came in when we heard Johnny crying.”

“I wasn’t crying” the oldest child in the room insisted.

“Was it just you two?” Ashlyn focused on Drew and Johnny as she helped the injured boy up to his feet.

“Yeah” Johnny replied glumly.

“I’m sorry you got hurt bud” she squeezed her nephew’s shoulder and gave him a little pat on the back. “But you’re lucky all you did was hurt your elbow. You could have fallen right through one of the windows. Do you realize that?” her voice was rising again as the idea struck fear in her heart.

“Ok” Ali stepped into the middle of the kids and started herding them out of the room. She conveniently left Drew and Johnny behind with her wife. “Let’s finish getting dressed so we can go down and have our sundaes. Here Dodge” she chuckled as she saw the boy struggling to get his casted forearm through the sleeve of his t-shirt. He knew he had to put it through the sleeve first but he must have been in a rush to investigate the fall in Drew’s room, “let’s try this again. Put your cast in first...” she pulled the shirt and freed both arms so he could start over with just his head.
through the shirt.

There was a tense moment of silence in the room as Ashlyn, Drew and Johnny listened to the rest of the kids work their way down the front stairs, talking animatedly about what kind of extras they were going to put on their sundaes.

“You guys...” Ashlyn breathed out as she sat down heavily on the edge of Drew’s bed. Her heartrate was finally starting to settle down and she felt more like herself again. “We count on you guys as the oldest to set a good example for the other kids. What are you doing to me here?”

Neither boy said anything for a long, full minute. They looked nervous and sad as they moved their eyes anywhere but to Ashlyn’s face.

“Sorry Mama” Drew finally got out, tentatively meeting her thoughtful gaze.

“Thank you for apologizing, but I’m really disappointed in both of you.”

“I’m sorry too” Johnny added in as quickly as he could.

“I know you are” she gave him a small smile. “Let’s go down and get some ice for your elbow.

She put a hand on each boy’s shoulder as they left the room and moved down the hallway towards the stairs. Nobody said anything until they were halfway down them.

“Can we still have sundaes?” Drew ventured hopefully, craning his neck to give his mother one of his sweetest and most sincere smiles.

“Do you think you deserve sundaes?” she asked calmly as they continued down the stairs.

“Not really” he dropped his head and slumped his shoulders.

“Listen,” she stopped them at the foot of the stairs and stood in front of them, holding each boy’s hand in her own. “We want you guys to have fun and play and be happy. That’s part of being a kid and we love watching everybody have fun. But your safety is the most important thing in the whole world. We don’t make rules just to be meanies. We make rules, and we follow rules, to keep everybody safe. You absolutely cannot jump on the beds in this house. That’s a hard rule and you both know it. If you need to jump around go downstairs to the playroom and jump on the couch or the bean bag. Try not to destroy them” she chuckled and rolled her eyes. “But not the beds. You guys are bigger and can control your bodies better so maybe you feel like you’re not going to hit the windows. But the other kids aren’t and if they see you doing it they’re going to think they can do it too. Do you understand?”

“Yeah.”
“Ah-huh.”
They both nodded.

“You guys are the oldest and that usually means you get to take advantage of some cool things the younger kids can’t. Like what?” she asked them.

“Ummm I can stay up later than Lizzy” Johnny offered.

“That’s right, that’s a good one.”

“I can get my own stuff from the fridge” Drew added. “And I got to go to Ethan’s dad’s wedding by myself too.”
“Absolutely right” Ashlyn grinned at how proud her son still was of that last one. “But with those cool things also comes responsibility, right? You have to set a good example because the younger kids look up to you and want to do everything you guys do. So you need to keep that in mind all the time.”

“But it’s hard” Drew replied sincerely with no trace of any whine.

“It is hard” the keeper nodded. “But we all know you guys can do it. You just didn’t do a very good job of it upstairs. So let’s make sure you do a really good job of it for the next couple of days, ok?” She watched them both sigh and look dejected for a few seconds. “Otherwise I don’t know how I’m going to justify letting you have your sundaes now” she cocked her head to the side and let a tiny smile sneak onto her face.

“Yessssss!”
“Awesome!”
They both yelled and started to run towards the back of the house.

“Whoa,” she chuckled and held tightly to their hands, halting their progress. “Not so fast, rule-breakers” she fixed them with another stern look. “Do we have a deal?”

“Yes Mama.”
“Yes Auntie Ash.”

“Alright then. Don’t let us down again boys” she gave them a smile and released them. “Don’t run!” she called out after them as they tore through the front hall and into the dining room on their way to the nook at the back of the family room. “And don’t make me regret this!”

Ashlyn walked behind them and stopped just inside the family room near the tv and the couch. She watched as the boys hurriedly picked up their bowls and bellied up to the nook table, eagerly assessing the offerings and making their first sundae decisions. The keeper took in the whole sight of the other four kids enjoying their first scoops of sundae with Tammye, Carol and Meg sitting in the nook among them. Carol wielded the can of whipped cream while Tammye monitored the sprinkle usage. Both dogs were close by, waiting optimistically for something yummy to fall onto the floor. The feeling of satisfaction and completion and love that Ali had felt earlier in the front living room during the Shark Week shows recreated itself right then for the blonde. Her heart felt full and a smile filled her face. She scanned the area for the only thing missing from the picture and then jumped when she felt her wife’s arm sneak around her waist from behind.

“You ok babe?” Ali asked softly, pressing a quick kiss into her shoulder blade.

“Christ, you scared me” Ashlyn gasped out with a giggle. “Where’d you come from?” she turned and Ali moved up so they were standing arm-in-arm.

“Almost had a chocolate ice cream emergency” she chuckled as she held up the new tub of ice cream she had just brought up from the basement freezer.

“Wow, that would have been a disaster” the keeper agreed with another giggle as she kissed Ali’s cheek.

“I can’t believe Drew hasn’t pitched a fit yet” Ali raised both eyebrows. “There’s maybe a half a scoop left over there but that’s it.”

They both watched him patiently standing there waiting for the chocolate ice cream that he had been told was on the way. Johnny was happily digging into the vanilla and loading up the
chocolate sauce while everyone else was already enjoying their creations. Ashlyn was proud of her son for being so good, happy that her little talk seemed to have done some good.

“Seriously” the brunette laughed. “What did you say to them? This is impressive.”

“Let’s just say they’re happy to be having sundaes at all right now” Ashlyn grinned.

They both admired their beautiful, crazy family for another minute.

“They’re really good kids, most of the time” Ali leaned into her wife and rested her head against Ashlyn’s shoulder, conscious of how cold the ice cream was in her hand.

“Yeah, we’re so damned lucky” Ashlyn whispered and gave her wife a squeeze, enjoying the idyllic moment.

“Mommy!!!” Lily leaned back and roared at the top of her lungs. “Doo needs chocolate ice cream!!!!”

Everybody at the nook table reacted to the loud outburst while Lily giggled at them, very pleased with herself.

“Annnnd we’re back” Ali giggled to Ashlyn as they made their way to the table, enjoying the cheers from the kids when they saw the chocolate ice cream raised triumphantly in front of them. “But it was a nice moment.”

“It sure was” the keeper agreed with a chuckle. “It sure was.”
“I can’t...” Ali breathed out unevenly as her legs trembled under her own weight. “I can’t...I’m gonna...fall...”

It was Saturday night, one week later, and they had put the tuckered-out kids to bed after an exciting Breakers win in the last game before the FIFA window for the Olympic break. The family was flying to Paris on Monday evening and they had a very busy day planned for Sunday as they got everybody ready for the big trip. They had quickly locked up the house and gotten the dogs situated for the night and then locked their bedroom doors before enjoying their own private time. Ashlyn had been the aggressor during round one, pushing the brunette back onto the bed and devouring her before she even had all of her own clothes off. As soon as she could feel her legs again, Ali went to her closet and retrieved a few toys, including their two favorite dildos and harnesses, dropping them all on the edge of the bed so they’d be within easy reach. She used the tiny vibrating ring on Ashlyn’s clit to help send her hurtling over the edge for her first orgasm, eagerly lapping up every drop the keeper spilled onto her face and tongue. As soon as the blonde had gotten her breathing almost back to normal, she pulled her wife up towards the head of the bed and made her stand up above her, facing her, as she sat propped up against the headboard. Ashlyn had been torturing the brunette with long slow licks through her dripping folds and alternating them with probing thrusts into her quivering pussy. Ali held onto the top of the headboard and tried to stay on her feet for as long as possible while Ashlyn gripped the back of her thighs and held her firmly in place. They both knew it was a losing battle as the brunette’s legs started to give out beneath her.

“Here...” Ashlyn mumbled against her wife’s swollen clit and then pressed a warm, open-mouthed kiss into her Nittany lion tattoo low inside her right hip. “Come down here” she tried to guide her wife down to sit on her face as she stretched her long body out flat again.

But Ali had other plans. She took her keeper’s hands off of her ass and squeezed them as they locked eyes for a few seconds, exchanging dark, ravenous looks. The brunette smirked and turned herself around so they were in the 69 position, with Ali on top – one of Ashlyn’s all-time favorite arrangements.

“I want some too” the brunette purred as she pulled Ashlyn’s legs up and out, swooning at the delicious scent and sight of her pulsing entrance, wet and ready for her. “Fuck, you smell good” Ali moaned and dragged her stiff nipples across her wife’s lower abs as she worked her fingers through Ashlyn’s soaked folds, opening her up completely.

“Oh Jesus Al, shit, that’s good” Ashlyn bit her bottom lip and closed her eyes for a couple of
seconds as the brunette finished getting into position. “Make sure you come first baby” she gasped out as she felt Ali’s fingers enter her throbbing pussy. “You’re not...stealing my turn...again...” the keeper swallowed hard, opened her eyes and tried to focus on one of her favorite views in the entire world.

“We’ll see about that” Ali teased, her voice low and thick with lust as she worked her tongue around Ashlyn’s sensitive clit, her two fingers slowly starting to pump inside the blonde at the same time. “Mmmmmmm...so delicious” she hummed into the tender nub.

Ashlyn groaned as her body responded to the touches. Her nipples got even harder than they already had been and her hips started rocking all on their own, matching Ali’s slow and steady rhythm inside her hot core. She felt like she could come as soon as the brunette upped the pace and started applying real pressure to her clit. The keeper did not want to come first. Normally she didn’t care when Ali hijacked her turn like this. She understood the impulse because when she got really turned on, all she wanted was to bury her face between Ali’s legs, even if it meant she had to delay her own release. It had always been like this between them. Instead of ‘my turn’ meaning my turn to have an orgasm, Ali and Ashlyn had always used ‘my turn’ to mean my turn to touch you and make you come. Nothing made them hornier than bringing the other to orgasm. Nothing. But tonight, for some reason the keeper didn’t fully understand, she really wanted to get Ali off and keep control of her turn. And that wasn’t likely to happen with the way the brunette had just increased the pace and pressure of her two middle fingers thrusting between the blonde’s legs. Ashlyn forced herself to snap out of the sweet, pleasurable sensations that were rolling over her body at the moment. She grabbed Ali by the top of her thighs and pulled her back into her face, stuffing another pillow beneath her head for a better angle.

“Oh Ash...yes baby, mmmmm...feels so nice...” Ali hummed into her sensitive flesh and then bit her keeper’s inner thigh, making Ashlyn growl and writhe beneath her.

“Fuck!” the blonde groaned and felt her orgasm starting to take shape deep inside and knew she had to do something to make up the ground she had lost.

Ashlyn put her mouth to work, holding onto one of her wife’s thighs while caressing and squeezing her ass with the other hand. She felt Ali’s pussy quiver at the flurry of attention and kept up her pressure. But every time the keeper upped her level, her sultry wife matched her and made it impossible to catch up. Desperate, and beginning to doubt how much longer she could hold off her own release, Ashlyn came up with a plan, a last-ditch effort to level the playing field. She blindly reached out and felt for the toy she wanted, letting her fingers find the distinctive knobs her sexy brunette loved so much. The current strap-on for Ali was the same thickness and length, as usual, and included roughly the same number of knobs protruding from it, but this model had a pink and purple swirled coloring to it. At first, it reminded both women of their daughters’ favorite colors and it had taken some time for them to reclaim it as their own sexy times toy. But it was all theirs now. They had done filthy things with it for six months now and all either of them thought about when they saw it was how dark Ali’s eyes got and how wet it made Ashlyn.

For whatever reason, the keeper had never used it on her wife in this particular position before. The keeper didn’t stop to ponder the question, but if she had to guess she would say it was because when Ali was spread out on top of her like this Ashlyn was not inclined to share her with anything. No toy was going to go where her own mouth or fingers could, not with the brunette’s gorgeous pussy and glorious ass right there in front of her face. No fucking way. But Ashlyn was determined to make her wife come first this time and she needed help. The keeper wondered for a quick moment if Ali would have a problem with it. She bit her bottom lip as another wave of pleasure rippled through her body from the brunette’s powerful mouth at her clit. Ashlyn knew she couldn’t hold off her own orgasm much longer. Fuck it. She was doing it.
“Christ, you’re fucking gorgeous baby” the keeper groaned as she slid her tongue out of Ali’s drenched center. “Mmmmmmm...fuck...” she hummed and gasped at another strong tug in her own core. “I’m gonna make you feel so good. So fucking good...” she husked out, knowing how turned on Ali got when she used her words like that.

The keeper felt Ali’s rhythm falter for just a few seconds and knew she had taken the first step forward in the race no-one knew anything about except for her. Ashlyn slid her hand through the brunette’s soaked folds and then coated the dildo with her juices. It took two hands and she had to abandon touching and licking her sexy brunette while she prepped the toy, which allowed Ali to regain her focus. Ashlyn made one more pass with her hand and applied another handful of passion to the dildo before slipping two fingers back into the brunette’s pussy, making them both gasp. The keeper could feel Ali settle into the new, more aggressive thrusting of her fingers as her body began to bounce and move along with Ashlyn’s thrusts.

“Oh, yeah...mmmmmmm...” Ali moaned into her keeper’s swollen clit, temporarily faltering with her own pumping. “Unnnhhhh...fuck babe...mmmmm...”

They both felt the brunette’s leg tremble and Ashlyn knew it was time. Without any warning, she pulled her fingers out and spread Ali’s folds wide, slowly pushing the thick, knobbled dildo inside her with the other hand. The brunette let out a low, guttural moan as her whole body stillled for the 30 seconds that Ashlyn took to push the toy all the way into her pulsing core.

“Oh fuck” she gasped as she dug her short nails into the back of Ashlyn’s thigh. “Oh my God...fuck yes...” her leg trembled again, stronger this time. She swallowed hard and rested her forehead against her keeper’s mound for a few seconds while neither of them moved a muscle. “Jesus Christ Ashlyn...” her voice was hoarse and ragged. “What the fuck are you...doing to me?” she groaned and grasped both of her keeper’s thighs as she felt the dildo start to slowly move in and out.

Ashlyn turned her head and sucked on the soft flesh at the top of her wife’s inner thigh, thrusting the toy slowly but steadily. Both of Ali’s legs tensed up and she involuntarily lifted her body up an inch before dropping it back down gracelessly on top of her keeper. Their slightly sweaty skin made a clapping sound as their bodies slapped against each other.

“You like that, baby?” Ashlyn purred in a low, hungry voice. “That feels good, doesn’t it, sexy?” she grinned lasciviously, loving the way the pink and purple swirls disappeared inside her wife’s dripping wet pussy.

All Ali could do was grunt in response. She picked her head up and tried to get her mouth back to work between Ashlyn’s legs but there was no way she could concentrate on anything other than the incredible feeling coming from between her own legs. The brunette had grown to love this position over the years. It had taken some time and a lot of trust, but she loved it because she knew how much Ashlyn loved it. There was something sexy and powerful about being so open and exposed like that and it had become one of their go to positions, even for their more typical first-round quickies. But there was something even more titillating about having the dildo inside her like this. Ali knew the toy stretched her out and the idea of Ashlyn’s face being right there where she was her most vulnerable made her absolutely crazy with desire. The brunette’s body and mind worked together and in just a few minutes with the knobby dildo pumping inside her, she felt like she was going to explode into a million pieces.

Ashlyn felt the change in her wife immediately and moaned as another gush of her own passion flooded her core. There was nothing sexier than Ali Krieger about to have an orgasm, except Ali Krieger actually having an orgasm. The keeper knew it was time for both and she released her
wife’s thigh and moved her fingers down to circle her aching clit, applying light pressure and sucking in a breath when the brunette’s body lifted off of her again at the touch.

“Fuck!” Ali shouted and dug her nails into the blonde’s thigh again. “Harder...unnnhhhh...fuck...oh God...unnnhhhh...” her whole body bounced as Ashlyn thrusted harder and faster with the dildo. “More...my clit...” she pleaded as the tingling sensation of her impending orgasm started to spread through her body.

The keeper rubbed her fingers hard and fast against Ali’s sensitive nub, loving the way her wife pressed down against her fingers for even more pressure as she chased her release. Ashlyn kept her lips and tongue moving from inner thigh to inner thigh, lazily licking and sucking and nipping at the soft skin there. The brunette’s juices were sliding down into her clit and even slowly dripping onto Ashlyn’s chest.

“Jesus” the keeper groaned as she watched the passion start to collect on her own skin. It felt like hot lava and freezing ice all at the same time as intense lust filled every part of her brain and body. “Christ, that’s fucking hot. Goddamn, baby” she husked out and pumped and rubbed even faster. “You’re so fucking sexy...fuck yeah!”

It only took another minute before both Ali’s legs shook and her whole body stiffened and then quaked as she came hard. She shouted in a strangled, strained voice.

“Oh God...unnnhhhh...yes...Ashlyn...yessss!!!”

The orgasm raced through her and left her convulsing and flailing on top of her very excited wife. Ashlyn moved her hand from Ali’s clit down to her own and began rubbing it. Ali was still quivering and gasping for breath, but she felt and saw her wife’s hand right in front of her face as the brunette rode out her orgasm. Ashlyn kept slowly moving the dildo in and out with her right hand and brought herself to orgasm with her left hand. She felt her wife’s hand cover her own as it rubbed her sensitive nub just right. The keeper knew Ali was barely present, still riding her high, and loved that she tried to help her get off anyway.

“Aliiiiii!!!” she yelled and then groaned as she came, just a few short seconds after her beautiful brunette.

Ashlyn stopped moving both hands and let Ali interlock their fingers together by her thigh. The keeper left the dildo in place and held tightly onto Ali’s right thigh as she shook and twitched underneath her. The brunette did the same thing with her free hand, wrapping her arm around her wife’s right thigh and leaning her hot cheek into it. They stayed like that for a couple of minutes as they each tried to catch their breath. Ali finally tried to reach behind her with her right hand to remove the dildo but Ashlyn beat her to it. She knew her wife liked to keep whatever toy they used inside her for a few minutes after her orgasm, particularly if it was a strap-on and still connected to her gorgeous keeper. When she was ready, she would ask the blonde to take it out. Ashlyn wondered why she hadn’t asked her this time as she pulled the dildo out of the brunette’s relaxing and very wet vagina.

“I got you” the keeper mumbled as she kissed Ali’s thigh again.

She felt the desire spark up again as she watched the pink and purple swirls come back into view in front of her face. A gush of the brunette’s juices slid out with it and dripped onto Ashlyn’s chest again, making the keeper’s breath hitch. She was about to lick Ali’s passion off the toy when she felt the brunette try to turn around in a hurry.

“Whoa, where are you going?” she asked, surprised and more than a little disappointed. Ali had
gotten more comfortable over the years and usually spent several minutes on top of her keeper after they came, at least. “What’s the matter Al?” Ashlyn asked as her wife pushed hard against the resistance she offered with her thigh and arm.

“Just...let me go” she entreated, turning her head to try and look at the blonde. “Please Ash...”

Ashlyn released her so she could spin around, but didn’t allow her to roll off of her body.

“Hey, honey” the keeper soothed with her voice as she held Ali firmly on top of her with both arms once the brunette had completed the turn and moved her face up near hers. “What’s going on?” Ashlyn lifted her head up so she could press a soft kiss into the top of her wife’s forehead as Ali ducked her head down shyly.

Ashlyn couldn’t see her wife’s face but the tops of her ears were beet red. It had been a very long time since the brunette had gotten embarrassed while they were having sex and Ashlyn couldn’t imagine what had caused it tonight. The only times Ali was shy or hesitant about sex was when her wife helped her through her really awful period cramps a couple of times a year. But she still let Ashlyn do it. The keeper was stumped.

“Ugh, is this all from me?” Ali asked, her voice so soft that Ashlyn almost couldn’t hear her.

“What honey?” the blonde put a hand on each side of Ali’s head and physically tilted it up so they were facing each other from about 6” apart. Ali kept her eyes down and her cheeks were covered in the same deep blush as her ears. “Hey, baby, talk to me. Are you ok?” she cooed and pushed the soft brunette hair back behind her ears.

“Is this all me?” she wiped the juices from Ashlyn’s chest with the palm of her hand and a frown on her face. “From when you took it out?” she finally glanced up, quickly looking at her keeper’s face.

Ashlyn’s face registered concern and tenderness as she studied Ali’s beautiful whiskey-colored eyes, trying to understand what was troubling the brunette.

“Umm, yeah it is” the keeper replied softly, as she caressed Ali’s cheek with her thumb and cupped her face. “I can’t even tell you what that did to me” she chuckled seductively. “That was so fucking hot” she felt her eyes start to darken again at the thought.

“Really?” Ali was surprised to hear her wife’s words but couldn’t doubt the hungry look in her eyes. “You liked that? It wasn’t...gross?”

The shy, tiny voice she heard moved Ashlyn deeply. She finally realized that Ali was self-conscious about how her body had reacted to what they had just done.

“Ali, please tell me you’re not worried about the fact that you were so worked up while we were having sex that you got really wet” she carefully quirked an eyebrow at the brunette and waited for her reply. But none came. Ashlyn replayed her wife’s question in her mind again. “And no, there wasn’t anything gross about it. Why would you think that, baby?”

It took a few more minutes and a little more cajoling before Ali finally opened up to her patient keeper.

“It’s just...we’ve never done that like that before. I mean, in that position” she stammered a bit. “It surprised me I guess” she shrugged and dropped her eyes again.

“Oh, shit, I’m so sorry honey...” Ashlyn started to apologize.
“No, no” the brunette shook her head and looked into her favorite tawny hazel eyes sincerely. “It was amazing and I loved it” she blushed again and the corners of her mouth curled up just a bit. “There’s nothing to be sorry about.”

“Ok, well then I’m confused as hell” the keeper chuckled. “I have no idea what’s going on right now. But you’re ok?” she watched Ali’s face carefully for her reply.

“Ugh” Ali rolled her eyes, frustrated with herself. She took two deep breaths and tucked her head into her wife’s neck before continuing. It would be easier to try and explain if she didn’t have to look her in the eye. She hoped. “I’m way more than ok” she kissed Ashlyn’s neck and trailed her fingers across her collarbone and the base of her throat. “I trust you Ash and that was incredible.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah” Ali grinned against the soft skin of her neck and snuggled in closer.

“So why did you leave so fast then? Afterwards? You took my favorite spot away” she squeezed her wife sweetly to make sure she knew she wasn’t really upset about it.

“Ummm...ugh...” Ali sighed loudly, exasperated with herself for making this into such a big damned deal. “I love that position because you love it and because it makes me feel really vulnerable and open” she explained, her words coming a mile a minute. “But something about that dildo being inside me and all of that happening right in your face...” she paused, wishing more than anything that she hadn’t ever said a word about any of it.

When the pause had gone on for almost a full minute, Ashlyn spoke again as she moved both hands around her brunette’s back in soothing, rhythmic circles.

“Maybe made it a little too vulnerable and open for you?”

“Yeah” she exhaled, relieved that Ashlyn had found words for it when she hadn’t been able to herself. “You make me a sloppy mess and after I came I was lying there, totally blissed out, and then all I could think about was all of that mess...”

“And that’s why you didn’t ask me to take it out” the keeper nodded, finally getting the picture. Ashlyn felt her wife nod her head in agreement. “But I took it out for you anyway...”

“And then...”

“And then your sexy body told me just how fucking hot that was, honey. That’s what happened next” she turned and kissed the top of Ali’s head. “I love how wet you get for me. It’s the biggest compliment and the hugest damn turn-on” she chuckled again. “Seriously Al, I can’t believe you don’t know that by now.”

Ali groaned a little, still sounding embarrassed by her keeper’s honest words.

“No, really baby” Ashlyn’s voice was still soft but it became more urgent as she tried to prove her point. “Do you know how crazy it made me when I took that thing out of you?”

The brunette didn’t reply.

“Do you?” Ashlyn asked again, this time pulling her head back to try and look down at her wife’s face.

“Really?” the small reply came from beneath the keeper’s chin.
“Oh my God” Ashlyn rolled her eyes dramatically. “When you started dripping down onto my chest? Jesus fucking Christ Al, that’s some next-level horniness right there. I mean, I was ready to go again, right that minute, just from that” she confessed with a throaty chuckle.

“You were?” Ali couldn’t keep the surprise from her voice.

“Honey, you and this magnificent body of yours fuck me up in ways I can’t even begin to tell you” she shook her head and smiled down at the brunette who had finally pulled her head back to look up at her face. “You are so fucking sexy and I’ll never be able to get enough of you. And that goes for your delicious, wet juices too, wherever they end up” she rolled them over so they were on their sides, facing each other. “I’m sorry it freaked you out this time” she kissed Ali’s lips softly as they held each other close. “And if you don’t want me to do that again, I won’t. But I loved every second of it, all of it, well, until you tried to get off of me like a crab scrambling around at the damned beach” she giggled and was relieved to hear Ali giggling too. “I love you” she kissed Ali’s lips again. “And I love your smoking hot body” she gave her another kiss. “And I love everything your body does when we’re having sex” she pressed another kiss to her lips. “And you’re just gonna have to deal with that, my sexy queen” she moved to give her wife another quick kiss but Ali had other ideas.

The brunette met her keeper’s lips with a hungry kiss of her own, sliding her tongue into her mouth and grazing her teeth across her bottom lip as they made out for a few minutes. Ali brought her thigh up and pressed it against Ashlyn’s steamy center, feeling her stomach flip-flop when she felt how wet her keeper actually was.

“Fuck Ash” she whimpered and applied more pressure with her thigh as they came up for air.

“See?” the keeper grinned and tried to catch her breath, loving the way Ali was working her lips and tongue up her neck and behind her ear. “I told you I was ready to go.”

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Getting four young children packed and prepared for a three-week trip to France for the Olympics was no small undertaking. The family, including Ken and Vicki, was going to travel with Ashlyn to all three different cities for the group stage games, starting with Paris itself. Then, if everything went according to plan and the USWNT took care of business, they would travel with her to the quarterfinal game in a fourth city and then on to the semi-finals and final which were all going to be played in Lyon. There had been much discussion over the past several months about leaving the twins behind but, in the end, Ali and Ashlyn decided the ordeal of the 7-hour flight was worth the joy of having all four young kids with them for the 3-week Olympic adventure. Everybody was disappointed that Meg couldn’t join them, but she had another soccer camp and then a basketball camp with only a few days off in between them. The teen had decided she wanted to dedicate the time and energy to becoming a professional athlete and was hoping to play in the NWSL after college. These were exactly the sacrifices she had to be ready to make and she knew it. The only thing that helped take the sting out of missing the big trip, besides the cute videos Ali sent every day, was the touching card Ashlyn had written and mailed to the redhead before they left for Paris. Ashlyn praised her step-daughter for her dedication and sacrifice and told her just how proud she was of her for following her dreams and doing the hard, often unseen, work that would be necessary to achieve them.

The Kriegers paid through the nose for fully lie-flat seats in business class so, hopefully, everybody would sleep during the flight. The huge plane had four seats in the middle section and then two seats in each side section. The two seats in the side sections faced each other with a privacy panel that dropped down between them if and when you wanted it to. The same, opposite facing sleeper
seats occupied the middle section as well, but with the two seats in the very middle both facing forward. Every seat on the aisle, no matter the section, faced backwards. It was an easy decision to put the four kids into those forward-facing seats in back to back rows in the middle section of the plane. The risk of them bothering each other was a concern, but all four adults felt like they could better wrangle the kids if they were enclosed in this manner. This also allowed the adults to be a buffer on the aisle to the other side sections of the plane. That buffer worked both ways too. They kept the kids in their seats or area as well as protecting the little ones from the beverage cart and other passengers moving up and down the aisle.

“That’s all we need” Ali rolled her eyes as she and Ashlyn had methodically planned out the seating arrangements when they bought their tickets back in early May. “If Drew does manage to fall asleep in the aisle seat and somebody drops something on him or bangs into his foot or elbow and wakes him up we’ll have a murder on our hands” she quirked her eyebrow sharply at the thought.

“Yeah, we can’t have that” the keeper chuckled at her wife. “We’d be lost without you honey” she kissed Ali’s cheek sweetly. “Besides, we both know nothing good ever happens in foreign prisons. We’ve seen the movies” she grinned mischievously. “You’d be way too popular in there” she laughed and dodged the swat coming her way.

“Me?” Ali pulled back incredulously. “You’re the one who would kill somebody babe” she chuckled and shook her head. “You barely hold it together on the 3-1/2 hour direct flights to Florida with the kids. You’d better start working on some happy thought exercises or something now. Before we know it, July 17th will be here and you’ll be murdering some poor fool 30,000 feet above the Atlantic” she laughed out loud and bumped shoulders with her keeper.

“Oh, I’ll be fine” Ashlyn dismissed her wife’s very valid concerns. “I’m much better about flying with the kids now.”

The statement was true, for the most part, but the keeper was still the most stressed-out member of the couple when it came to air travel with the kids. By far.

“Don’t make me drug you, All-star” Ali cautioned, fixing her wife with a warning squint. “Because I’ll do it” she laughed and pecked her lips.

The flight had gone surprisingly well, and, aside from the usual ear-popping pain during take-off and landing, the kids had adapted easily to the plane and their cool sleeper seats. The direct flight from Boston to Paris took off at 7:00pm in the evening and landed at about 8:30am the next morning, Parisian time. Everybody slept for at least part of the flight and the kids managed to sleep for almost all of it. Settling in and calming down enough to go to sleep was the most difficult part, but once they nodded off an hour or so into the flight they stayed out for the duration. The adults had a harder time sleeping because they were worried about the kids getting up and wandering around on their own. The flight attendants couldn’t have been kinder about it though. They assured Ashlyn that they would wake one of the adult Kriegers up if one of the kids got up or needed anything. Four hours of sleep was better than nothing and the moms were thankful for every minute of it.

Ken and Vicki had tried to change their plans when Mike Christopher had his heart attack so they could be with Ali for all three weeks. But the moms insisted that Grandpa and Vivi keep their French Riviera vacation week as scheduled. Spending a week where Audrey Hepburn had vacationed in ‘Paris When it Sizzles’ and Brigitte Bardot had sunbathed her way to stardom in ‘And God Created Woman’ and Elizabeth Taylor had shot ‘The Last Time I Saw Paris’ and Grace Kelly had filmed ‘To Catch a Thief’, had been on Vicki’s bucket list for years and there was
absolutely no way Ali was going to let her father change those plans. The French Riviera is the Mediterranean coastline of the southeast corner of France, including the independent state of Monaco. There is no official boundary but it is usually considered to extend from the Italian border, the Italian Riviera, west over to Saint-Tropez. The names of the cities and towns that make up the swanky resort area are recognizable to almost everyone, whether they know why they know the name or not. Monte-Carlo in the principality of Monaco is perhaps the most well-known, but Nice, Antibes, Cannes, and Saint-Tropez, all in France, are almost as recognizable. Ashlyn knew Saint-Tropez from the old Bain de Soleil tanning lotion commercials she watched as a little girl. The catchy tagline and all the beautiful, scantily clad European women made the ad stand out to millions of Americans who would never visit the toney resort paradise. “Bain de Soleil for the Saint-Tropez tan” sang the television commercial as it showed a gorgeous tanned model with a fashionable wide-brimmed straw hat and expensive dark sunglasses. Sometimes the black-bikini clad model was lounging poolside on a chaise lounge, or preparing to take the sun on a luxurious yacht. The tagline was always the same. That shit left an impression on a young girl from Satellite Beach, Florida. And Ashlyn wasn’t the only one. Part of the reason so many movies were filmed or set in that desirable area was because of the mystique of the famous French Riviera. The Cote d’Azur, another exotic name for the area, was where the beautiful people went on vacation and Hollywood, as well as the European film industry, ate it up. And aside from the spectacle of the famous actors and musicians and superstars and heiresses who lived and played there, the French Riviera was absolutely gorgeous all on its own. The Mediterranean Sea lapped at the sunny, pristine beaches and made the whole coastline truly stunning.

Deb and Mike were supposed to take the first week of the trip for themselves, then Ken and Vicki would take the second week off and then they all would get together for the third week and, hopefully, the gold medal game in Lyon. Ali was grateful that her dad and Vicki were there to help them get settled that first week as they figured some logistics out and got the lay of the land. The constant travel was challenging and made the brunette appreciate their unique Los Angeles experience even more. All of the soccer stadiums had been close together there in 2024 so the travel had been minimal if not non-existent. This was not the case in 2028 France. Ashlyn only nagged her wife a few times about overpacking on this trip and that was just to prove a point. The keeper had begged Ali to keep it simple, at least with the kids, so they wouldn’t be schlepping a million suitcases across France for three weeks. The kids had been packed lightly but there was no way Ali Krieger was going to Paris and the freaking French Riviera and Monte-Carlo without something appropriate to wear. And she knew Ashlyn would do the exact same thing. The couple was still hoping for a few date nights of their own while they were away and Monte-Carlo had been highlighted on the itinerary for each of them. And Paris, the city of love, the city of light, was something both women were looking forward to as well.

The Group Stage games and quarterfinal games were held in eight different cities throughout France. Five of those cities were up in the North: Rennes, Le Havre, Paris, Valenciennes and Reims. The other three cities were in the South: Grenoble, Montpellier, and Nice. The semi-finals and Championship games were all going to be played in Lyon which was in the southern half of the country but not down on the Mediterranean coast like Nice and Montpellier. Like Germany, France had an impressive rail system that transported people quickly and efficiently from city to city. The USWNT, and the Kriegers, spent their travel days on comfortable, high-speed trains as they moved from Paris to Rennes, both in the North, and then down to Nice to close out the group stage in the South. They travelled West along the southern coast to Montpellier for the quarterfinal and then up to Lyon to close out the tournament. Ali and Ashlyn realized that their children hadn’t spent much time on trains in their young lives. They were experienced fliers and car-riders and sometimes bus-riders but they hadn’t been on a train other than a quick one or two-stop subway ride from Mommy’s office to one of the museums in Boston before this summer. All four kids enjoyed it which made the time spent on the trains much easier for everybody. Thank God.
The USWNT’s first game of the 2028 Olympics was played in front of 48,000 screaming football fans in Paris, France on Wednesday, July 19th. The opening ceremony wasn’t until two nights later, but as was usually the case, many of the more far flung events actually started before the pomp and circumstance that followed. The USWNT, for the first time anybody could remember, wasn’t playing their first game in the sticks somewhere, but in the grand dame of cities instead. Tuesday night, the Krieger’s first night in France, Ken and Vicki stayed behind at the hotel with the four kids who they all knew were going to pass out from exhaustion after their long flight and the time change and the busy day they’d had exploring Paris. It seemed wrong for Ali and Ashlyn to ditch their kids on the very first night but they didn’t have a lot of time in Paris and they both wanted to walk around and take it all in. They changed into nice outfits and strolled around the beautiful gardens not too far from the hotel or the restaurant they had chosen for a late, romantic dinner. The city was packed, in general, and even the streets felt overcrowded as tourists jammed them up terribly in the balmy 75 degree temperatures. It would be hotter and stickier by the end of the month and it was thunderstorm season as well. The clear blue sky could darken in the blink of an eye and pour rain on you for 15 or 20 minutes before clearing again. July was peak tourist season in Paris and most of the locals abandoned the city for the southern coast or even the Spanish coast. That population shift usually balanced things out, but with the Olympics being held there the balance was completely out of whack. Neither Ali nor Ashlyn enjoyed being crammed together like sardines, but they sucked it up for their evening in the city of light. Everybody seemed to be in a good mood as they moved through the masses, but there were just so damned many of them.

“Can you believe we’re in Paris?” Ashlyn squeezed her wife’s hand after dinner as they ambled down the tree-lined and still busy street that passed along the edge of a large, popular park space.

“No” Ali sighed happily and wrapped her free hand around the keeper’s bicep, pressing her body closer to her long, strong arm. “I can’t believe we’re still awake either” she giggled. “Way to push through Harris” she praised sweetly.

“You too baby” Ashlyn chuckled. “I never feel older than when I don’t get enough sleep. But it’s worth it to be walking along the...” she peered at the next street sign and tried to read it, “Allee Paul Deschanel with you, and these other million people” she grinned and looked around them at all the other tourists.

“Well, if we were looking for privacy we shouldn’t have come to the Eiffel Tower” the brunette laughed out loud.

It was her short, loud shout of a laugh and she threw her head back as the sound filled the night air around them. Ashlyn watched her for a few seconds and then stepped to the side of the street, towards the park side, pulling her beautiful brunette with her. Ali gasped in surprise at the deft move, always impressed by Ashlyn’s strength and agility. Most people would have crashed into at least three other tourists but not her keeper. Ashlyn held Ali closely, looking into her shimmering amber eyes for only a second before bringing their lips together in a romantic kiss. It took a couple of seconds for the foreign bodies and strange smells and sounds to fade into the background, but then it was just the two of them, alone in a sea of human beings and roving spotlights that danced across one of the world’s most famous tourist attractions. None of that mattered. The electricity that passed between them as they embraced felt the same no matter what language was being spoken around them. When they finally pulled their lips apart, they exchanged loving looks and then turned their heads to look at the Eiffel Tower, still a good 200 yards away from them across the park. They stood there, cheek to cheek with their arms around the other’s waist, and soaked in the atmosphere.

“Thank you for coming here with me tonight honey” Ashlyn said softly, still in the same pose, eyes on Gustave Eiffel’s masterpiece. “I know you’re bringing the kids here tomorrow afternoon but I
really wanted to stand here with you and look up at this beauty, all lit up” she moved her eyes from the bottom of the tower up to the top again. “I know it’s cheesy as hell, but I’ve always thought it would be so romantic to come here with the woman of my dreams...” she turned to face her wife who was blinking up at her with the most adoring look Ashlyn had ever seen, “...with you.”

“God, I love you so much Ashlyn” the brunette choked out emotionally. “Please don’t ever stop loving me back, ok?” her bottom lip trembled as she fought for control of those unwieldy emotions.

“Never gonna happen my queen” the keeper blinked her own watery eyes as they both grinned at each other. “Never gonna happen.”

Chapter End Notes

Cute stuff tonight from the Kids vs Pros game in Orlando. Chi needs some tips on how to film while on the pitch tho. lol. That's ok, she was great with the content before the game. :) And Ashlyn's "Face of a Feminist" interview where she talks about being present for her partner and getting to the age where she wants to start having kids......sigh..... Lordy I love those two ladies so much. <3
For the opening game, Wednesday, in Paris, the Parc des Princes was sold out and seemed to be equally divided between the red, white and blue of the USA fans and the royal blue, red and white of the Iceland fans. The Americans won their first match of the 2028 Olympics 3-1 but it had been closer than the score indicated. The Icelander continued to play their best football on the world’s biggest stages. The USWNT wanted to participate in the opening ceremony Friday night but it just wouldn’t work. Their second group stage game was Saturday in Rennes, in the northwest corner of the country, so they wouldn’t even be in Paris on Friday night. The team was in good form that summer and eager to perform better than they had the previous year in the Women’s World Cup. Their third-place finish on home soil still stuck in the throats of every member of the 18-woman Olympic team. All 18 women had been on that WWC team and remembered the bitter disappointment well. This year’s Olympic team was without four long-time, high-performing members of the squad as well as perennial fan-favorites. Abby Smith, Rose Lavelle, Andi Sullivan, and former captain Sammy Mewis were no longer on the USWNT and it was an adjustment for everybody. Mewis and Smith, 36 and 35 respectively, had both retired from soccer at all levels after the 2027 NWSL season ended. Lavelle and Sullivan, both 33, were still playing in the NWSL but had announced that 2028 was their last season with their club teams. They both had nagging injuries that had become impossible to shake as they got older and their bodies continued to take more abuse. The other member of the WWC team that didn’t make the Olympic roster was Ashley Hatch. The 33-year old forward was one of the three alternates, along with two young, inexperienced players who were getting their first real international experience as they trained and worked with the team. At the beginning of the year, 29-year old defender Jojo Harber had been named the new co-captain and she joined 30-year old Mallory Pugh in the leadership role. Jane Campbell was still the starting goalkeeper and playing very well. It was true what they said about the keepers getting better as they got older and more experienced and 33-year old Campbell was in peak form coming into the tournament. Coach Laura Harvey, in her seventh year leading the team, had made some tough decisions and was hoping her squad could survive with fewer injuries this time around.

NBC had the rights to the Olympics again and Rebecca Lowe was the women’s soccer anchor and host for all of the on-set coverage the network did. Instead of staying in the studio in the US, they all went to France and travelled with team around the country. Alex Morgan, Heather O’Reilly and Ashlyn Harris were the woso experts who sat at the studio desk, often times located just off the pitch, with Rebecca and discussed and debated all aspects of the international tournament. Aly Wagner and Julie Foudy were up in the pressboxes of the stadiums calling the USWNT games and Abby Wambach was interviewing the players on the pitch. All seven women and their families travelled from location to location for each and every USA game and had a pretty good time doing
it. They had all worked together before and were friendly, if not good friends, when the cameras and microphones were off. Abby, Julie, Aly and Heather had all been teammates on the USWNT, and Alex had played there with everybody except Aly and Julie. Ashlyn had played in college with Heather and in the WSL with both Abby and Alex. NBC had special international guests joining them all the time to talk about the rest of the teams, and specifically, the team the USWNT was facing next. These international tournaments were like a Mecca for former players. Anybody who lived near the host city for the next match tried to get together with as many former teammates or colleagues as they possibly could. It was a wonderful way to catch up with old friends you hadn’t physically seen in years. Ashlyn enjoyed introducing her young family to several of her former teammates and broadcasting colleagues. It was especially wonderful to spend some time with her pals from the EUROs back in Germany three years earlier. Birgit Prinz, Sylvia Neid, and Caroline Seger all made the trip with their spouses, and young children in Seger’s case, to France for the semi-final and championship games in Lyon. Both Ali and Ashlyn loved catching up with that fun group.

Five of the six former US soccer players had children and almost all of them were travelling with them for those three weeks, even some of the older ones. That was the thing about these former athletes – their families all understood what a big deal these big tournaments were. The kids were raised to watch them and love them and look forward to them every four years, whether it was the Olympics or the World Cup. It was like its own little sports cult. Julie Foudy was the oldest, 57, and both of her grown children, 21 and 20 years old, made the trip. Aly Wagner and Abby Wambach were both 48 but had much different families. Aly’s triplet boys were 15 and her daughter was 13 and they were all spending the three weeks in France with their mom and their dad. Abby’s much more famous story came with a famous wife, Glennon Doyle - 52, and her three kids from her first marriage - a 25-year old son and two daughters aged 22 and 20. Glennon and the girls made the trip with Abby and were the best big sisters in the world to the youngest member of the family. After three years together, Abby had decided she wanted to be a mom too and experience the whole childbirth thing. Her wife had blogged hilariously and heartbreakingly about it, and adjusting to her role as a new mom at age 43 without having given birth became the subject of one of Glennon’s best-selling books. Their 9-year old son Dillon was all Wambach and looked like a mini-Abby and was already dominating every single sport he played. Wambach joked that she had been so ready to raise another strong girl that the universe had surprised her with a big, meat-headed boy instead. Abby took it as a sign that it was time for her to start influencing young boys too. Everybody should be a feminist if the world was ever going to find true equality one day.

Heather O’Reilly and her husband Dave Werry were both 43 and had missed the parenthood boat. They were everybody’s favorite aunt and uncle and seemed to be ok with that. Heather felt so blessed with the way her life had turned out that sometimes she thought not being able to have a baby had been the toll she had to pay for all of the other blessings. Alex Morgan and her husband Servando had two little girls, 3 and 1. They were both 39 and Serva had adjusted pretty well to being Alex Morgan’s husband once his own playing career had ended. Her fame had always surpassed his and he had always been man enough to handle it. When his playing career ended he moved into the front office of the Los Angeles Football Club, LAFC, in the MLS while his wife became the majority owner of the NWSL’s LA Strikers. Morgan had always been vocal about what the NWSL needed to improve on and she gradually gained more and more influence and power after she retired four years ago. It was no secret that the Carrascos wanted to eventually own both sides of the LA franchise, the MLS and the NWSL teams. Their competition for fans and support in Southern California, the LA Galaxy in the MLS, had faded gradually over the years and LAFC had become the most beloved football club in the area. Amy Rodriguez, Alex’s old USWNT teammate, was the head coach of the Strikers and had been successful for the past several years. She had her team poised to claim one of the four coveted playoff spots this season for the first time since 2023.
The US defeated China 4-1 in a dominant performance in game two on Saturday afternoon in Rennes. Another sold-out crowd, this one just shy of 30,000, filled Roazhon Park and watched Mallory Pugh, Jessie Scarpia, and Frankie Tagliaferri score goals. And Kayla Duran, the player Niki Cross had coached at Buckingham, Brown and Nichols, scored the first international goal of her career as the USA cruised to victory. The team travelled the next day to the South of France, the Cote d’Azur, or the French Riviera, for their third and final group stage game. They played in Nice at the Allianz Riviera at full capacity, just over 35,000 spectators, on Tuesday evening, July 25th. Nigeria surprised the USWNT and handed them a 2-2 draw that was highlighted by some questionable refereeing and some unnecessarily brutal tackles from the young Nigerians. Mallory Pugh went down with an ankle injury in the 40th minute thanks to one such tackle and was irate that there hadn’t been a yellow card handed out to the guilty party. Frankie Tagliaferri, Tags, had to try and walk the referee away from the fallen player and furious captain who was having trouble keeping her mouth shut in her fury. The draw didn’t end up hurting the Americans, aside from the injury to their captain, and they won their group with 7 points.

When the US contingent arrived in Nice on Sunday afternoon before the Nigeria game, Ken and Vicki helped get the young Kriegers settled into their hotel suite before making their way to their own villa just a few miles down the coast in Antibes. They had planned a blissful week ahead of them and were treating it as a second honeymoon of sorts. They would rejoin Ali and the kids in Lyon the following Sunday for the third and final week of the Olympics. Nice was stunning and it was easy to see what all the fuss was about now that they were actually on the French Riviera. Ashlyn wanted more than anything to surprise her wife with an early birthday dinner but she knew this was not the trip, nor the week, for anything that wasn’t on the schedule. Instead, she and Ali devised a plan together so they could get away Monday night for a birthday date night. Nice was only 15 miles west of Monte Carlo and it gave them their best and only opportunity to visit the destination spot. Ashlyn begged her colleagues and friends for babysitting help for Monday evening. She promised that she and Ali would get the kids all tuckered out during the afternoon so they’d fall asleep quickly and easily for whomever was kind enough to assist them. Drew and Abby’s son Dillon were both 9 years old and had become fast friends over the first 7 days of their grand adventure. That was an easy one. Drew hung with Abby and Dillon that night. Ali was afraid he would be too shy to spend the night with Abby, Glennon and Dillon and left instructions to just bring him back to their room if he got too fussy at bedtime. The brunette was hoping that the brave and boisterous Dillon would inspire her reflective son to suck it up and spend the night, but she wasn’t going to bet on it. Ashlyn was hoping Heather and Dave might be up for a fun-filled night of babysitting but they had romantic dinner plans of their own right in Nice and couldn’t do it. Aly Wagner and Alex Morgan had their own kids to wrangle so the Kriegers didn’t ask them, even though most moms would tell you that adding one extra kid to the mix wasn’t all that earth-shattering, as long as it was just for an afternoon or an evening. They were already in mom-mode and ready to deal with whatever kid thing cropped up. But both Ashlyn and Ali felt bad imposing on the busy moms and agreed to ask them only if they completely struck out with everybody else. That left Julie Foudy. Her two grown kids had spent most of the first week hanging out with Abby’s two grown step-daughters and the 20, 21 and 22 year olds were out exploring Monday evening as usual. Julie’s husband wasn’t joining them until the final week so she had agreed to come to Ashlyn’s suite and babysit Josie, Dodge and Lily for the evening. How hard could it be? She had done it before, granted it had only been two kids and it was 15 years ago, but kids were kids. Ashlyn left instructions for Julie to call or text if she needed anything or had any questions and promised her any favor she needed between now and the last two weeks of their Olympic adventure.

The trip from Nice to Monte Carlo normally took about 30 minutes by car or train and a little longer by bus, but the Kriegers chose to travel up the coast by boat instead. The weather was in the mid-70s and almost too perfect as they sat together trying to decide what to look at – the
picturesque shoreline on their left or the postcard perfect Mediterranean to their right. They disembarked and took a cab up the Place du Casino to the Casino de Monte Carlo, arguably the most famous casino in the world. It wasn’t a long walk and it would have been a lovely evening for it but Ashlyn knew the sexy high heels her wife was wearing would be killing her feet before long and she was hoping to save her some discomfort. It was one of the millions of small kindnesses that Ashlyn showed her beautiful brunette all the time and Ali appreciated every single one. She always thanked her keeper for being so thoughtful and considerate. And Ashlyn no longer tried to talk her wife out of wearing such painful footwear when they went out. She just tried to keep the walking to a minimum and knew she would probably finish the evening carrying those heels for Ali anyway. It was all worth it to see the brunette dressed to the nines and Ashlyn would never complain. She grinned like a fool as she offered her hand to Ali to help her out of the cab.

“Lord you’re a gorgeous woman” the keeper whispered as she kissed Ali’s cheek and then escorted her into the famous building with the ornate, castle-like exterior.

The Belle Epoque building was the inspiration for Ian Fleming when he first came up with the idea of super spy James Bond. The first Bond book he wrote was called ‘Casino Royale’ and was based on the Casino de Monte Carlo. And George Clooney’s ‘Ocean’s Twelve’ movie was filmed in the casino too, a wonderful example of the incredible staying-power of the place and scene.

“You’re one to talk” the brunette returned the grin and slipped her hand under Ashlyn’s arm. “You look amazing Ashlyn.”

Ali wore a tight-fitting, black, cocktail dress that was high-necked and sleeveless and fell to just above her knees. The top of the dress had a tantalizing opening down the middle of the front about 2” wide that stretched from just below the collar at her neck to just below the ribs. There were thin, horizontal strips of fabric covering the opening and leaving just enough skin to make it interesting. Black, strappy 4” heels and an classic, black clutch complemented the dress nicely. She wore her hair in an elegant bun at the base of her neck with fairly flashy elongated silver loop earrings and matching silver bangle bracelets on her wrist. When Ali flashed her megawatt smile, Ashlyn had to remind herself to breathe.

The keeper impressed as well, dressed smartly in a tailored navy blue suit and black dress shoes with a crisp white shirt and a darker blue tie and pocket square. The whole outfit was classic and clean and a little understated for Ashlyn’s usual taste. She opted for the subtle dark blue tie and pocket square instead of adding a more vibrant splash of color there. She was channeling Cary Grant from ‘To Catch a Thief’ and she let his elegant style guide her. Her brilliant diamond stud earrings and beloved rings added the only dazzle she needed or wanted that night. It was Ali’s early birthday dinner and the blonde wanted to make sure all eyes were on her beautiful brunette, as it should be.

This place was a tourist hive but you had to pay a pretty penny to even walk into the building. No riff raff allowed. Just pulling up to the curb was an eye-popping experience as they gawked at fancy Ferraris, Lamborghinis, Bentleys, Rolls Royces, Aston Martins and other uber-rich sports cars. Proper attire was a must and there was no such thing as being over-dressed at the Place du Casino and the nearby Hotel du Paris and the Opera de Monte Carlo. This was where the richest of the richest came to play and enjoy themselves and Ali and Ashlyn felt a little bit out of place. They looked the part, but they both knew they were out of their depth. But it was a one-time extravagance, a birthday present for Ali that they could both share and enjoy together. The plan was to spend an hour in the casino absorbing the atmosphere and a couple of $20 drinks. There were high-rollers at every table and lots of activity wherever you looked. Ali and Ashlyn wandered from one elegantly decorated room to another, gazing at larger than life sculptures, frescoes, gilded mirrors and ornate fixtures. There was one gaming terrace that even overlooked the sea. It was
simply jaw-dropping. Ali hadn’t seen extravagance like that since her last visit to the mansions down in Newport, RI. This was a bigger and more European version of all of those enormous, marble and gold masterpieces.

Ali and Ashlyn had dinner reservations at the 3-star Michelin rated restaurant that was located in the Hotel du Paris Monte Carlo, a short walk on the other side of the casino. Le Louis XV – Alain Ducasse was on every short list of the best restaurants in the world and it served some of the finest French cuisine anywhere. It was insanely expensive but Ashlyn and Ali looked at it as a once in a lifetime experience and decided to just enjoy it and not worry so much about the cost. Ali always worried about her wife’s inner battle with excess and wasteful spending, but the keeper was ok with this trip to Monte Carlo. The truth was, they were both excited to visit the place they had loved in Hitchcock’s final film with Grace Kelly. Ashlyn, in particular, had become enamored with Hitchcock’s ideal blonde – Grace Kelly, and was especially looking forward to seeing Monaco where the actress married her prince and became a real-life princess. Sydney and Whitney had both teased them mercilessly about the evening they had planned out in advance. Neither bestie loved Hitchcock movies nearly as much as Ali or Ashlyn did and the couple didn’t expect them to understand. But boating across the Mediterranean and spending time in the casino and then the hotel where so much of the movie had taken place was a real thrill for both Kriegers. When they stood on the casino terrace that overlooked the winding road down to the sea, Ashlyn and her big heart wondered exactly which one of the tight turns had been the site of Grace Kelly’s fatal car accident when she was only 52 years old. It was an odd way to pay their respects to the actress, but that’s what they ended up doing, in a way. The whole evening was magical and beautiful and everything they hoped it would be. Their only complaint was that there wasn’t enough time. Ali would have loved to share a picnic with her wife overlooking the Mediterranean just as Grace Kelly and Cary Grant had done in the movie. But they would happily settle for a few hours in the casino and the hotel, pretending they were back in 1954 with Hitch and the cat burglar and the future princess.

“I know I feel like I have to say this because of how much money we just spent” Ashlyn began as they walked from the cab to the dock to wait for the next boat back to Nice after their fabulous and romantic dinner. “But that was the best meal I’ve ever had in my life.”

“I know, right?” Ali giggled and leaned into her keeper as they walked hand-in-hand. “It’s totally true though. That was amazing” she enthused and flashed a nose-crinkling grin at her wife. “I feel like I’m going to explode now though” she laughed and patted her full belly. “I can’t wait to get this dress off so I can breathe without worrying about splitting the seams.”

“Well that’s just mean” the keeper rolled her eyes and then grimaced. “We’ve gotta wait for the boat and then it’ll take a half hour to get back to Nice and then another half hour after that to get to the hotel and up to the room and get rid of Foudy...” she groaned. “You can’t be talking about getting naked now” she shook her head. “Big meanie.”

Ali laughed at her silly, sweet wife and then yelped when she lost her footing on the cobblestone covered waiting area for the boat.

“Ow! Shit...”

“You ok?” Ashlyn released the vice-like grip she had on the brunette’s arm after attempting to steady her.

“These fucking shoes” Ali muttered as she stopped and bent her leg at the knee, lifting her sore foot up and shifting all of her weight onto the other slightly less sore foot.

“Is it time to take them off?”
“Yeah, I’m done. I’m sorry honey” the brunette apologized with a sad frown.

“Al, you know I appreciate what you go through to wear these beautiful things” she started as she squatted down, undid the straps and helped her wife step out of the painful heels. “But I don’t care if you never wear a pair ever again. Don’t apologize to me, baby.”

Ashlyn rubbed her brunette’s calves for a couple of seconds before standing up again with a soft smile.

“I know you’re right” Ali sighed, partly out of frustration at her own love of pretty shoes and partly because her feet didn’t hurt for the first time in five hours. “But I’m still sorry you’re walking around Monte Carlo with a barefoot wife” she chuckled. “Thank you, sweetheart” she leaned up and kissed Ashlyn’s lips. “You’re so good to me. I love you.”

They stood close together near the front of the boat, enjoying the warm breeze coming off the water as they made the return trip back to Nice. They were both quiet but it was the peaceful, content kind of quiet that felt better than anything else sometimes. They admired the way the coastline was dotted with lights now that it was after 10pm. It looked and even sounded completely different at night, especially from their vantage point on the sea.

“Did you have a good early birthday baby?” Ashlyn pressed a kiss into her wife’s temple as they waited for the elevator at their hotel.

“The best” Ali squeezed the keeper’s torso tightly, her head still resting against Ashlyn’s shoulder as they waited. “I loved our night. And I love my own perfect blonde” she giggled, referring to Hitchcock and his muse, Grace Kelly. “Thank you so much honey.”

Ashlyn’s phone hadn’t buzzed or dinged or vibrated or beeped all night long. It had freaked her out so much that she made Ali get her phone out and text her just to test it. She wasn’t worried about the kids, she just expected Julie to have a question or two at some point during the six hours she had been babysitting. The keeper swiped her keycard and quietly entered the large hotel suite with Ali right behind her. It was a two bedroom, two-bathroom suite with a small kitchenette and living room in between them. Each bedroom had two queen-sized beds in it so there was room for everybody and they could get creative with the sleeping arrangements if they wanted or needed to. The door to the suite opened up into a small entry way with a closet and then you could enter the kitchen to the left or the bathroom to the right. As you stepped deeper into the suite, the living room opened up in front of the kitchen and the bedroom on the right followed suit, in front of the first bathroom. On the other side of the living room was the doorway to the other bedroom with its own bathroom mirroring the set up on the other side of the suite. There were two big couches, a desk and chair, and a large tv on a short entertainment center in the living room. The kitchenette and living room were divided by a counter top with four bar stools which were where all four kids insisted on spending as much time as possible because the stools spun.

“Holy shit” Ashlyn whispered as she and Ali stepped far enough into the room to see the spectacle in front of them.

Neither one of them said anything else for about two minutes as their eyes adjusted. Ashlyn took a few pictures and Ali quietly poked her head into both empty bedrooms, just to be sure.

“I’m so tempted to just go to bed” the keeper giggled softly as they stood together by the kitchen counter again. Neither of them could figure out where the stools were though.

“If tomorrow wasn’t game day I’d say absolutely” Ali agreed, giggling with her. “Did you get a picture of the whole thing?”
“Oh yeah, a nice big wide-shot to go along with the close-ups.”

The living room area was medium-dark with what looked like a blue Breakers t-shirt covering one lamp and some other teal-blue blouse or maybe skirt covering the other one. The lamps cast a cool blueish light over the room that was augmented by the big tv that was still showing some sort of fish tank footage. Both of the sound machines were plugged in and playing the ‘undersea’ and ‘beach’ sounds at their loudest settings, on a loop, one from each machine. The fish tank from the tv was also making bubbling water sounds. It was pretty obvious they were recreating an underwater atmosphere in the room and both moms had to admit they had done a really good job. The trip to the aquarium, the Oceanographic Museum of Monaco, that afternoon had definitely made an impression on the kids, apparently. The comforters from all four beds were draped from the back of the two couches, which were on opposite sides of the room, and then hung over the four barstools in the middle of the room, creating two big, saggy tents. There were several drawings of fish and whales and other sea creatures, even a T-Rex dinosaur that must have the ability to breathe under water, taped up onto the walls and Ali held her breath hoping nobody had actually drawn on the walls themselves. It looked like every single sippy cup or plastic hotel cup in the entire suite was on the floor somewhere and there was a bag of goldfish crackers scattered around too. Two half-eaten cheese sticks and a banana were laying on the entertainment center by the base of the tv and Ashlyn’s pulse quickened as she fought her OCD inclinations to start cleaning up.

Every single couch cushion, from both couches, was strewn across the floor under the two tents in different patterns and positions with a kid sleeping on one or two of them. Josie was wearing Lily’s pink flamingo pajamas and Lily was naked except for her underwear and one of Josie’s tutus that the little redhead had insisted on bringing on the trip. Both girls were fast asleep on couch cushions over on the left side of the room. It was hard to see everything without getting close and bending over to peer underneath the waist-high comforter tents. Abby Wambach was stretched out between the girls, sleeping soundly, with bright blue...something on each of her cheeks. Once they saw it on her face they recognized it on their daughters’ faces too. Ali said a silent prayer that it wasn’t anything permanent as her mind raced through the possibilities of what it could be. The other comforter tent seemed to be the boys’ half of the space and Dodge, Drew and Dillon were all sacked out under it. They were all topless and had bright red... something across their chests. Ashlyn tilted her head and got closer.

“It’s a ‘D’” she smiled and drew on her own chest with her finger to show her wife without waking anybody up.

Drew had his pajama bottoms on as did Dillon, but Dodge was in his Captain America underwear with his Red Sox cap on backwards and nothing else as he slept on the floor with just his feet up on one of the cushions. Drew at least had pulled one of the kids’ blankets over his lower half. It looked like Josie’s Brave blanket. Ali quickly recognized the three other decorative fleece kids blankets that were covering up gaps in the comforter tents.

“Where the hell is Foudy?” Ashlyn whispered as she looked closer at the wild space.

“Oh my God” Ali laughed and pointed to the other side of the room where the desk and chair were tucked into the corner.

Julie Foudy was underneath it, laying mostly on her back with her head and neck propped up against the wall below the desk. She had all four of the throw pillows from the two couches. One was under her back, one was behind her neck, and the other two were on top of her, clutched in each hand. Ashlyn instantly recognized the defensive position and knew her friend had been using them as shields. Shields against what though? The bag of goldfish crackers near the boys’ tent and
the actual goldfish crackers that were all over the floor, concentrated near the desk, provided the answer.

“Well, the good news is that everybody is accounted for” Ashlyn grinned and hugged her wife.

“Let’s just stick with that” Ali smiled back. “We’ll deal with the clean-up tomorrow. It was worth it” she gave her keeper a soft kiss that Ashlyn returned.

After a minute, their kiss was interrupted by Ashlyn’s phone ringing. She jumped in surprise and fumbled it as she tried to turn the ringer off.

“Shit!” she whisper-yelled and looked over at the living room again, panic in her eyes.

“Oh good” Abby yawned, stretched and spoke quietly from her place under the comforter tent on the left. “You’re home.”

“Yeah, sorry Abs” the keeper whispered back, moving closer to the couch on the left side of the room. “Everything ok here?” she quirked her eyebrow at the sleepy woman.

“Yes” she yawned again and smiled. “Foudy needed some help so I brought the boys down and took care of it. Piece of cake.”

“Hey, thanks so much Abby” Ali waved. “We owe you big time. I’m gonna get changed, unless you need me right this minute?” she asked her wife.

“Damn Krieger, that’s a helluva dress” Abby rubbed her eyes and sat up with a playful grin. “You guys both look great. Freaking models.”

“So sweet” Ali blew Abby a kiss and winked before going into the bedroom on the left to get changed.

“Yeah, you go drool over your own wife, would ya?” Ashlyn smirked at her friend.

“What?” Abby looked confused for a second and then chuckled as she scooted out from under the comforter tent, snagging her bottle of water as she moved. “Oh, yeah” she chuckled. “Lipstick. Don’t worry, it’s G’s, or one of the girls’, I forget.”

“Oh, so Glennon approved all of this?” the keeper giggled and helped Abby up off the floor.

“I might have called her for help with fish paint” she dabbed her fingers at the lipstick on her cheek.

“Ah, fish paint, of course” Ashlyn nodded. “Makes sense now” she giggled.

“Do you want help with them?” Abby nodded towards the kids as she stretched out her back and rubbed her numb butt.

“Maybe just the mean one over in the corner” the keeper joked.

“Oh shit” Abby laughed when she saw the position Julie Foudy had ended up in. “My battery’s dead, did you...?”

“Oh yeah, plenty of pics.”

“She put up a good fight, I’ll give her that” Abby nodded approvingly at Julie who was still
“Drew’s got a terrific arm” she turned her attention back to the keeper. “Football?”

“Nope, baseball. He loves it.”

“You’ve got some great kids Ash. It was a fun night” she patted the keeper on the back. “Come on, let’s get her up before her back seizes up on her in that position. We’ll never hear the end of it.”

The first elimination game, the Quarterfinal game, was Friday night, July 28th, and the banged up USWNT had to face one of their toughest opponents over the years, Canada. They travelled west to another beautiful seaside locale, Montpellier, where they played in the 33,000 seat Stade de la Mosson in front of a decidedly Canadian-friendly crowd. The US had been getting the better of their neighbors to the North over the past few years and the world was ready for the Canadians to exact some revenge. But not that night. The world would have to wait some more because the Americans played their guts out and came away with a thrilling 3-2 victory that felt about as exhilarating as any tournament championship ever had. Well, not quite as good as WWC and Olympic gold medals, but pretty damned close. The good news was that they had won. The bad news was that they had lost two of their starters – a midfielders as well as a center back, to more injuries. It was becoming a familiar theme. Or a recurring nightmare.

That Friday was also Ali’s actual 44th birthday and the broadcast team and crew celebrated her at the local bar after the game. After the team’s big win, everybody was in the mood to celebrate so they all stayed out later than normal and had a really great night. Everybody but the parents with young children, that is. After their romantic, expensive night out in Monte Carlo at the beginning of the week, Ali and Ashlyn took their kids back to the hotel after the big Canada game and got them into bed. They celebrated in their own way, enjoying some hot shower sex while all four kids were asleep in the other bedroom.

Ashlyn and the kids had done their best to make Ali’s birthday special for her. There were handmade birthday cards with lots of pictures and drawings inside each one. Ashlyn ordered room service for breakfast so she could feed her beautiful brunette breakfast in bed. Of course, that was a lot less fun and romantic when you added four children to the equation. Ali was a good sport about it and swore she didn’t mind sharing the bed with everybody, sticky pancake fingers and all. The keeper had a lot of ideas about special things they could do for Ali’s day, but the more she thought about it the more she believed that they should concentrate on the Olympics. That’s what they were there for. That’s why she and Ali had decided to bring the kids with them in the first place. She could take Ali for a spa day when they got back home. Ashlyn hoped her wife would be in agreement with her. After one more moment of self-doubt she moved forward with planning the day and packing it full of Olympic events. They were in Montpellier, which was on the Mediterranean just like Nice was except it was near the western boundary, closer to Spain. The sailing, canoeing and rowing competitions were being held down on the southern coast of France so those were the three events she got tickets for that day. The sailing and rowing took place right on the Mediterranean. The rowing was very close by in Montpellier and the sailing was a short ride east to the bustling seaport of Marseilles, and they spent a couple of hours at both locales. The canoeing was also very cool to watch. Elaborate canoe runs had been built that replicated different levels of rapids. The canoe racing tracks were built more inland in the town of Grange which was halfway between Montpellier and Marseilles, but not directly on the coast.

Ashlyn had to leave them after their early family dinner to get to the stadium and get ready to call the Canada game that night. Back at the hotel suite after dinner she hugged Ali tightly and gave her a deep, romantic kiss that made the kids all groan in embarrassment. The family had spent the entire morning and afternoon together and the kids were getting a little bit cranky. The brief hotel
suite respite before the USWNT game was a must and Ali was glad they were all getting some quiet time before the big night at the stadium. She was also glad to have her gorgeous keeper in her arms, even though they were kissing goodbye for the next few hours.

“Oh just zip it you guys” Ashlyn told their children after taking a quick break from kissing her wife’s lips. “If you don’t want to see us kissing then go in the other room and you won’t have to” she offered quickly, eager to get back to paying attention to her birthday-girl wife.

“But the tv’s in here” Drew complained.

“There’s also a tv in both of the bedrooms and you know it” Ali added as she enjoyed Ashlyn’s lips working across her jaw towards her own lips. “We’re not stopping.”

Ashlyn and Ali never got too carried away in front of the kids but they were a married couple in love and they showed their affection openly and honestly and always had. The kids had seen them kiss each other good morning and welcome home and goodbye and goodnight for their whole lives. And sometimes they saw them kissing and embracing for what seemed like random reasons that their young brains couldn’t imagine. Five or six was usually when they were old enough to find it ‘yucky’. That was their primary term for it but they also used ‘gross’ very liberally.

“Happy Birthday baby” Ashlyn whispered as they locked eyes, their faces only inches apart. “I’m so sorry I have to leave you...”

“It’s ok honey” Ali gave her a soft kiss. “I loved our day together, thank you for getting all the tickets and making all the arrangements. It was a very sweet surprise.”

“And I’m sorry you’ve gotta wrangle them all on your own at the game tonight. I sure wish one of the grandparents was here to help” she stuck her bottom lip out sadly and shook her head just a bit.

Ali gave her wife another kiss and smiled as she pulled back and caressed Ashlyn’s cheek.

“It’ll be fine” she assured confidently. “Glennon and Dillon are always good company” she explained, referring to Abby Wambach’s wife and son. “And Dave is wonderful. Dodge just loves him. Heather sure is a lucky woman.”

“She’d trade almost anything for her own baby I think” Ashlyn frowned as she thought of her good friend’s one big regret in life. “But that’s good, put Dave to work tonight. He’ll love that” she grinned.

“Alright, you’d better go” Ali gave her one last, meaningful kiss before releasing her a minute later. “I’ll text you when we get to the stadium” she sighed contentedly when Ashlyn gave her a big hug, bending back and lifting the brunette off the ground. “I love you so much babe. Thank you for my day.”

“I love you too” the blonde settled her wife back onto the ground and smiled warmly at her. “Can’t wait to see you in a couple of hours, my beautiful birthday girl.”

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The last four teams standing, the four semi-finalists, were the USA, Germany, England and France. Three of the four same teams had made it to the semi-finals of the last Olympics back in 2024 in Los Angeles, just swap out France for Brazil. Only two of the four teams in this year’s Olympic semis had made it to the same stage in last year’s WWC, Germany and the USA. The United States was still the only team who had won the WWC and then won the Olympics in the very next year. Sweden, the 2027 WWC champions, hadn’t even made it to the semi-finals this Olympics so the
American record was safe for another four years. But nobody on the squad cared about any of that at the moment. All the USWNT cared about was beating Germany on Tuesday night, August 1st. Both Semi-finals and the championship match were going to be played at the biggest stadium in the whole tournament. The Parc Olympique Lyonnais was a 58,000 seat stadium just outside of Lyon and the games there had been sold out for weeks. The championship final would be played Friday night, August 4th with the runners up, bronze-medal game played earlier in the afternoon.

The Germans were just too tough that Tuesday night and the USWNT couldn’t stay ahead of them. The Americans came out fast and took an early lead on a beautiful Jessie Scarpa goal. The talented vet, along with Tags, had picked up the scoring slack after Mallory Pugh’s ankle injury kept her out of the second game in a row. But every time they scored a goal, Scarpa ended the game with a brace, Tags scored once and Kayla Duran had chipped in a goal of her own in the 87th minute that looked like it might be the game winner, Germany matched them. Then, in the 89th minute, the Germans took their first lead of the game and held on to win the match 5-4. The game winning goal for Germany was embarrassing for Jane Campbell and the US. The keeper wasn’t having her best game to begin with, no-one could remember the last time the USWNT allowed 5 goals against them. But Campbell just flat-out missed a fairly routine stop that she should have made. It wasn’t officially a howler, but everyone knew she could have, and usually did, do better. It was a heartbreaking loss and everybody was surprised at the result. Ashlyn reminded the viewers that Germany was the #2 ranked team in the world and had consistently finished in the final four of all the major tournaments over the past several years.

The Germans went on to defeat France three days later for the gold medal while the USWNT beat England to secure the bronze medal. It was definitely not the way the Americans wanted things to go. They had played great soccer for most of the tournament but had just picked a terrible time to have a bad game. Nobody tried to take the victory away from the Germans by blaming the loss on just having a bad game. All of the US players said different versions of the same thing – the better team won. Some experts said the US played their best game against the Canadians and peaked too soon. Some said the injuries had piled up and hobbled the team, again. One pundit even questioned Coach Harvey’s training regimen and blamed her for the injuries her players kept suffering.

“That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard” Ashlyn scoffed after Rebecca Lowe asked her what she thought about the injury issue. They were doing the wrap-up show after Germany had won the gold medal match, handily beating France. “Soccer is a tough, physical game and players get hurt all the time. Have the US players had bad luck with injuries to key players in the last couple of major tournaments? Absolutely” she nodded emphatically. “Is it because they’re not in shape or properly prepared to take the pitch? Definitely not. I think some people are reaching at straws to try and explain the loss. It’s really not that complicated. The German team on the pitch played better than the Americans did” she leaned forward on her elbows as she got more into it. “The US is one of the best teams in the world and they get the very best in terms of training and preparation so they can be the very best when they step out onto that pitch. To question that is just irresponsible and borderline offensive. They lost to a team that played better than they did. That’s all there is to it.”

“But would they have lost if they hadn’t had the injuries...” Rebecca began to ask the same question everybody had asked after the loss at the WWC the previous year.

“We’ll never know” Ashlyn’s eyes flashed. “I hate that question” she looked quickly at Rebecca, “I know you have to ask it, but it’s never going to have a good answer. Look, the bad news is the US took home the bronze medal instead of the gold. This team expects to win gold medals and anything else is considered a failure. But the good news is that the team is getting younger and those young players are getting invaluable playing experience on the biggest stages in the world and that’s only going to make them more prepared for 2031 and 2032. Do you know what I saw
“No” Rebecca chuckled as did Alex Morgan and Heather O’Reilly who were also sitting at the anchor desk, “but I feel sure you’re about to tell us.”

Alex and Heather shared a knowing and appreciative look as they waited to hear what the keeper had to say. They both knew she would be honest but considerate with her remarks. Over the years, Ashlyn had earned the reputation of being a devout lover of soccer and a loyal fan of the USWNT. But she was also known for telling the truth, even when it wasn’t convenient or attractive. Her fans, as well as the players and coaches she reported on, respected her for it.

“You’re right, as usual” Ashlyn grinned before getting serious again. “I saw really talented young players stepping up big time. Was it enough this time? Not quite. But we had players like Kayla Duran filling in after Crews went out in that attacking midfield position. Duran scored two goals, her very first two international goals too, and held her own in a position she hasn’t played in about three years.” She went on to name three other young players who had stepped up in a very bright spotlight and performed better than they had any real right to. She finished with her characteristic enthusiasm and had everybody believing again. “The future is bright for this American team, very very bright.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm looking forward to watching the She Believes Cup game two tomorrow afternoon. The first game was frustrating for a lot of reasons, but I really think it's impossible to judge much of what happened on the pitch because of the insane weather conditions. If anybody had ever told me that Lindsey Horan would kick a ball on goal and have the wind literally stop it in its tracks I would have said they were nuts. Still can't believe Christen Press didn't play. Crystal Dunn joined the team late so I think that's why she wasn't in the mix, but who knows, honestly? It was wonderful to see Morgan Brian looking healthy for the first time since, what? the victory tour after the 2015 WWC? And am I the only one who thought it was weird to sub on even more young players as the end of the game drew near? It was a 1-0 lead and we bring in McCaskill? I don't know. I thought teenager Tierna Davidson was the best of the backline that night. Kelley had some nice saves but it sure felt like she was covering a lot of ground all by herself. I thought Dahlkemper and Smith were terrible for most of the game. Dahlkemper played a terrible first half but made one really good clearance with Ian Darke apparently saw. lol. Man, I do not get why she's on this team. And Smith just gave the ball away time after time after time. I felt a little bit like I was watching Kristen Edmonds last year with Orlando again. But, as I said in my first sentence, it's hard to judge anything by this game because of that crazy wind. So, let's see what happens tomorrow. Good luck USA!!!!!
August

Chapter Notes

Teeny bit of smut, but don't get too excited.

Two important medical appointments happened as soon as the Kriegers returned home from their Olympic odyssey through France. Both had been postponed a week because of the trip. The first was Ali’s third ultrasound and blood test of the year, and the second was the removal of Dodge’s cast. So far, no news had continued to be good news on the ultrasound front and both Ali and Ashlyn were grateful. They knew another phantom image could appear at any time and hurtle them back down the path of doubt and fear. But they had learned a valuable lesson last year and had promised each other to remain hopeful even when the next ‘shadow’ showed up. They were, after all, looking for those things in the first place. That’s what was supposed to happen. It would still be stressful the next time, but both women felt like they would be better able to cope with it. Dodge’s cast had been in place for 13 long weeks and Ali teased her wife about naively clinging to the hope of the shorter, 10-week duration. Dr. Comello laughed with them while they were in her office that first week back.

“I told you it wouldn’t be 10 weeks” Ali smirked at her wife as Dr. Comello finished cleaning off the freshly uncovered right forearm of their 5-year old son.

“It probably would have been if we didn’t go to France” Ashlyn countered with a challenging look.

“No way” the brunette shook her head. “Have you met your son?” she nodded down at the boy who was sitting between them on the end of the examination table.

His moms stood on either side of him as he gawked at the condition of his pale, shriveled arm. Drew had been freaked out when he saw his own arm, seven years earlier, and he had been much younger too. But Dodge had the biggest grin on his face. It was hard to tell if he was more excited about how gross his arm looked or how loud and scary the saw that had just sliced the cast off of it had been.

“How come he’s my son?” Ashlyn feigned offense as the doctor chuckled at the banter between the women she had known and treated for over a decade.

“Ashlyn, this child is a living clone of you. Your mother swears it and I believe her” Ali rolled her eyes and smiled at her wife.

“If I may...” Patty Comello interrupted from her spot on the stool in front of the patient. When both moms gave her their full attention she continued, a look of mischief on her round face. “I like to treat each of my patients individually. I try to tailor the plan of care to each person based on what I know of that patient and his or her family life and general outlook on life.” She paused and enjoyed the looks of concern and anticipation on Ali and Ashlyn’s faces while Dodge just kept staring at his arm and gently poking at it with his other hand. “I’m never one to choose sides in debates like these” she chuckled. “But I will tell you that without a doubt I treated this case differently than I would have treated Josie or Lily if they had a broken arm.”

“What do you mean?” Ashlyn’s first thought went to some sort of boy/girl discrepancy.
“This young man uses his arm a lot more and a lot...harder” she chose her word carefully, “than his other siblings. So I would have been inclined to leave the cast on for the full 12 weeks even if you hadn’t been at the Olympics.”

“Ha! Told you” Ali grinned and rubbed her son’s back as he began poking at his arm with more vigor and purpose.

“But...” Ashlyn started to object.

“Listen” Patty put her hand up to stop her and kept explaining her own theory. “It’s the same reason why I went with the hard cast instead of the soft cast or a splint. Some kids do well with soft casts and others” she looked at the curly-haired blonde boy who was now lightly smacking his forearm with his other hand, “don’t.”

“Dodge, easy there buddy” Ashlyn held his free arm to stop him from hitting his freshly repaired right arm.

“Exhibit A” Dr. Comello chuckled again as they all looked at the boy who smiled up at them proudly.

“It looks so gross!” he grinned, lifted his arm up and swung it from one mom to the other so they could get a good look.

“One way’s not better than the next” Patty shrugged after they all laughed at Dodge’s enthusiastic comment and adorable behavior. “All kids are different. And this one lives his life like a mack truck so I’m always going to recommend a hard cast and a couple of extra weeks, just to be sure he doesn’t do too much as soon as it’s off and re-injure it. And I would make the same recommendation for you” she winked at Ashlyn.

“See” Ali laughed and reached across the table to poke her keeper in the shoulder. “Your son.”

At the end of the first week of August, the Kriegers’ first week back from France, Kyle and Nathan drove up to the big old house with Edgar, Cristina and Peaches. It was the 8th and final week of The Academy and the big year-end barbecue and party was being held Thursday afternoon after the last campers, the college teams getting ready for their season, went back home. The NYC Kriegers arrived Thursday morning and then followed Ali and the mini-van up to Greenfield, NH that afternoon to join in the fun. The Academy got bigger and better and more popular each year and Ashlyn, Whitney and Cat Whitehill had to keep pinching themselves to make sure they weren’t all having the same awesome dream. They were talking about branching out and offering a few weekend soccer camps in the Spring as well, that’s how heavy the demand was getting. That new venture would take some time to work out, but Jane Sheldrick didn’t think it would be a problem at all. The campground was used for actual camping more in the late summer and Fall so the new Spring weekend sessions wouldn’t be disrupting too many other plans. And it would be bringing in more income as well. They wanted to be careful not to use up all of the available weekends that had been earmarked for the underprivileged kids though. That was vitally important to all three of the organizers, and Jane Sheldrick.

Kyle and Nathan were there for a more important reason than just the camp barbecue and party. They had just spent three weeks house and dog-sitting for Ali and Ashlyn and had enjoyed being back home in NYC for a week. But the coming Monday was their 7th wedding anniversary and Kyle had gotten it in his head that they were going to suffer through the seven-year itch that many marriages fell victim to. No matter how hard Nathan and Ali tried to convince him he was crazy, he held onto the irrational fear. So Nathan did what any caring husband would do – he gave in and let Kyle take him away for a romantic weekend back to the Chatham Inn on Cape Cod where they had
been married. Kyle and Nathan hadn’t been away from their kids for a night since Edgar and Cristina had first come to live with them as foster kids. The dads had enlisted their friends to come to the condo and babysit for an evening once the kids had gotten more comfortable with their new life in general, but they had never gone away over night before. Ali gave her brother an earful when she learned the surprising news. She, along with everybody else, had just assumed that Kyle and Nathan had relied on their close-knit group of friends in NYC to babysit overnight every once in a while. But that was not the case. It hadn’t been because their friends didn’t try. Both Nathan and Kyle were uncomfortable leaving the kids overnight. The potential negatives far outweighed the positives in their minds. They had all worked so hard for so long to get Edgar and Cristina feeling normal and safe and loved and protected and they didn’t want to risk it. A night away here and there just wasn’t as important to them compared to going through some kind of setback with one of the kids.

The original plan was for Deb and Mike to come to NYC and babysit for the weekend so the kids could at least be in their own space. But once Mike had his heart attack those plans changed as well. The Kriegers adapted, all of them, to their summer without Grandma. When Kyle had asked his sister to step in back in early July and confessed that it would be their first overnight getaway in 2-1/2 years, Ali gave him a stern talking to. Then she called him back the next day and talked to him some more, in a much nicer and more patient conversation, to make sure she got her point across.

“BB, you have to make time for you and Nate or it’ll never work” she explained as they spoke over the phone. She was driving home from work and he was trying to edit some film footage at his shared studio near his condo in Brooklyn. “I mean it, it’s really fucking hard sometimes and if you guys aren’t tuned into each other or at least speaking the same language...”

“You’re scaring me sis” he chuckled nervously when Ali let her words hang in the air.

“I’m not trying to scare you Ky, but maybe you should be scared if you’re not going to make your relationship with Nate the priority.” Her voice was soft and kind. “Because nothing tests you like having kids” she sighed heavily. “And I don’t know how couples who aren’t working together do it.”

“You sound like you’re speaking from experience” he prodded a little.

“I’ve told you a million stories about fighting with Ash over the kids, or all the crap that comes with them. It happens to everybody, no exceptions. So you have to go out of your way to stay connected with your husband, or wife, or you’ll just fight all the time. And that’s what kills so many marriages. Just look at Erica and Tom.”

They were both quiet for a minute, thinking hard.

“Sometimes I wish...just, like, for a few seconds I think about it...” he stopped this time, unable to actually say the words out loud. Not even to his beloved, trustworthy confidante and sister.

“That you didn’t have kids?” she offered quietly.

“Yeah” Kyle admitted in a whisper. “But only for a second and then it goes away and I’m so happy and I love my family so much...”

“I know...it’s ok...Kyle, I understand exactly what you’re saying” she talked at the same time he did.

“You do?”
“Of course. Are you kidding? I would die for my kids and Ashlyn knows that better than anyone” Ali paused for a second. “But there are days when I would give my right arm to go back to just the two of us. Back to when we could do whatever we wanted, whenever we wanted, with no responsibilities or obligations besides work.”

“Geez Alex, if this is your idea of a peptalk...”

“It’s not. This is the truth. I’m telling you what only other parents understand, and even then we hardly ever admit it to each other. Raising my kids is the hardest and scariest thing I’ve ever done and just the thought of trying to do it without somebody else who’s right there with me, all the way in it 100%, terrifies me. But I’m lucky. I’ve got Ashlyn and she’s a great wife and mother, a real, true partner. Thank God. She’s not perfect, and neither am I – but we’ll just keep that part to ourselves, ok?”

“Ok sis, whatever you say” he tried to laugh but wasn’t ready to find any of this funny just yet. “I won’t tell.”

“Even with Ashlyn carrying half the load it’s still fucking hard as hell. It’s wonderful and amazing and absolutely incredible...but it’s crazy hard. We learned our lesson the hard way, after Josie was born and we almost fell apart” Ali’s voice was low and solemn and she spoke slowly, taking her time and choosing her words carefully. “And maybe it took all of that happening that year, I don’t know” she shook her head and sniffled as she remembered how miserable she had felt that summer. “But we both decided that we had to have each other, we had to find a way to carve out time to be with each other, if we were going to make it. All those stories you hear about how marriage is hard work, well, they’re true. If you want to have a long and happy marriage you have to make sacrifices and work hard to stay in touch with your husband. Don’t stop doing the little things you used to do when it was just the two of you and you were madly in love. When you’re exhausted and up at all hours of the night with a sick kid before your big, important meeting at work the next morning – that’s when those sweet, thoughtful things matter. Maybe Nate gets up with you and rubs your shoulders for you after you spent an hour holding Cristina’s hair back while she threw up.”

“Eww, gross. Has one of your kids thrown up for a whole hour before?” he asked, astonished by the horrifying idea.

“Not the point Ky” Ali chuckled. “You guys have to go on date nights, just the two of you, once a month at least, and no cancelling no matter what. And you have to get away for a weekend just to take a break and find each other again. It’s so important.”

“That’s what mom said too” he sighed.

“So why haven’t you done it yet?”

“We were so afraid of messing up with the kids...”

“Look, you guys had a pretty unique situation when they came into your life. I mean, those were tough conditions to start parenting under. I get it. I probably would have done the exact same thing.”

“You totally would have done the same thing, mama bear” he laughed lightly, feeling better the longer they talked.

“Well, it’s a miracle if you and Nate haven’t had any big huge blowouts before now. 2-1/2 years! Jesus Kyle” she shook her head again and exhaled loudly. “Your kids are doing great. It’s time to
start taking care of you and Nate again too. Because if things get hard between you guys…”

“Now we’re talking” Kyle interrupted with a boisterous laugh, unable to contain himself when he heard his sister’s choice of words.

“What?” she took a second to replay her last sentence in her head. “Oh fuck you BB” she laughed, frustrated but relieved that he was able to joke about it. “You and your stupid dick jokes, God…”

“Well don’t set me up like that sissy” he giggled. “Ok, I’m sorry” he cleared his throat and settled down again. “If things get difficult between me and Nate…” he repeated her sentence back with one word change and waited for her to continue.

“If things aren’t good between you and Nate the kids will know. They can sense those things a mile away. So if you think you’re doing them a favor by being a martyr about not leaving them for a weekend every once in a while, you’re not. They’re happy if you’re happy. That’s the best advice I can ever give you on being married and raising kids. Keep you and Nate the top priority and everything else will fall into place.”

“You mean top priority after feeding, clothing and nurturing our children, of course” he challenged with a playful voice.

“Why do I even bother?” she sighed again and then chuckled.

“Because you love me and don’t want me to mess up my marriage or my kids. And I love you just as much for trying to help me, Alex. Thank you.”

Even after the heart to heart with her brother, Ali was more than a little nervous about having Edgar and Cristina stay with them for the weekend. She had all of the same fears that Kyle and Nathan had about messing something up with the former foster kids and setting all of their progress back a step or two in the process. In the end, Kyle had made it very simple. If something went wrong in Gloucester, they would just come back up from the Cape early. Easy solution. But it had been a good weekend at the big old house. They spent a lot of time at the beach and that was good for everybody. Ashlyn and Ali’s kids had missed it while they travelled in France and Dodge was thrilled to be able to go in the water and not have to worry about keeping his cast dry any more. They went up to Ken and Vicki’s house one afternoon, in two vehicles full of 6 kids and 3 dogs, and Grandpa played in the pool with them and took them for their special ice cream just as he had done with all of his grandkids over the years. Just as he had done with Kyle and Ali and even Sydney when they were kids. There was only one tricky time and it was Saturday evening after the Breakers game. Cristina was overtired and started to cry once they got home because she missed Kyle and Nathan. The 6-1/2 year old became inconsolable in a matter of minutes and neither Ali nor Ashlyn was sure what the best course of action would be. Ordinarily they would snuggle up with the child who was so overtired and cranky. They would talk softly to him or her and maybe even sing a quiet song to try and soothe them. But both moms were hesitant to scoop poor Cristina up, afraid of sparking some old fear in the girl. Ashlyn led her by the hand to the couch in the family room, away from the other kids in the front living room. They sat together, the keeper with her hand on Cristina’s knee just to remind her that she was there with her, and were joined by both Persey and Peaches. Persey sat on the floor in front of the girl and rested her head in her lap while Peaches jumped up onto the couch and curled up next to her girl. Cristina’s sobs slowly started to calm down so she was only occasionally shuddering and shaking as she held onto Ashlyn’s hand with her own small fingers.

“Here” Lily said as she walked over to the couch, keeping her eye on her cousin. She had her hand on Fred’s collar and was bringing him to the upset girl. “Fred always makes me feel better” she bent over and gave the caramel colored dog a big hug while he slowly wagged his tail and stood
“Thanks Lily girl” Ashlyn smiled sweetly at her daughter, loving the way the girl patted her knee once she stood back up from the dog hug. “That’s really nice of you honey” she squeezed Lily’s hand. “Why don’t you go back in the other room for a little bit. It’s almost time for bed. Everybody’s tired after our big, fun, long day.”

When Ali came downstairs almost an hour later, after tucking the other five children into bed, she leaned against the doorway between the dining room and the family room and smiled broadly at the sight in front of her. Ashlyn had gotten more comfortable on the couch, slouching down a bit and putting both of her long legs out on top of the coffee table in front of her. Cristina was curled up on her lap, nestled into the crook of her left arm and supported by the arm of the couch. Persey had climbed up and taken Cristina’s spot next to the keeper while Fred laid down on the floor underneath Ashlyn’s legs. Peaches was still curled up tightly on the other side of Persey, just as she had been before the young girl had moved to Ashlyn’s lap. All five souls were asleep, until the floor creaked underneath Ali’s weight and both Peaches and Persey lifted their heads up to greet her with dog smiles and little wags of their tails. Fred kept snoring, as did Cristina with her stuffy nose leftover from her long, hard cry. Ashlyn’s head was leaning back against the back of the couch but tilting down awkwardly to one side as she slept. Both her arms were wrapped around Cristina, and the little girl’s left hand held a fistful of the keeper’s t-shirt on Ashlyn’s chest. Ali took a couple of quick pictures before moving closer to try and keep the dogs calm and in place. She stood next to the arm of the couch and gently ran her hand through her wife’s longer blonde hair on the top of her head. She bent over and pressed a soft kiss to Ashlyn’s forehead, leaving her lips there for several seconds while she kept her hand moving through her hair.

“Hey” the keeper croaked out and winced as she straightened her neck.

“Shhhh...” Ali hushed her and kissed her lips. “You did it” she whispered and smiled as Ashlyn stretched and rolled her neck out. “Want me to take her?”

They shared a meaningful look, both of them appreciating what the other had done for their family that evening. Neither job had been easy and when they smiled softly at each other it was as if they were wordlessly saying thank you at the same time.

“A few nights later, after Kyle and his family were all back in their own condo in NYC, Ali hung up the phone and turned to face her wife. They were sitting on their bed folding clothes and there were four neat stacks at the foot of the bed, one for each child. It was 9pm and they had just finished getting everybody into bed for the night.

“Uh oh, that didn’t sound good” Ashlyn commented nervously as she began pairing up matching socks and folding them over into compact balls.

“Edgar’s got some stomach bug” the brunette sighed heavily and closed her eyes for a few seconds, her hands still in her lap. “He’s been throwing up all evening. Kyle said he had to go pick him up from soccer camp right after lunch.”

Kids got sick. A lot. That’s just how it went. It wasn’t a Krieger thing or a Gloucester thing or a big old house thing. There were so many kids gathered together in schools that any germ or flu or bug
that struck down one of them spread like wildfire more often than not. Because of the fact that Edgar had just spent three full days with them, Ali and Ashlyn were fairly certain that at least one of their kids was going to come down with the same stomach bug. They hoped it would just be one of them instead of all four. The good news was that none of them had shown any signs of sickness at all that day so they allowed themselves to hope that maybe Edgar had picked up his bug back in NYC. Just to be safe, they spent the next hour disinfecting the entire house, except for the kids’ bedrooms and the boys’ bathroom because they didn’t want to risk waking anybody up.

“I really think they’ll be ok” Ashlyn offered optimistically as they got ready for bed. She finished brushing her teeth while Ali washed her face in the sink next to her in their master bathroom. “I’ll bet he picked it up at camp on Monday and it just didn’t show up until today. I think we’re safe” she ducked her head into the sink in front of her to wash her own face.

“I hope you’re right” Ali sighed as she dried her face off and leaned all the way forward, almost to the mirror, to look closely at her chin. She squinted but still couldn’t see so she reached for her glasses and tried again, but from farther away.

“I don’t know why we don’t just get a magnifying mirror” Ashlyn chuckled through the towel she used to dry her face.

“Because I don’t need an old lady mirror, that’s why” the brunette sassed back, surprised that her wife had even seen her struggle. “How could you possibly have washed your face that fast?”

“Because not all of us take forever and massage every inch of our skin while we wash our face, my queen” the keeper grinned when Ali rolled her eyes at her. “But what do I know? Maybe that’s your secret” she winked at her wife. “Maybe that’s why you’re so damned beautiful.”

“Oh geez” Ali chuckled as she finished with her moisturizer and turned to leave the bathroom. “That’s cheesy, even for you, cheeseball.”

“Oh you love it” Ashlyn laughed and used her own moisturizer.

When she turned off the bathroom light and moved into the bedroom, the keeper walked by the foot of the bed towards their dressers and got an eyeful of her favorite sight in the world – a naked Ali Krieger. The brunette was changing into her pajamas but had hit some sort of snag in the process. Ashlyn knew from watching her for 12 years that Ali usually took off her shirt and bra, if she was wearing one during the evening, first and then pulled on her sleep tank. Then she took off her shorts or pants and panties before putting her thin, cotton pajama pants on.

“Babe, what happened to the basket of clean clothes? The last load?” Ali asked as she looked behind her near the bedroom door to the second-floor hall.

“Oooh, umm, I’ll go get it” Ashlyn realized she had forgotten to bring the last load upstairs after her wife had specifically asked her to while she was right there letting the dogs out for the last time that night anyway.

“Oh, don’t bother” Ali frowned and turned back to her dresser, pulling open a drawer. “I’ll just wear something else” she shrugged and yawned. “I just thought I’d wear...”

“Your beach umbrella jammies” Ashlyn smiled and wrapped her arms around her wife from behind. She felt her core spark to life when her hands came in contact with Ali’s bare, warm skin. “They’re your favorites this summer and they’re in that load of laundry” she continued, pressing soft, slow kisses up the top of Ali’s shoulder towards her neck. “I like them too, but I have to admit” she smirked when she felt her wife’s skin break out in goosebumps as her lips moved to the
base of her neck, “I like this look a hell of a lot more.”

Ashlyn had one hand around the brunette’s midsection, just below her breasts, while the other wandered lower, trailing her fingertips across her belly and down to her dark curls. Ali sucked in a breath and melted back into her keeper without any hesitation. She was disappointed to feel Ashlyn’s t-shirt and shorts still between them but her lips moving up to her ear felt amazing.

“Mmmmmmm...” Ali hummed and turned her head to the side so Ashlyn could kiss them. “Are you just trying to get out of going down to get the laundry?” she giggled after the soft, sweet kiss.

“No, not at all” Ashlyn shook her head slowly as she kissed her way down the brunette’s jaw and back to her ear again while her hands kept moving around the soft, warm skin. “I can go down right now and bring it up” she offered, hot breath right in Ali’s ear while her fingers raked through her short hairs and cupped one of her breasts.

“Are you just trying to get out of going down to get the laundry?” the blonde teased, nibbling on her wife’s earlobe as she pressed her body harder into her back.

“No...” Ali chuckled, low in her throat, trying desperately to maintain some semblance of self-control as Ashlyn drove her wild. “But you’re not leaving this room” she smirked and let her head rest back on her keeper’s shoulder.

“Yessss” Ashlyn grinned against her wife’s neck and got more adventurous with both hands. “God you feel so good baby.”

“Mmmmmmm...” Ali moaned louder when she felt the blonde’s fingers start to dip lower towards her quickly dampening folds. “Oh, shit...yes, babe” she purred as Ashlyn cupped her whole crotch, the heel of her palm pressing into her clit, and leaned back, lifting the brunette off her feet a couple of inches.

“God I love touching you and holding you...”

“Fuuuuuck...” Ali groaned and spread her legs wider as soon as her keeper put her back down. “Take off your shirt” she commanded as she exhaled. “I need to feel those hard nipples of yours stabbing me in my back.”

Ashlyn got her shirt halfway over her head before they heard it.

“Oh no...”

“Aw, fuck.”

The unmistakable sound of one of their children running into the hallway, puking, and then crying.

“Mommyyyyy...”
The next weekend was the beginning of the 4-family vacation up in NH and the usual suspects gathered together to spend one of their favorite weeks all year. For the first time, one of the kids who wasn’t Meg wasn’t there. Noah Cross, 12-1/2 years old, went to his own soccer camp in a scheduling conflict that couldn’t be avoided. Over the years this would happen again with several of the kids in the four families as they got older and got more involved in sports camps and drama camps and science camps and music camps. For the second year in a row, Ryan Flanagan missed vacation too. As his Boston Cannons team continued to improve and earn better results, they played deeper into the playoffs each of the last two years. As much as Whitney missed him and hated that he was missing a week that meant so much to all of them, she was thrilled for him and happy to watch him get closer to achieving his dream of a MLL championship.

The big group of friends enjoyed all the fun things the lake had to offer, as they usually did, but they all felt a little bit sorry for Dom being the only guy in attendance. Many of the kids missed Ryan too. He was always happy to play any sort of game with any of the kids and his big-hearted, easy-going personality was noticeably absent that week. With Noah gone, there was a shift in the groups within the children too. Cassius was one month shy of his 11th birthday and instead of following Noah’s lead that week, he allowed Drew to join him in his exploits. That left Evan Cross the odd man out. A one-year age difference could be a big deal or nothing at all, depending on what ages involved were. Drew was truly torn between hanging out with Evan, one year younger than Drew, or Cassius, a year and a half older. Although the week was a successful one, the three oldest boys spent much of it trying to figure out where they fit. Sydney, Molly and Ali finally put their collective feet down and said that if those three boys couldn’t figure something out that all three of them could do then they would do nothing at all. Things felt different that vacation week, but they finally fell into a rhythm of their own, for everybody. They could all feel the change in the air, adults and kids alike – the kids just didn’t understand what it was or what it meant.

“Can you believe we’ve been doing this for, like, six years now?” Sydney asked as she finished washing the last pot in the kitchen sink of the lake house.

She and Ashlyn were doing the dishes while everyone else handled bathtime upstairs. They had just finished talking about The Academy and some tweaks the coach wanted to make to the program for next summer. The keeper was drying the dishes and they had fallen into a comfortable silence as they stood shoulder to shoulder.

“Has it been that long?” Ashlyn squinted as she tried to think back to the first summer they had vacationed together.

“Yep, the year after my goddaughter was born” Sydney nodded as she drained and rinsed the sink out.

“And...the year after your son was born” Ashlyn chuckled.

“Well, of course” she rolled her eyes dramatically. “But you know I take any chance I can to remind you and your wife that Josie is my goddaughter.”

“Yeah Syd, we know” the keeper laughed. “We were kinda involved in that decision.”

“I made you godparents to all three of mine and you only gave me one...” the coach muttered under her breath as her lips formed a small smile despite her best efforts to pretend to be offended.

“But you got the most challenging one” Ashlyn cocked her head and quirked her eyebrow at Sydney.

“Nah, she’s a piece of cake” Sydney giggled. “I grew up with her mother, remember?”
“I’m well aware, but you’re not going to be Josie’s best friend when she’s 13 and going through puberty. You’re going to be one of the adults who are plaguing her life” the keeper chuckled as she took in the frown on Sydney’s face. “Forgot about that part, did ya?” she put the last dry pot on the counter and snapped the damp towel at the coach’s bare thigh, making a sharp snapping sound at the painful contact.

“Oh!” she yelped and smacked Ashlyn hard in the arm. “That hurt” she chuckled and rubbed the injured area as she leaned back against the counter. “Jerk.”

“Sorry.”

“No you’re not” she chuckled again and rolled her eyes.

“You’re right, I’m not” the blonde’s dimpled grin appeared on her face as she leaned against the counter right next to the woman who had become such a good and trusted friend over the years. “Josie’s going to be a tough one in high school” she sighed after another minute of quiet between the two of them. It was common knowledge among the four families that Josie Krieger had somehow inherited the stubborn streaks of both Ali and Ashlyn, as well as their competitiveness. She was a strong-willed girl who was going to present parenting challenges once she decided to start pushing the envelope of what she could and couldn’t do as she got older. “And I can just tell she’s gonna drive Ali absolutely nuts.”

“Yeah, I never thought about it that way, but you’re right” Sydney agreed thoughtfully. “Well, maybe it’s a good thing you made me her godmother then. I can tell her all the things her mother did when she was her age. Maybe help them find common ground.”

“God, I hope so.”

There was another comfortable pause and the two women enjoyed the short-lived quiet that would soon be shattered by post-bathtime children coming downstairs in their jammies with their damp heads and yammering faces.

“You doing ok?” Sydney cautiously asked with a nudge of her elbow. “With your brother and everything?”

It had been a while since Sydney and Ashlyn had been able to talk one-on-one and the coach had been longing to touch base with her about the trying, difficult year she was going through with Chris’ addiction and recovery.

“I’m ok” the keeper nodded slowly, seeming to assess her own condition as she answered. “We’re ok. I mean, I still want to kill him sometimes for letting things get that bad, but I understand what happened, and why it happened.”

“And does he?”

“Yeah, I really think he does” she pursed her lips as she considered it. “He’s totally different now, this time. I’m surprised but really happy about it. Did Al tell you about the surf shop and the volunteering?”

“MmmmHmmmm” Sydney hummed. “It all sounds good...”

“I know, right?” Ashlyn exhaled loudly. She would always feel guilty for doubting her brother but she had time, experience, and his own track record on her side. “But I don’t know Syd, this time really honestly feels different. I’ve never seen him like this. He’s totally there for Beth and the kids and he’s really embracing the recovery this time. He’s volunteering at the rehab center and he’s
started the after-school program for the kids. Before, the other times he’s gotten sober, he made changes for himself, which is cool” she shrugged. “But compared to this time, it was like he was doing the bare minimum before.”

“And look how well that worked out” Sydney quipped lightly.

“Exactly. So I’m really hopeful for him. We’ll find out in January if Harvey will let him run the surf shop again or not. But I’m pretty sure he will, if Chris keeps up the good work.”

“I’m glad Ash” the coach slipped her arm around Ashlyn’s waist and gave her a side-hug squeeze. “And I’m glad you two worked things out between you too. Sometimes I’m glad I’m an only child, let me tell you” she made her eyes wide and then whistled.

“That was the hardest part, for sure” she sighed. “But I love him, you know? We’ve been through a lot together and I know he loves me. He’s shown me a thousand different times since we were little kids. I’m not gonna let one hellish night erase all of that.”

“You really are something else, you know that?” Sydney squeezed her again and patted her arm with her other hand. “Ali’s always talking about how incredible you are about this or that and whatever” she playfully rolled her eyes. “But this...well, I don’t know a lot of people who would be strong enough to forgive and then brave enough to move forward afterward. I give you full credit for that. That’s really something.”

“Thanks Syd” Ashlyn gave the coach a bashful but appreciative smile and leaned into the side-hug. “I just wish Ali could do the same.”

As soon as she said the words she regretted them. It wasn’t that they weren’t completely accurate, but she had been trying so hard all year to keep from pressuring her wife in any way about her feelings for Chris. And now she had shared that important, but selfish, wish with Ali’s best friend and there was no hope of her keeping the comment from her bestie.

“Oh shit” she turned a look of fear and regret to Sydney and stepped out of the side-hug to turn and face her. “I didn’t mean it like that...”

“Well how did you mean it?” it was impossible not to hear the defensive snap in her tone.

“No, listen...” Ashlyn stammered and looked nervously over her shoulder towards the hallway in the middle of the house to make sure they were still having a private conversation. “Of course I want her to forgive him. I want that more than anything” she confessed, talking quickly. “But I would never tell her that or make her feel pressured to do that. Not ever” she shook her head vigorously from side to side as she searched for understanding in Sydney’s face. “I’m sorry, I never should have said that. Fuck” she dropped her eyes when the coach’s impassive face never changed from the look of wary judgment.

“You’ve never told her she needs to forgive him?” Sydney asked in a softer voice than the keeper expected.

“No, never” Ashlyn lifted her eyes, thankful for the almost kind tone in Sydney’s voice. “It’s got nothing to do with me. It’s between Ali and Chris. I want her to take whatever time she needs, and I’ve told her that.”

Sydney and Ali had talked at length about the brunette’s difficulties forgiving or forgetting that Chris almost killed his own sister that night. The coach had heard from her best friend that Ashlyn had been good about giving her time and space to try and work through it. She studied the blonde’s
anxious face for a few seconds and then nodded her head as she pursed her lips.

“Good.”

Ashlyn let out a shaky breath, grateful for the reply even if it wasn’t quite as warm and fuzzy as she had hoped. It had always been one of her favorite things about Sydney Rae Leroux Dwyer – she had Ali’s back no matter what. The keeper wouldn’t want it any other way.

“It breaks my heart, but I know she may never be able to forgive him” Ashlyn admitted softly. “But if I put myself in her position I’m not sure I could do it either” she shrugged sadly, her emotions rising up and surprising her. “Fucking addiction” she whispered and dropped her eyes again.

“Hey,” Sydney felt her own heart tug at the keeper’s struggle. She reached out and pulled Ashlyn into a hug and was surprised when the blonde held on tightly. “She’s so strong” the coach spoke quietly from inside the hug. “We don’t know what she can actually do sometimes until she tries to do it. Don’t give up hope yet.”
For the first time ever, and for what would be only the first of two years ever, all four Krieger children walked into the same school building for their first day of school. Ali and Ashlyn stood outside the East Gloucester Elementary School and took deep breaths. They squeezed the hands they were holding for a few seconds before turning back to the minivan to make sure their children had their backpacks and were ready to get their school year started. Drew was a 9-year old 4th grader this year while Josie was a 7-year old 2nd grader. Dodge and Lily were embarking on their first year at the school as 5-year old kindergarteners. They were both wide-eyed and excited to finally get to join their big brother and sister at school and both their moms felt their hearts swell to impossible sizes as the family of six walked up to foot of the school steps. Ali thought about two years earlier when Drew had held Josie’s hand on her first day of kindergarten and guided her up the steps and into the school where her teacher and other classmates were waiting. Where the hell had the time gone?

“Ok you guys” Ashlyn stopped and squatted down in front of her children with a big smile on her face. “We want you to be good and remember to listen to your teachers and behave yourselves, ok?”

All four little heads nodded with varying levels of enthusiasm. Drew was over the big deal of the first day of school. This was his fifth year at this school and it was old hat for him. Josie was excited mostly because she loved school so much. Dodge was practically bouncing out of his sneakers he was so eager to be a big boy like his big brother and go to this school with him. And Lily was somewhere between Dodge and Josie’s levels of excitement.

“And be nice to the other kids and take care of each other. You’re all team Krieger!” Ali added with her own nose-crinkling grin. “And have fun and learn lots!”

“We love you guys” Ashlyn stood up and gave high-fives and smiles to each kid while Ali hugged them and made sure their backpack straps weren’t twisted.

“We’ll be right here at the end of the day” Ali waved.

The two moms stood arm-in-arm, fighting back complicated tears, and watched their children walk up the steps towards the open doors with the kindergarten teacher smiling down at them.

“There she goes” Ashlyn nodded as they saw Josie reach out and take Dodge’s hand as they climbed the first step together.

Lily watched her twin brother and then grabbed Drew’s hand to make sure she kept pace with what Dodge was doing. Drew turned his head quickly to see whose hand had latched onto his. He gave a little half-smile when he saw that it was Lily and slowed his pace a bit so she could climb the steps with him.

“That a boy” Ali squeezed her wife and leaned her head against her shoulder at the sweet sight of Drew helping Lily.

The kindergarten teacher, Ms. Johnson, the same woman who had been Drew and Josie’s kindergarten teacher, waved at Ali and Ashlyn and the two moms waved back appreciatively. They
stood there for another few minutes until all four kids were safely inside the school and out of view.

“Jesus, that fucking hurts” Ashlyn breathed out as they turned around and slowly walked back to the minivan.

“It sure as hell does” Ali agreed wistfully.

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And just like that, their September and Fall were under way. Soccer practice and games filled up much of their time, but all four kids continued to take music lessons as well. Last year had been the first year any of the kids were old enough to play an instrument and join the band and Drew had decided to play the trumpet. Once the moms understood how beneficial it was for their kids to learn and play music, they had pushed them all into it. All four kids took piano lessons starting at about age 4 or 5. This was what most of the group music lessons they had been taking over the past couple of years had been for. They learned how to read music and some of the basics. When they turned 8 and went into 3rd grade they could choose an instrument to learn and play in the elementary school band. They got group lessons for their instrument at school and then their group music lessons in Rockport turned into private lessons for that specific instrument once they started playing one. The plan was for all four kids to play an instrument and sing in the chorus through elementary school and middle school. Then, when they started high school, they could decide if they wanted to continue doing either activity any more. Both moms hoped they would all opt to continue, but they agreed that they would let the kids make their own decisions at that age. The good news was that they all seemed to enjoy the music program so it was easy to keep them involved and interested in their lessons. Even Drew enjoyed the trumpet. It had been hard for him to learn how to play it and he still wasn’t very good, but he liked it anyway. Ashlyn had a cool vintage poster of Miles Davis up in her studio and both moms were pretty sure that had been their son’s inspiration to take up the trumpet.

Josie continued taking her own private piano lessons with Mrs. Clinton. The stern older woman came to the big old house every Monday afternoon and instructed the little redhead in everything having to do with playing the piano. Sometimes she spent the whole hour playing the piano herself to demonstrate something to her student. Other times she had Josie play for the whole hour while she adjusted her posture and her form and her technique. Usually they both played off and on and it was easy for everybody else in the house to tell who was playing when. Josie had improved quite a bit in the 2-1/2 years she had been taking the lessons and she seemed to love the piano more every single day. Dodge and Lily still went up to Rockport once a week for the basic music and piano lessons and they both enjoyed and looked forward to that too. Neither mom had made much progress in their half-hearted attempts to learn to read music, but Ali had decided she was going to buckle down this year and learn it once and for all. The desire to be able to share something special with her kids, and help them at some point if they needed it, drove her to devote her time to it.

Drew and Ethan were still thick as thieves and the whole Machado family unit, with Sam and Lisa happily married, welcomed him with open arms. Drew had other friends too, but Ethan was his best bud. Josie finally had a bestie of her own, Kayla, and both her moms were relieved. They knew their daughter was smart and driven and interesting and fun, but they were also aware that there was something in Josie that made her not care very much if she had a lot of friends or not. Her self-confidence was astonishing and both women wondered where the hell she had gotten it from. Truthfully, the little girl wasn’t as confident as she appeared. It bothered her when kids teased her about her giraffe birthmark or her two moms but she had learned to make it appear as though nothing fazed her. It was a great skill to have and it would serve her well her entire life, but it wasn’t always what you hoped for in your 2nd grader. Josie’s truest best friend was James
Dwyer and the older they got the more solid their friendship became. Ali and Sydney often wished they lived in the same town so they could have all of their kids in the same schools together. Nothing would be better than that. James and Josie were amazing to watch together. The fears that Sydney had confessed to Ali about James’ development earlier that year had turned out to be misplaced. He really was completely fine. Everything was in good working order and he had tested in the top 10% of kids his age in cognitive function. He was just the chilliest kid in the world. He not only let Josie boss him around, he liked it. And, because he put up no resistance, Josie didn’t really feel the need to boss him around very much. They cracked each other up and helped each other out and were always together whenever they could be. James was only 5 months younger than Josie and it was easy to see that they felt like true contemporaries. The redhead never seemed more at ease than when she was with James.

Dodge and Lily had made friends in preschool, but now that they were in kindergarten at the elementary school their moms expected them to form friendships with kids that they would be spending the next several years with. The preschool hadn’t been specific to Gloucester kids so there were boys and girls from several nearby towns. Elementary school was where the permanence set in for all the Krieger kids. Dodge came home from the first day of kindergarten and told both his moms that his new best friend was Mikey. Lily confirmed that the two boys had spent the entire day side by side and laughing whenever they weren’t supposed to be listening to their teacher. Ali got choked up the first time she dropped her youngest son off at Mikey’s house for a play date. How in the hell had he gotten so damned big so fast? It was truly an odd feeling to have both Ashlyn and Ali at the big old house after school or on the weekend and not have Dodge there too. That was the thing about their little daredevil – you always knew he was there because you could hear him. If whatever he was doing didn’t make a lot of noise, the boy himself did. He was one of those kids who was a constant sound machine all on his own. Sometimes he sang songs, at the top of his lungs of course, and other times his mouth and throat just made a string of non-stop sound effects. He conducted his own accompanying orchestra to every one of his activities. It used to drive Ali crazy after a certain amount of time, and he had done it all his life to varying degrees. But eventually she got used to it, as did everybody else in the big old house. So it was almost painfully quiet when he wasn’t there. Since when was he old enough to have his own social calendar?

Lily took her time sussing out the new kids in her class. She was more confident than ever before because her speech had improved so much over the past year. She had learned to speak up and once she had done that, the problem had almost completely disappeared. She still stuttered and stammered a bit if she was really tired or very nervous. But she could hear her moms’ and her speech therapist’s voices in her head. ‘Slow down. Take a deep breath. Speak up. You can do it.’ Neither Ali nor Ashlyn was surprised to learn from Ms. Johnson that Lily’s favorite friend was the classroom hamster, Mr. Giggles. Her moms weren’t worried about the non-human element of her first school best friend though. Lily was smart and kind and pretty and they knew she’d make good friends soon enough. She could still be the biggest diva in the house if she was unhappy, but when she wasn’t upset about something she was one of the most lovable and loving of all the kids.

The new thing on the family calendar that Fall was play practice. Josie wanted to sign up for the musical play that the school performed in November and Ashlyn had signed the permission slip and agreed to take her to the rehearsals that happened twice a week, including a 2 or 3-hour session on Saturday or Sunday afternoons. It was a new wrinkle in the family’s schedule for sure, but Josie absolutely loved it. The bigger kids in the play, the 4th and 5th graders, had all of the speaking and singing parts, but they always needed some younger kids to participate too. The first play Josie was part of was ‘Seussical Jr’ and the whole family learned her songs with her, whether they intended to or not. Josie had a part in the chorus that sang in almost half of the songs and required two different costume changes at different times in the production. Both moms were looking forward to
watching their hambone of a daughter take the stage in the middle of November. Ashlyn fully planned on being the mom who unapologetically filmed the whole thing on opening night.

Soccer continued for all four kids and they all loved it. Ali coached Drew’s team and Josie’s team and Lily’s team, but all of the other coaches agreed that Dodge needed to play up a year, at least. He still wiped the pitch with everybody else and the coaches talked with his moms about maybe moving him up two years next Fall instead. Something about Dodge’s advanced ability spurred Drew on and he had his best soccer season ever. Ali was shocked at how much better he played that Fall. Ashlyn thought she was going to die from her heart exploding the first time she looked in the backyard and saw all four kids playing 2 v 2 soccer together, all on their own without any parental prodding or input. Drew and Lily took on Dodge and Josie and they played so well together that the keeper had been afraid to even breathe for fear of breaking the spell. Drew was still better than everybody else, but Dodge gave him a run for his money even at 4 years his junior.

“Al, you wouldn’t believe it” Ashlyn enthused that evening after following her wife up the backstairs while she got changed after work. “I swear, I wouldn’t believe it if I hadn’t seen it myself. They played 2 v 2 for, like, 45 minutes!”

“Wow, that long?” the brunette raised both eyebrows from the other side of the bed as she hung up her suit jacket in her closet. “I loved the video you sent” she smiled. “But I had no idea they played together that long.”

“That’s what I’m saying! It was unbelievable!”

“Lily didn’t get bored and quit?”

“Nope. And Josie didn’t get mad and quit either” the blonde added with a chuckle.

“And Drew didn’t kill Dodge? Wow, that is freaking incredible” Ali laughed as she pulled on a t-shirt and then stepped into joggers, getting ready for Drew’s soccer practice right after dinner.

“I think they might have played even longer too” Ashlyn rolled her eyes as she knelt and bounced on the bed like a teenager eagerly telling her bestie the latest gossip. “But Persey got bored” she laughed. “She ran into the middle of them and took the ball away.”

“Probably best” Ali laughed with her wife. “This way none of them caused the game to end. There were no fights or fits so maybe they’ll want to do it again.”

“Oooh, excellent call baby. So damned smart” Ashlyn walked on her knees to Ali’s side of the bed and pulled her wife into a hug and a kiss. “And here I married you for your sexy body” she playfully grabbed the brunette’s butt and made her giggle and squirm a little. “Got me a girl who can do both. How lucky am I?”

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Scheduling the family picture for the Christmas cards was never easy for Ali. Ideally, the second week in October was perfect for getting them taken, then waiting a week for the proofs to come back so she and Ashlyn could make the selection. Then they would wait 2-3 weeks for the cards to be made and shipped back to them. Then, just before Thanksgiving, they could start writing them out and addressing them so they’d be ready to go out right after turkey day. That was always the plan. Every single year. But as the number of children increased, so did the odds of something happening to mess that all up. And just when Ali got a handle on scheduling everything with four little kids, the kids got older and started having their own busy schedules! It had been difficult enough to work around her own schedule and Ashlyn’s but at least then the kids were small
enough where they were either at daycare or home. Not anymore. Now she had to factor in soccer practice, play rehearsal, music lessons, after-school playdates with best friends, homework and other school commitments. To further complicate the issue, the second week of October was almost always the week of the two NWSL playoff games so Ashlyn was more than likely going to be away for at least Friday and the weekend. Some years they made the second week of October work. Other years it was the third week. A couple of times they had to wait until just before Halloween to get their Christmas picture taken and that made the cards go out just a week or ten days before Christmas. All of which was totally ok in the grand scheme of things, and Ashlyn had reminded her frazzled wife of that fact every single year. One year they did the photo while Ashlyn was away at Championship Week because she was going to film some Mental Health Initiative videos with some famous people on the West Coast immediately after the big game and wouldn’t be coming right home. The photo was a cute one of all four kids but it didn’t feel right without Ali and Ashlyn in it. The brunette swore she’d never do that again. And as soon as Lily could talk, she had insisted that the dogs be in the picture, pointing out that they were part of the family too. Neither mom could debate her on that fact because they felt the same exact way. But the logistics of wrangling four kids and two dogs into the photographer’s studio up in Rockport were nightmarish. Thankfully the photographer was wonderful and patient and kind. It helped a lot that she also loved dogs. She was the wife of one of Ali’s old builder customers and the brunette had met her a few times before she stopped selling windows and doors. Ali was happy to see that the photography studio was still open for business when she started looking for a place to bring her unruly horde to get their Christmas picture taken.

This year the Breakers had made the playoffs as the number two seed and were hosting the playoff game against Atlanta. That was the best possible outcome because it meant that Ashlyn wouldn’t have to travel anywhere that weekend to cover the game. The other playoff game that weekend was in Houston with the Shield winning Dash hosting the LA Strikers. Friday evening was the only one without soccer practice for any of the four kids so that was always the first choice to schedule the pictures. The only problem was that Josie had play rehearsal from 3-5pm at the elementary school in Gloucester on Friday afternoons in October and up to opening night, Saturday November 18th. Drew also had his private music lesson up in Rockport from 4-5pm. This meant that Ashlyn was already busy bringing Drew up to his lesson, with both twins in tow, on any given Friday that month. It also meant that she was relying on Kayla’s mom to take Josie home with her after rehearsal until Ashlyn or Ali could get there to pick her up. If it was a day where Ali left work in the afternoon then it wasn’t such a big deal, but if Ali got stuck at work or had to stay at the office until 4:30pm or later, then they had to use the mom network to help keep everybody accounted for.

On photograph appointment Friday, they had the additional challenges of getting the kids, and the dogs, and themselves, looking camera ready. Ashlyn picked up Drew, Dodge and Lily from school at 2:30pm. They hung out with Josie for 20 minutes on the school playground where the keeper swapped out the empty purple thermos bottle and insulated lunch bag in the redhead’s backpack for freshly stocked ones.

“Remember to eat your dinner” Ashlyn shook the new insulated lunch bag to get her daughter’s attention before slipping it into the backpack. “Mommy will pick you up after rehearsal but you won’t have time to eat at home. You’re just getting changed and then bringing the dogs up to meet us for the family picture tonight.”

“Oh yeah!” Josie’s face lit up. Getting dressed up for family picture was one of her favorite things and she looked forward to it every year. “Did you give me turkey again?” she tilted her head and looked up at the keeper.

“Umm, your favorite turkey sandwich with cheese and just the right amount of sauce?” Ashlyn smiled. The kids still used the word sauce interchangeably for any sort of dip or dressing or, in this
case, light mayonnaise, that went with any of their food. “I sure did.”

“Oh, ok” she shrugged and slowly turned to go take one last run around the playground with Dodge and Lily and Drew.

“Hey Jojo” the keeper caught her hand and tugged it to make the girl turn back to face her. “What’s the matter sweetie?”

“Oh nothing” she sighed dramatically and dropped her chin to her chest.

“Yeah, I’m not buying it” Ashlyn pulled her daughter in and put a finger under her chin to lift her face up so she could see it. “What’s up?”

“I don’t really like turkey anymore” she shrugged again.

“Oh really?” Ashlyn’s face registered more than mild surprise. “Since when?”

“It’s been a long time Mama” Josie began to pull on Ashlyn’s fingers with both hands like they were her own personal toy.

“Since when, exactly?” the blonde smiled at the sweet way Josie played with her hand. Dodge would have tried to bend at least three fingers all the way backwards by now.

“Ummm...” the girl squinted as she tried to think about the answer to her mother’s question. “The day after Mrs. Clinton came, so...”

“Tuesday?!?” Ashlyn laughed. “A long time means three days now, ok” she laughed again and moved her free hand to tickle Josie’s side, making the girl squeal and giggle. Ashlyn picked her up and hugged her close for a minute. She kissed her nose and then put her back down on the ground, straightening her skirt and tucking her shirt back in too. “If turkey’s not your favorite anymore, then what is?”

“I don’t know” she shrugged and sighed, her brain too tired after a long day of learning new things in school to try and figure out her new favorite sandwich.

“Well, when you get it figured out you let me know, ok?”

“Ok Mama” Josie grinned and then turned to go play for the last few minutes of her break before rehearsal.

“Can you do me a favor and eat the turkey sandwich today though anyway?” Ashlyn called out to her as she ran towards the swings.

“Oh, I will” came the high, clear voice in reply but Josie didn’t turn back to look at her personal sandwich-maker.

Ashlyn stood there and watched her kids all doing different things on the playground for a few more minutes before she started herding them back into the Jeep. Josie came back for her backpack and a high-five and then ran into the school with some of the other younger kids going to rehearsal. The keeper drove Drew, Dodge and Lily home so they could get changed for the picture before getting back into the Jeep and driving the 10 minutes up to Rockport for Drew’s music lesson at 4pm. Ashlyn warned all three of them not to make any kind of a stink about the clothes that had been laid out on their beds for them to change into. Their outfits for the picture had been discussed with them ad nauseum over the past two weeks and the keeper was tired of hearing about it. That was the problem with letting your kids make their own decisions a lot of the time. They changed
their damned minds constantly. These outfits had been chosen, discussed and reaffirmed with all four children and there simply wasn’t time that day for anything other than putting them on. After Ashlyn finally relented and let Dodge wear his winter boots, for who knew what crazy reason, they were on their way up to Rockport after feeding the dogs their dinner a little earlier than usual. They only made it about two blocks before Ashlyn asked Drew if he had remembered his trumpet and his music and had gotten a no on both counts.

“Come on Drew” the keeper frowned as she turned the Jeep around. “How do you leave the house for your trumpet lesson without your trumpet??”

“I’ll go fast...” he started to say but Ashlyn cut him off, hurrying so they might not be late.

“No, I’ll get it. You guys just sit tight for a second” she hustled out of the driver’s seat but paused just long enough to give them a stern look before closing the door behind her. “And don’t move. Just stay in your seats, please.”

By 6pm both moms were aggravated and frazzled and not in very good moods. Things might have been entirely different if they could have made the appointment with the photographer for 7pm instead of 6pm but that time slot was already booked. As it was, the photographer was giving up her dinner hour to work with the Kriegers after Ali called to see what could be done on short notice. She had booked an appointment for the following week before Ashlyn had to fly to Vancouver for Championship Week, but as soon as the Breakers had secured the second seed she called back to see about an earlier appointment.

“Wow” Ashlyn’s eyes were wide as she greeted her wife and daughter and moved to the side of the minivan to get the dogs out of it. “Everything go ok?” she asked, honestly afraid of the answer.

“Does it look like everything went ok?” Ali answered shortly and rolled her eyes while shaking her head.

“We tried out the new make-up and costumes today at rehearsal” Josie enthused as she hopped out of the minivan onto the curb.

“I can see that” Ashlyn grinned at the excited girl with the garishly bright red cheeks and nose.

“Hey, how come she gets to wear a costume?” Lily whined when the three other kids finally ambled over to the curb to hug Ali hello.

Ashlyn stifled a giggle and ducked her head to attach the leashes to the dogs before letting them join the rest of the family on the curb a few blocks down from the photography studio.

“Because by the time I got the make-up off of one of her cheeks it was so red anyway that it looked like she still had it on” Ali explained as she inspected the three children she hadn’t seen since that morning. “So Josie’s going to be one of her characters from the play for the picture instead.”

Ali tried to answer the question definitively enough to quell any other complaints from the other kids but keep the whole thing light and fun enough so Josie didn’t get upset about being the only one in costume. The girl had a mini breakdown at the big old house when Ali realized scrubbing off the make-up wasn’t going to make her daughter’s face look any more normal or less-red than the red make-up did. It took the brunette a few minutes of fast thinking to solve the problem the best, and only, way possible – other than cancelling the appointment.

“So...are you a Who or are you a jungle creature?” Ashlyn asked, smiling broadly at the redhead who very definitely looked like a Who.
There were two big groups of extras or chorus members in the play – the Whos and the jungle creatures and they didn’t look anything alike. The playful joke didn’t go over very well with Josie whose face fell instantly as her bottom lip started to quiver.

“She doesn’t look like a jungle creature Mama” Lily laughed.

“Yeah, she doesn’t even have a tail!” Dodge added with his own chuckle.

“Are you kidding me right now?” Ali gritted out between clenched teeth as she turned away from the kids and fixed her wife with a glare.

“I’m only kidding Jojo” Ashlyn quickly moved to reassure the girl. “Aw, I didn’t mean to make you upset honey” she squatted down in front of her daughter as Ali tried to keep the dogs away from them both. “You look awesome” the keeper grinned. “I’m jealous. I wish I was dressed like a Who for the picture too.”

Ali took the dogs’ leashes from her wife and moved a few steps away from the minivan as the blonde built up Josie’s confidence again. The brunette started walking up the block, instructing the kids to follow and telling them that Mama and Josie would catch up with them. She was pleased to see that they all had the correct outfits on and knew the afternoon had probably been a struggle for Ashlyn too. They weren’t matching outfits or anything, but they were all appropriately Christmasy. Drew had on dark jeans and a red sweater with a green and white plaid collared shirt underneath it. He had balked at the bowtie and neither mother was in the mood to fight with him about it. Especially not with a Who making the family picture this time. Dodge was dressed similarly, except his pants were tan and instead of a sweater he wore a red-striped, long-sleeved button-down shirt, untucked, with a green vest over it. Lily had a soft pink cotton skirt on over white tights and a long-sleeved white t-shirt that said ‘I Believe in Santa’ all over the front of it. Her hair was pulled back with a loose braid of just the top of her hair, falling back against the rest of her long hair down her back.

Ali knew her wife had gone through her own version of hell getting them all dressed and fed before the appointment. None of this was easy. But somehow, it was all still alright. They were all there together and really, nothing else mattered. She could feel her shoulders start to drop a little and the pounding in her head starting to subside.

“Dodge, what are you wearing on your feet, you big goofball?” Ali chuckled when she finally registered the enormous snow boots that covered most of the lower part of his legs.

“I don’t know” he shrugged and grinned up at her adorably. “They felt like Christmas.”

The logic was too pure to argue with.

“ Aren’t your feet really hot?” Ali asked as they all kept walking. It hadn’t even been really cold yet that Fall and the temperature was in the low-60s that evening now that the sun was starting to go down.

“Yeah, they’re all sweaty too” he jumped up in the air and landed a foot in front of where he had taken off.

Thirty minutes later as they all tried to hold their poses, it was all the brunette could do to keep from laughing out loud at the motley crew that was her family. She was standing on one side of the group, dressed beautifully in a black skirt with a bright red, Christmas blouse that had a small tasteful pattern of dark green holly leaves covering it. Her hair was down and even though she was tired and still a little stressed from getting everybody there, she looked happy and content. Ashlyn stood on the other side of the group with an impish smile on her beautiful face. She wore dark jeans and her favorite new Christmas sweater which was dark green with a big picture of the leg
lamp from ‘A Christmas Story’ covering the front of it. She had the sleeves pushed up so her forearm tattoos were exposed and she had Josie the Who right in front of her, beaming into the camera. Dodge and Drew were standing in between their two moms and Lily was kneeling on the floor in front of them, a dog laying on either side of her. Ashlyn and Ali shared a brief, loving smile and then grinned into the camera as the photographer snapped away.

When they got back home two hours later, after ice cream in the same shop Ali and Ashlyn had been visiting together since 2016, they let the kids stay up late and run around for a little bit. They had so much sugar in them that they wouldn’t be able to go to sleep yet anyway. Ali was bent over, raiding the fridge for leftovers because she still hadn’t eaten dinner yet and the ice cream sundae she’d eaten didn’t feel great in her empty stomach.

“I knew I should have just brought Drew’s leftovers for you” Ashlyn commented as she walked behind her wife and gently patted her butt. “Sorry baby.”

“What did he have?” she glanced over her shoulder at her wife who had changed out of her leg lamp sweater and into a soft, lightweight, TWLOHA ‘LOVE’ sweatshirt. “Chicken tenders?”

“Yes” Ashlyn crossed her arms and leaned against the counter right next to the fridge and her hungry wife. “He ate three of them but that was it. We’ve gotta figure out what’s the matter with his stomach. I think there’s something wrong.”

“You mean besides him just not liking to eat very much?” the brunette stood up with a cheese stick in one hand and a slice of cold cheese pizza in the other.

“Yeah” Ashlyn took the pizza out of her hand and crossed the kitchen to the oven where she put the slice onto a piece of aluminum foil and into the oven to heat it up. She knew her girl didn’t like cold pizza. “I think it’s time to talk to Patty about it again. That’s all.”

Ali unwrapped the cheese stick and began pulling strips of the string cheese off and dropping them into her mouth. She moved to the oven and leaned on the counter on the other side of it, facing her wife as they talked. They were both quiet and thoughtful for a minute before the brunette spoke between mouthfuls of string cheese.

“Thanks for being awesome tonight. I know it was hard” she smiled softly at her keeper.

“I don’t know what was harder, brushing Lily’s hair or dealing with Miss Thing and her make-up and costume” Ashlyn raised both eyebrows and chuckled. “Why do we have so many kids again?” she grinned and stepped forward to kiss Ali on the forehead, her mouth busy chewing.

“That’s your fault” the brunette laughed and quirked her eyebrow at the keeper. “We had two, a perfect set even” she poked her wife in the chest as Ashlyn stepped back again. “But no...somebody gorgeous and amazing wanted to have one of the most miraculous experiences in the world” she rolled her eyes and giggled.

“Ok, ok, so that one’s on me” Ashlyn laughed and reached out to hold her wife’s free hand. “But look at what we would have missed...”

“You’re the one who asked why we had so many kids, not me” Ali countered. “I think I might be losing my mind, or maybe I’m just starting to get desensitized to it finally” she chuckled. “But as I was standing there in the photography studio, in the middle of the chaos, I was so happy.”

“I know” Ashlyn grinned and her dimple appeared as she swung Ali’s hand back and forth between them. “I saw you. You looked...almost peaceful. I should have asked you how much wine you’d
had before you got there” she teased.

“What? I’m high on life, babe. That and our crazy, wonderful kids” the brunette laughed and moved closer to her wife, pressing a soft kiss to her lips.

They stood there together for another minute, waiting for the oven to warm up the slice of pizza. They were both surprised that the kids sounded like they were all playing nicely down in the playroom – for now anyway.

“Do you remember when the twins were, like, a year and a half and I was supposed to get them dressed and ready to go for pictures...” Ashlyn began with another big grin.

“You mean the time I came home with Drew and Josie and found you in tears because Dodge had pulled the lamp off the end table in the family room and it had somehow landed right on top of Lily’s head...” Ali took over the story with her own enormous, nose-crinkling smile.

“We’re lucky I didn’t completely black out from horror and panic” the keeper chuckled. “I felt so bad. Poor baby girl” she shook her head and frowned at the memory. “I never thought that burn was going to go away.”

The lamp had landed in an upright position with Lily’s head inside the lampshade. The hot lightbulb had been pressed against her forehead for the thirty seconds it had taken Ashlyn to lift it off of her. The keeper had been left hyperventilating herself while she tried to soothe the screaming baby girl with the painful looking burn right in the middle of her forehead.

“It looked so huge to us” Ali reached up with her now free other hand and put it behind Ashlyn’s neck with a warm smile. “But you can barely see it in the picture. And she was fine a few hours later.”

“God, that was horrible” the keeper closed her eyes. “I always compare whatever crap the kids get themselves, or us, into when we have to be somewhere, to that day when I let one kid burn the other kid an hour before family pictures.”

“Did I ever tell you that Maddox did that too?”

“What? No way! What are the chances?” Ashlyn laughed and opened her eyes again. “Who did he get?”

“It was James...”

“Of course it was, any other kid would probably have moved out of the way of their aggressive little brother” the blonde laughed again. “Not chill James though.”

“Well the same exact thing happened. Maddox pulled on the cord for the lamp and it fell off the table and landed on James’ head. But this time the lightbulb didn’t get near his face because his head was too big to fit very far under the lampshade.”

“That would do it” Ashlyn nodded. “If only Lily’s head had been twice as big as it was back then...”

“It was hard to tell who was more upset, you or Lily” Ali laughed and gave her wife a big hug, getting up on her tiptoes and squeezing her tightly. “Turns out it was you.”

“I guess we should consider every family picture day that doesn’t include one of the kids with a surface burn on their forehead a huge success” the keeper sighed and chuckled. “It’s kind of nice to
have the bar set so low sometimes.”

“I’m not sure we didn’t just lower it tonight with our little visiting Who in the picture” Ali giggled and rested her forehead on the blonde’s shoulder. “I’m so glad I think it’s funny now” she lifted her head up and shook it slowly as she leaned back and met her wife’s eyes. “It was touch and go there for a while.”

“I can’t even imagine” Ashlyn chuckled and made an eek face. “The princess and the queen making the clown make-up work in the family picture. That’s definitely one I didn’t see coming.”

“Lucky for us our little princess likes to be the center of attention. Can you imagine if that had been Drew?”

“Oh God, he would have totally flipped out and refused to even get in the car” Ashlyn’s eyebrows were up near her hairline at the thought of their shy son standing out like that in the family picture.

“I think he might have melted into an actual puddle or something” Ali laughed again. “Aw, poor shy guy” she frowned as she thought about Drew’s almost debilitating, but occasional, shyness. “I hope he grows out of it soon. I don’t want him to miss anything fun because of it.”

“I don’t think it’s that bad” Ashlyn let her wife go so she could take the pizza slice out of the oven. “He’s fine with his friends and at school…”

“He freaked out about that book report last month though, Ash. I mean there’s shy like not jumping up on the bar and dancing in front of a room full of people and then there’s shy like can’t function normally in the real world” Ali worried as she dropped the hot pizza on the plate her wife had set on the counter for her. “Ow, shit, that’s hot.”

“I know you’re hungry honey, but you’re scaring me if you’re surprised the pizza you just took out of the hot oven is hot” the blonde teased and was rewarded with an eye-roll from her wife.

“Ha ha, very funny” she sassed back as she blew on the pizza, desperate to have a bite.

“Who knows” Ashlyn sighed as she thought about Drew again. “Maybe his shyness and his not eating are related?”

“What? Do you really think so?”

“I have no clue Al, but people get ulcers” she made a face at her wife who had suffered with ulcers for a period of time when she was younger and not careful about taking advil on an empty stomach.

“Well, sure, but my ulcers were because I was dumb, not because I was shy” she took a tentative bite of pizza and was relieved it wasn’t too hot to eat.

“I don’t know much about any of it. But people get ulcers from stress too, right?” Ashlyn shrugged. “But I think it’s time we figure it out. It’s not normal for him to have such a hard time eating.”

“You’re right” the brunette nodded with her mouth full. “I’ll make an appointment with Patty. We’ll start there.”

“Mommy!!” Lily ran into the kitchen in tears with Dodge close behind her. “He hit me” she sobbed and stuck her arm out where both moms could clearly see a red mark.

Ashlyn wanted to let her wife eat her slice of pizza so she got on her knees and pulled the girl into a
hug. She kissed the boo boo gently and rubbed her back to get her to calm down.

“She hit me first!” Dodge offered in his own defense, his defiant little face moving from one mom to the other.

“Yeah, but he...he...” Lily stammered as she turned to look at her brother.

Both women knew very well that Lily probably had instigated whatever had gone on down there. She used to be able to fool them, but once they had figured out her sneaky m.o. they understood the dynamic among all the kids a lot better. But they also knew that Dodge probably hit her ten times as hard as she had hit him, which was something they had been trying to work on with him too.

“You know what?” Ashlyn spoke to both children sharply. “I don’t want to hear it from either one of you. Lily, I don’t know how many times you’re going to do this before you realize that this result” she pointed at her sore arm, “is the only way it ever ends. If you hit people or poke them or whatever, they’re going to hit you back. So if you don’t want Dodge to hit you then maybe you should think about not starting things with him in the first place.”

The little girl opened her mouth to protest but closed it, knowing her mama was right and not about to be fooled that night. She leaned into Ashlyn as her whimpers began to die down. Dodge grinned from ear to ear, feeling vindicated.

“And you can just wipe that smile right off your face young man” Ashlyn continued, just as sharply. “Where’s the mark she left on you?”

Dodge looked down at his own arm and saw nothing. He lifted his head up, confused.

“That’s right, there’s not one there is there?” she quirked her eyebrow at him. “You shouldn’t be hitting at all, either of you, and I don’t know why we still have to have this same conversation all the time. But there’s absolutely no reason you need to hit your sister so hard that you leave a mark on her arm. Just because you’re strong doesn’t mean you have to use all of your strength all of the time. You’d better learn that lesson fast, son. That’s nothing but mean, Dodge, and we don’t tolerate mean in this family.”

Ali finished her piece of pizza as she watched the family drama unfold at her feet. She loved Ashlyn all day every day, but at times like this, when things were hard and her keeper did the heavy lifting, she loved her even more.

It was difficult for the brunette to remember how challenging it had been for Ashlyn to get used to being the bad guy and disciplining the kids appropriately and consistently. It seemed like it was a lifetime ago that she had dealt with little Meg and her temper tantrum by grounding her and keeping her home from the beach the very next day. Ali had never seen her wife look more forlorn than when she came out of Meg’s room that night. But the blonde had learned the hard way that you had to have discipline with kids. Even if you were super cool parents who let their kids have more fun than most other parents, you still had to have rules and consequences. Ali felt like the luckiest woman in the world for about the tenth time just since 6pm that evening. She simply couldn’t ask for or hope for a better partner to be doing this parenthood thing with. Neither of them were perfect or infallible, but together, as with so many other things in their life, they could do just about anything. Even the family Christmas picture.

Chapter End Notes

Can't believe the Christen Press news tonight. Eeeek!!!
The Boston Breakers lost their home playoff game the next day to the surprising Atlanta Fever. Atlanta had a once in a lifetime scoring machine who played like a combination of Marta and Sam Kerr with a hint of Christen Press thrown in for good measure. Ruby Kirkland was the next big thing in women’s soccer and she won the golden boot award that season as well as rookie of the year. She sliced through Boston’s backline like it wasn’t even there and nearly scored a hat trick. She had to settle for a brace and two assists in her very first playoff game in the NWSL. Ruby was all anybody could talk about after the match, and rightfully so. A star had been born that day and had the stats from the season to support her claim to greatness.

“Well folks, you don’t see that every day” Ashlyn smiled into the camera as she did her sideline report after the game. “We knew she was good, but she showed us all how great she can be today. Remember when I said how bright the future of the USWNT was after the Olympics this summer? Well, this incredible player wasn’t even on that team. Once she gets called up things will look even brighter.”

A week later, the first Saturday of Championship Week, Boston defeated the LA Strikers to secure a third-place finish for the season. Third out of twenty wasn’t too shabby, but nobody was happy with it. The Breakers were embarrassed by their loss to Atlanta in their home stadium. There had been a time when the team was invincible at home and maybe that had been part of the problem. Maybe they were too cocky and hadn’t given the Fever the appropriate respect. As so often happened with bitter defeats like that, the Breakers vowed to learn from their mistake and let the loss fuel their fire for next season.

Vancouver was the host city this year and Ashlyn and the other Knight-Harris agents spent their time taking care of clients and attending workshops and seminars and spreading the good name of the company far and wide. The Championship game would be played the following Saturday when #1 ranked Houston tried to find a way to contain Ruby Kirkland and the rest of #3 ranked Atlanta. As much as Ali had tried to make the trip this year, after promising herself the year before, she just couldn’t do it. She coached three soccer teams in addition to the other obligations, like working full-time and taking care of four kids with growing social calendars and increasingly challenging homework. She had to settle for flying across the country Thursday morning and spending the final four days of the NWSL’s biggest week with her wife and K-H colleagues. Naturally, the brunette had made sure to be there for most of her wife’s 43rd birthday, Thursday October 19th. It wasn’t a surprise this time but Ashlyn was still excited to see her and spend a grown-up weekend together, even though they were both working part of every day. Ashlyn had been to Vancouver several times over the years but it was only Ali’s third visit. Her previous two trips were short and focused solely on meeting with clients that K-H was trying hard to sign contracts with. The keeper made plans to take her wife on one of her favorite hikes in Stanley Park and then to the VanDeusen Botanical Garden, and then to the Vancouver Aquarium Marine Science Centre. She would let Ali choose between the three Art Museums, the Science World museum, and the Museum of
Anthropology to finish out their four days together.

Unfortunately, the brunette wasn’t feeling well when she landed around midday on Thursday. She had gotten her period during the flight and was having a medium-strong bout of cramps. She took her advil and willed herself to feel better during the last two hours in the air. Ashlyn picked her up at the airport and they enjoyed a late lunch, celebrating with a yummy shared dessert that Ali had the waiter put a candle in for her keeper’s birthday. Ashlyn had to go to a broadcast meeting for a couple of hours that afternoon but they would reconnect just before their dinner plans.

“Are you sure you’re ok baby?” Ashlyn pulled back from the kiss they shared in the backseat of the cab as it sat at the curb of the hotel after lunch.

“Yeah, just jetlag” Ali gave her the best smile she could muster and nuzzled into her keeper’s hand as it cupped her cheek. “I’ll be fine. I might take a little nap. Dodge was up at 6am again...”

“Ugh, I thought we were good with the 6:30 or 6:45am” Ashlyn groaned in sympathy. “He slept til then for almost two weeks.”

“Yeah, maybe it was a growth spurt or something and he needed the extra sleep” Ali shrugged. “But listen birthday girl...” she leaned forward and gave Ashlyn a soft but meaningful kiss. “You do your job and be awesome and then we’ll celebrate tonight” she flirted in her sultriest voice, happy the cab driver was standing outside waiting to open the door for her and not listening to their conversation.

“Ooooh, does that mean we’re gonna get freaky in the club again tonight?” Ashlyn wagged her eyebrows and grinned.

Ali chuckled, low in her throat, and caressed her wife’s beautiful face as their eyes met.

“Maybe...” she winked.

But the brunette’s cramps stayed with her all afternoon, even through her fitful nap. She kept taking advil as often as possible, careful to eat something first and not take the next dose too soon. She even took a hot bath because sometimes that helped her feel better when she was suffering through a tough day of menstrual cramps. She was determined to go out and celebrate her beloved wife with the assorted group of former teammates, broadcast colleagues and friends that were in town that evening. The plan was to enjoy a nice group dinner then go out somewhere to dance and drink and do adult things that grown-up people without children did on their birthdays. Ali made it through dinner without too much trouble. She was a little quieter than normal but Ashlyn chalked it up to her being a little shy on her first night with the gang, most of whom she didn’t know nearly as well as Ashlyn did. The brunette summoned all her strength and put on a brave face at the club they hung out in after dinner. Again, she was quiet but she looked happy enough. It wasn’t until the keeper realized her wife hadn’t once ventured out to the dance floor that she started to suspect something was wrong. When she slid into the booth to sit next to Ali, Ashlyn was alarmed to find her palms sweaty and her skin clammy. She was close enough now to see that the happy looking smile was masking the subtle creases of pain around her eyes.

“Al, what’s the matter?” she asked in an urgent, but hushed, voice with her face right up close to the brunette’s.

“I’m ok, but I think I’m going to head back to the room” she tried to keep the smile on her face as she apologized, but it fell little by little as she spoke. “I’m so sorry babe. But I’ll just hop in a cab and you stay here with everybody, ok?”
“No way” she shook her head and gave Ali a concerned frown. “I’m calling an Uber right now” she pulled her hand away from the brunette’s to quickly type into her phone. “7 minutes” she lifted her eyes to study her wife’s face. “Is it your period?” she asked as she sat very still, knowing that any movement on the seat they shared might cause her more pain.

“Yeah” Ali nodded and winced a little, relieved to have the truth out there but full of regret about ruining her sweet wife’s birthday night out. “Please, honey, just stay here. I’ll feel so much worse if you come back with me and miss out on all your fun. Please?” she entreated.

Ashlyn knew she was being sincere and she also knew that she would do the same thing in Ali’s place. But there was no way she was letting the brunette go back to the hotel by herself.

“Sweetheart” she cocked her head adorably as she took in the pathetic face in front of her. “I know you feel bad about cutting the night short, but I promise you, I’d much rather be with you tonight...”

“But I’m just going to curl up and be miserable” Ali tried again. “You should just stay here and have fun. It’s your birthday honey, I don’t want you to come and do nothing with boring old decrepit me.”

“That’s right” Ashlyn quirked an eyebrow at her beautiful but broken brunette. “It is my birthday so I get to do whatever I want. And I want to go back to the room with you and take care of you and watch you curl up” she squeezed Ali’s hand softly, afraid of causing her pain. “Maybe I’ll even read to you...” she stopped and grinned when she saw a tiny smile grace Ali’s drawn face. “But, now listen, that’ll depend on how much you fight me on this” she cautioned. “If you’re good, then we’ll see...” she chuckled and pressed the gentlest kiss into Ali’s cheek.

And that was what they had done. It was 9:30pm by the time they got back to their hotel room and the keeper had helped her wife change into the comfy pajamas she had brought. Ali’s periods were still a little bit erratic, she had never been able to pinpoint exactly which day it would fall on but could usually guess within a four or five day range. So she had come prepared, just in case. Ali crawled into bed and curled up in the fetal position, praying for the pain to subside. Ashlyn pulled the armchair over and sat as close as possible while she read a couple of chapters of Ali’s book out loud to her. The keeper brought her more advil at 11pm and was relieved to see her looking a little bit better. And Ali did feel a bit better. She insisted on Ashlyn getting into bed with her, as long as she didn’t touch her, and they both fell asleep pretty quickly.

It was almost 3am when the keeper sat up slowly in the big, queen-sized bed. The room was dark except for a sliver of light coming through the bottom of the closed bathroom door. She felt the other side of the bed, where her wife should be fast asleep, but it was cold to the touch. Ashlyn grabbed a bottle of water from her nightstand and crossed the room quickly, pushing her glasses onto her face as she went.

“Oh, honey” she gasped when she opened the bathroom door and found Ali curled up on the floor, most of her compact form on the bathmat in the middle of the small room.

Ali was on her right side, facing away from the door so Ashlyn had to step to the other side of her so she could see her face and find out what she could do to help. It was unnerving to see the brunette’s body shivering against the cold of the night and the tile floor and whatever battle was going on inside her beleaguered body.

“What can I do sweetheart?” Ashlyn asked soothingly as she knelt next to her wife and leaned down near her face, careful not to touch her anywhere. “My poor baby...what do you need?”
Ali opened her eyes and tears streamed down her face towards the floor. She had both hands up under her chin in fists as she shivered and wept. The brunette opened her left hand, the one on top of the other, and splayed her fingers out as she looked up sadly at the keeper. Ashlyn knew better than to touch her but it seemed like she wanted her to hold her hand.

“Do you want me to hold your hand honey?” she reached out tentatively and then slid her left hand under the splayed fingers when Ali blinked affirmatively. “Ok Al, you’re gonna be ok. I’ve got you baby” she soothed as the brunette grabbed her hand and squeezed the shit out of it. “Whoa, they’re really bad tonight, huh?” she asked and furrowed her brow, trying to think of something that would help her poor, suffering wife.

“Advil” she whispered faintly and winced, still squeezing her keeper’s hand.

“Ummm...” Ashlyn silently cursed her sleepy brain as she tried to remember when she had last given her the pills. “Yeah, you can have more now” the keeper nodded encouragingly. “It’s been four hours. They’re on your nightstand...let’s get you back to bed. This floor can’t be comfortable.”

Ali’s eyes flew open and filled with fear.

“I know you don’t want to move honey, but you need to. This floor isn’t doing you any favors. You’ll never fall asleep in here” the keeper explained matter-of-factly. “Did you need something in here? Why are you in here anyway?”

Ali blinked at Ashlyn as she got on her feet, ready to stand up once the brunette released her hand.

“Did you have to pee? Or do you need another pad? Let me help you Al and then I’ll get you back into bed.”

“Peed” she breathed out quickly.

“Ok good. So you’re good to get back in bed?”

The brunette blinked yes.

“Alright, here we go baby” she squeezed Ali’s hand and waited for her to open her eyes and look at her again. “It’s gonna suck and I’m really sorry, but you can do it. And then once you’re in bed we’ll do advil and you’ll feel better in no time” she reassured the brunette as she grabbed a towel and tossed it over her own shoulder as she started to pull her wife up off the floor.

It took some doing and Ali cried the whole time, but Ashlyn helped her out of the bathroom and back into bed. The brunette walked as quickly as she could and stayed totally bent over at the waist, letting her wife guide her across the room. The keeper quickly spread out the bath towel underneath her before Ali even noticed what she was doing. Ashlyn helped her sit up to take the pills and told her how sorry she was for the pain. It just about killed the blonde to see her wife like this. Thankfully it didn’t happen very often, maybe two or three times a year, and Ali was good about treating it early. That was when it got really bad – when she tried to push through it instead of just giving up and going to bed for a few hours. Pushing through it is exactly what she had been doing all afternoon and evening today. She curled up on her left side, facing the middle of the bed, and Ashlyn pulled the blankets up above her shoulder because her skin was cool to the touch from being on the tile floor for at least an hour.

“I know these are so bad tonight because you tried to do so much for my birthday, and I love you more than words can say for doing that honey” Ashlyn smiled sweetly at her poor wife from her own side of the bed. Ali had splayed her fingers out again and grabbed the keeper’s hand as soon as
she moved it close enough. That was new. “But if you ever do that again I’m gonna kill you.”

Ali blinked at her but the keeper wasn’t really sure what it was supposed to mean and she didn’t want to ask. What she really wanted to do was wipe the tears off of her wife’s face and move some of the brunette locks away from her neck for her. She knew Ali hated to have her hair stuck to or around her neck while she was sleeping. But Ashlyn knew not to do any of that because it would only cause her more pain. The keeper was sitting up with her back against the headboard while Ali clutched her hand and continued to cry. The fact that she hadn’t been able to stop herself from crying yet was also new. Usually the brunette used her willpower to stop anything that made her body hurt more at times like this. She changed her breathing to up in her lungs, instead of her whole torso, so her diaphragm didn’t move down near her cramps. She steadied her heartbeat and willed herself to be still and calm so she could avoid more pain. But tonight was different and Ashlyn had taken almost as much as she could. After an interminable 15 minutes when Ali couldn’t stop crying or steady her breathing or her heartbeat, Ashlyn decided it was time to act.

“All, let me help you. This is crazy sweetheart. I don’t think I’ve ever seen them this bad...not since that first time.”

The brunette opened her eyes wide and Ashlyn could see the fear there again. They both knew what the blonde meant and as uncomfortable as Ali could be having sex with her period at home, she almost felt panicked at the idea of doing it in a hotel where someone else might have to clean up her mess.

“It’s ok. I put a towel down so you don’t have to worry about anything” Ashlyn tried not to chuckle when Ali’s distraught face became confused too. “I promise, there’s a towel underneath you. And I know it’ll hurt for you to roll over, but think about how much better you’ll feel once you have an orgasm.”

Ashlyn wanted to just go ahead and do it regardless of Ali’s answer, but she patiently waited, without moving a muscle, for the brunette to close her eyes and give the slightest nod. Only then did she start to move off of the bed. Ali had gotten better about having sex during her period over the years. She still didn’t love it but sometimes their menstrual cycles just got in the way. The two busy moms didn’t always get a lot of quality time alone together so when the stars finally aligned and they found or made time to have sex, the last thing either of them wanted was for their periods to thwart their plans. Ashlyn’s wasn’t usually the problem because her period had always been one of those light and easy 3-day periods that every woman dreamt of having. But Ali’s had always been longer and more frequent and a bit more unpredictable as well. Sometimes she got really horny right before her period started and it lasted a day or two into it, in which case she relented and let Ashlyn have sex with her anyway. They had talked about it several times, with the keeper always reassuring her wife that she couldn’t care less that she was bleeding or not. Truthfully, she would always prefer it when neither of them had their periods, but she would never admit that to Ali. As harmless and obvious as the statement was, she knew the brunette would internalize it and feel self-conscious about it again. When they had the big huge shower with the double shower heads it had been an easy call to make to have sex in there, just as they had the very first time Ali let Ashlyn help her through her horrible period pain. But since they swapped that out for the big soaking tub they had either had sex in the tub or else in the bed with an old towel in place. Ali didn’t like the idea of both of them sloshing around in a tub with even the tiniest amount of her menstrual blood so they almost always used the bed.

Ashlyn had even gotten her wife a special gift a couple of Christmases ago that came in very handy for those occasions. The ‘Throws of Passion’ pleasure blanket was a beautiful, deep purple, ultra-soft Naked Fleece especially designed for messy sexy times. It was developed to help the squirters of the world have a dry place to fall asleep after enjoying themselves with their partners, but it
came in handy for any type of mess whether it was massage oils, lubes, honey dust, or any other bodily secretion. It came in a few sizes from small which was the size of an average bath towel, all the way up to extra-large which would completely cover a king-sized bed. The bigger sizes were great so you didn’t have to worry about staying on the blanket while you were preoccupied with other things, but the smaller sizes were easier to travel with and pack. The Naked Fleece was a revolutionary new material and it had a Stay-Dri barrier in the inner layer between the two sides of insanely soft micro-fleece that kept your sheets or your couch or your whatever dry. Toss it aside when you were done and throw it into the washing machine the next morning and you were good to go for the next time. You could even put it in the dryer without worrying about it disintegrating which both Ali and Ashlyn had been pleasantly surprised by.

Ashlyn had started with the medium size which was a little bit bigger than the largest bath sheet towel you’ve ever used. It covered about half of their bed and was more than adequate for their needs, which were mainly to keep their sheets clean when they had sex during one of their periods. But the keeper could not have been happier when her wife ordered the large size after about a year of gradually increasing their usage to most nights when they took the time to grab it out of the closet. The large one almost covered their entire queen-sized bed and allowed them to completely forget about any of their worry. Let’s face it, if you’re doing it right, things get wet and sloppy and messy and nobody likes to curl up with a giant wetspot underneath them and try to go to sleep. Nobody. Ali and Ashlyn made each other very very wet and always had. As their lives and their laundry loads got busier and more hectic, they had started using an older bath towel before they got busy with their sexy times. It worked fine but it sure didn’t feel nearly as soft and sexy as the sex blanket, as Ashlyn liked to call it. So they rotated through their two sex blankets and used them when they could. Sometimes, if they were already asleep in bed for example, they didn’t bother to get up and get it out of the closet. As with most things between the two soulmates, they were flexible and adaptable and went with the spontaneous when those moments presented themselves. There was a needle-scratching across the record halt to proceedings to go and retrieve the sex blanket or any of their toys for that matter. Sometimes one thing led to another in bed and neither of them left it for longer than it took to lock both bedroom doors and that ten seconds apart felt impossibly long. The sex blanket stayed in the closet those times.

But they didn’t have the sex blanket with them that night in the hotel in Vancouver so Ashlyn had improvised. She didn’t really want to think about what they would do with the towel when they were done, but she didn’t care about anything other than easing her wife’s pain. And by Ali agreeing, she wordlessly told her keeper that she was so desperate for relief that she didn’t care about it either. They could worry about that in the morning. Ashlyn gingerly got off the bed and then dragged the armchair from Ali’s side, where she had left it earlier, over to her side. She quickly took her sleep shorts and t-shirt off as she glanced at the bed again. Ali’s eyes were screwed shut and she was still crying but not quite as much. The keeper knew her wife was using whatever strength she had left to calm her body down, inside and out, and try to get herself as still and steady as possible. Sometimes, when they were at home, Ashlyn would use some lube to make things more comfortable for her wife. Just because she was bleeding didn’t mean her vagina was going to welcome Ashlyn’s fingers with open arms. Sometimes it wasn’t easy for the keeper to even put one finger inside when Ali was in this condition. But they didn’t have lube, at least Ashlyn didn’t think they had lube and she wasn’t going to waste time trying to ask her wife or trying to search her suitcase for it on her own. So the keeper did the next best thing and tried to get her wife ready for her with a little show of her own. They were both still complete horndogs for each other after watching the other masturbate – that had never changed and they both hoped it never would. It took Ashlyn a minute to get her own mind right and then her body into position, slouched down in the chair with her legs spread out wide. She kept both feet on the floor, catching herself at the last second before she rested them on the edge of the bed. That would have been the worst and might have scuttled the whole mission right there. As much as she wanted to put her feet
up there so her wife could see everything better, the movement while she got herself off would have killed her beautiful brunette. When Ashlyn was in position and ready, and when she could feel her own juices starting to flow a little bit, she spoke sultry words to her wife.

“Hey baby, do you wanna watch me?” she purred and moaned lightly as she started to move her fingers around her own outer lips. “Mmmmmmm...I love when your fingers tease me like this...your tongue is even better, but your fingers feel sooooo good. Mmmmmmmmm...”

The brunette’s eyes opened quickly and locked onto her sexy keeper, directly in front of her and looking gorgeous as ever in her birthday suit. The only thing she wore was her glasses so she could watch Ali’s face from her place in the chair. They locked eyes and Ashlyn saw surprise fighting for room there among the pain and exhaustion. The surprise was quickly replaced by the faintest bit of desire. The blonde couldn’t imagine what it felt like or how hard it must be to try and let your body get turned on while it was in such distress. Ali had explained to her once that it was her mind that needed to be in control during these times. If she could get her head right then her body would follow, at least to a certain, limited degree.

“There she is” Ashlyn smirked and moaned again, closing her eyes for a second as she brought her fingers up and traced a wide circle around her own clit. “There’s my sexy girl” she opened her eyes to see that Ali’s were down between her legs. “You just lie there and watch me come for you...beautiful” the words dripped from her lips in a slow, steady, sultry rhythm. “Don’t move. Don’t do anything but watch me...mmmmmm...” she slid her fingers lower and spread her dampening folds out for her wife’s viewing pleasure. “I’m gonna come so hard for you, baby.”

The room was still dark, but there was a narrow swath of light coming from the bathroom door which was halfway open. It bathed her naked body in a somewhat severe light, but it had been the best she could do without turning on the nightstand light which would have been much too bright for both of them. Everything was quiet except for the intermittent heating and cooling system that kicked in for a few minutes to adjust the temperature in the room. That was all background noise though. All Ashlyn could hear was the slow and steady breathing coming from her wife’s open mouth and the juicy noises coming from between her own legs. The keeper was into it now, loving the way her wife’s eyes had locked onto her body, flitting occasionally up to Ashlyn’s own dark eyes. She wasn’t about to draw this out though, not when Ali was still in so much pain. The blonde scooted even lower in the chair so her vulva and ass were hanging off the edge of it by an inch or two. She lifted her right leg up and hooked it as best she could over the arm of the chair, turning her body just a bit and opening herself up even more for Ali’s hungry eyes to take in. She was remarkably uncomfortable and barely had room to move her right arm the way she wanted to, but too fucking bad. This wasn’t about her. This was for her beautiful brunette and nothing else.

“Oh God” she gasped out as she pushed the two middle fingers of her left hand inside her wet pussy. She moaned louder as they continued all the way in up to her knuckles. Ashlyn used her right hand to stimulate the rest of her body, teasing her own skin with featherlight touches and causing goosebumps to appear after another minute. She closed her eyes as she used her fingertips to play with her breasts and bring her nipples to stiff points, all the while thrusting slowly and steadily with her left hand between her legs. Ashlyn started to pant as she kept bringing herself closer and closer to the edge. When she felt a gush of wetness between her pussy lips she dragged her right hand down her body and circled her now aching clit.

“Oh fuck yeah, I’m so wet for you Al...so fucking wet” she husked out, eyes still closed as she started rubbing her clit just the way she needed. “Fuck, you get me so turned on baby. Mmmmmmm...unnnnhhhhh...”
It only took a few more minutes of steady rubbing and increased pumping before Ashlyn was ready to explode. She had kept her eyes closed the whole time, trying to imagine a healthy, sexy Ali Krieger on the bed waiting for her. But now that she was ready, she wanted to watch her wife’s face – still somehow beautiful even though it was pinched in pain.

“Are you watching me, sexy?” she drawled as she opened her eyes. “I’m gonna come Al...oh God, I’m gonna come...”

As soon as Ashlyn saw her wife’s eyes, still full of hurt but also a little bit darker and hungrier than when they had started this routine, she felt a strong twitch inside her core and she was gone.

“Oh God...oh fuck...yes baby, yes!!!!!” she shouted as the orgasm took over.

Ashlyn sat up and slammed her eyes shut as she came, even though she had wanted to watch her wife’s eyes in that moment. It was a medium-sized orgasm but she played it up a bit for no other reason than to make sure Ali got as wet as possible. That was the whole goal for this stop along the journey to hopeful pain-relief.

“I love you” the keeper panted out, opening her eyes and blinking at her wife as she came down from her high. “I don’t know how the hell you do that” she chuckled breathlessly, marveling at the effect Ali had on her body even in the worst of situations. “But thank God you do.”

She smirked again and, for extra insurance, made a slow show out of licking her own fingers clean. She got nervous after a minute when Ali closed her eyes and winced but then she realized the brunette was getting herself into position, rolling over onto her back near her side of the bed. The keeper took a second and wondered why Ali always slept on Ashlyn’s side of the bed in times like these. She knew at home it was because Ashlyn’s side of the bed was closer to the bathroom, and maybe that’s all it was here too, just a habit of taking that side of the bed when she was suffering killer cramps.

“Are you ready, my sexy queen?” Ashlyn asked in her husky voice as she moved around the bed to Ali’s side and pulled the covers down to the foot of the bed.

The keeper quickly helped her wife pull her pajama pants and panties down and off of her legs, leaving the overnight pad in place and setting the pile of clothes on the floor next to the bed. The change in air temperature made Ali’s skin burst into goosebumps and Ashlyn wanted nothing more than to lie down on top of her and warm her up. But that was definitely not going to happen. The blonde was standing next to the bed, right next to her wife, and she bent over and pressed a warm kiss to her dry lips.

“I love you so much Al” she whispered, lips still touching each other and eyes still closed. “Let’s try and make you feel better, ok?”

Ali nodded and gave her keeper a weak, but sincere smile. The taste of Ashlyn’s juices from her lips had sent a jolt, however muted, to her center. She held Ashlyn’s left hand with her own right hand, right there at the edge of the bed. The blonde smiled down and began tentatively scratching at her wife’s mound with her right hand, trying not to put any pressure on any soft part of Ali’s abdomen. Ali winced again as she spread her legs out and squeezed her wife’s hand hard again. Ashlyn knew there was no time to waste. There wasn’t anything romantic about this. The sexy talk was just a means to an end and they both knew it. Ashlyn’s orgasm had been nice and hopefully Ali’s would be ok but that was all they hoped for. They had found that it worked better if Ashlyn didn’t get on the bed at all. Instead, she stood next to it and appreciated the height of their bed at home which made it easier to bend over the brunette without killing her back. But even tonight, leaning over the lower hotel bed, Ashlyn wasn’t going to complain about it. She wasn’t going to be
standing there for very long anyway. Ali kept her right leg out straight and bent her left knee up to give her keeper some room to work and the anxious look on her face told Ashlyn to get moving.

“Just try and relax honey” Ashlyn soothed as she moved her fingers lower, through the neatly trimmed curls that were tangled with matted blood.

The keeper lightly moved past the tangles and pressed her fingertip into the warm, wet opening that was her target. She kept her face pointed towards Ali’s and tried not to cringe as the brunette squeezed her left hand hard again. Ali took one last look at her wife’s loving face and then closed her eyes so she could concentrate. She brought her left hand down between her own legs, tilting her hips just slightly to the left as she started to move her fingers towards her own clит. The brunette grimaced and squeezed her eyes shut as she felt the tangles and worked her way through them. Ashlyn watched it all with care and concern as she slowly pushed one long finger inside her wife’s hot center. Ali exhaled and nodded slightly, letting her keeper know it was ok to get started.

“I love you, baby” Ashlyn offered as she continued to watch her favorite face in the world. This was probably her least favorite version of that face though and she frowned as she saw it crease under the effort of concentrating and fighting the pain. “I love you” she whispered again.

They worked together, Ali rubbing hard and fast, and Ashlyn pumping very slowly, curving her finger up and aiming for her wife’s g-spot along the way. The thrusting was not what Ali wanted or needed now. It actually hurt and caused her body to move around more than she wanted it to. They had learned this the hard way over the years so now Ashlyn knew that pressure on the g-spot was what worked best for her girl in this situation. The slow pumping was just to get things moving a little bit. It only took a couple of minutes and when Ashlyn saw the brunette’s breathing start to change, she knew it was time to just hit her g-spot. She stopped moving her finger in and out and just pressed it up into the front of Ali’s vagina over and over again, in a repeating come hither motion. She watched the brunette’s forehead creased with concentration and her mouth open slightly so she could breathe.

“Ash!” she gasped out as the small, distorted orgasm moved through her in a slow-motion wave.

The keeper pulled her finger out right away as Ali rolled her body back onto her left side, still shaking and twitching. They let each other’s hand go at the same time and Ali curled into a ball again, facing away from her wife. Ashlyn used her clean hand and started to pull the covers up to keep the brunette warm, but Ali started feeling around underneath her and behind her and seemed agitated.

“You’re good honey, you’re on the towel” Ashlyn soothed as she finished covering her up. “Just relax now. Don’t undo everything we just did. I’ll help you with your pajamas in a few minutes when you’re feeling better.” She couldn’t resist anymore and she placed the lightest kiss she could on Ali’s temple. “I’ll be right back. Just stay still and relax.”

Ashlyn went to the bathroom and washed her hands, bringing a warm, wet washcloth back to the bed with her to wash her wife’s hand as well. Neither woman spoke as Ali lay still, trying to steady her breathing and her body. The keeper went back into the bathroom for a few minutes to pee. She quietly walked over to the chair and put her sleep shorts and t-shirt back on, catching her wife watching her as she finished getting dressed.

“Do you feel any better?” she tilted her head and smiled softly at the brunette. “Did it help at all?”

“Yeah” Ali nodded very slightly and blinked her eyes at her sweet keeper. “Thanks.”

“Good” the blonde’s smiled quadrupled at the news. “Do you want to go to the bathroom or just
“Put your jammies back on and go to sleep?”

“I don’t wanna get up” she barely shook her head. “Where are my pj’s?” she frowned and started to lift her head and look around the bed.

“They’re here, I’ve got them” the keeper moved to Ali’s side of the bed and picked them up off the floor. She pulled the panties out of the pants and waited for her wife to roll over onto her back again so she could help her get her bottom half dressed. “The pad looks new so I don’t think you need a new one, but I can get you one if you want.”

“Just changed it” the brunette shook her head as she rolled over.

Ashlyn nodded and pulled the covers down again. “Gotcha. Ok, here we go, just lift that gorgeous ass of yours up and I’ll get these back on.”

The keeper slid the towel out from under her wife when they were done and then pulled the covers back up while Ali rolled onto her right side, facing the room and her wife.

“Hardly a drop” Ashlyn told a little white lie for her wife’s own good. She folded the towel up and tossed it on the floor towards the bathroom. “So quit worrying about that too.”

The keeper knelt down next to the bed and finally moved Ali’s hair away from her neck for her. She made sure the covers were up where her girl liked them and then gently kissed her lips.

“Thanks babe” Ali’s voice was still clipped and ragged but the fact that she was talking at all was a very good sign.

“Shhhh...” Ashlyn gave her lips another soft kiss. “Don’t talk. I know.”

“Will you spoon me?”

“Nothing would make me happier” she grinned and walked to her own side of the bed for what felt like the 50th time in the last hour. It was all worth it if Ali was finally starting to get some relief.

“Are you sure?”

Ali nodded and even backed up into her keeper’s warm front when she was finally in place. Ashlyn knew not to touch her with any other part of her body, just her front. The weight of her arm, or her hand even, on Ali’s hip could make things start to hurt again. The blonde knew the routine and felt optimistic about her wife’s recovery if she was wanting this much contact so soon.

“You tell me if you need me to move back. Wake me up, I don’t care” Ashlyn instructed, her voice stern for the first time in the past hour. “I do not want you suffering for a second instead of waking me up and having me move. Deal?”

“Deal” Ali answered in her strongest voice yet. It was still soft but it didn’t sound like she was about to die or breathe her last breath. “I love you Ashlyn.”

“I love you too sweetheart” the blonde pressed a kiss into the back of her wife’s head, enjoying the faint scent of her shampoo that had somehow survived about 24 hours by that time.

“That was not the birthday sex I had planned” the small voice sounded again. “But I’m glad you had at least a small orgasm tonight.”

“Small? Were you not paying attention my queen?”

“Small? Were you not paying attention my queen?”
“Oh stop, I know you milked it” Ali tried hard not to laugh. Laughing definitely caused too many things to move around inside her body and invited trouble again. “And I love you even more for doing that. You're just the sweetest person I've ever known Ash. I love you and I appreciate you and I'll make this up to you, I promise.”

Ali’s mind and body were spent and sore and exhausted, but she couldn’t stop thinking about how incredible it felt to have someone she could trust and count on, no matter what. Ashlyn wasn’t perfect and had never claimed to be. But the tenderness she always showed her beautiful brunette had been on full display this night. The care she had taken with every little part of helping Ali try to feel better – from remembering not to touch her at all, even though her first instinct would always be to hold her tight, right up to knowing exactly what to do, and not do, with her finger as she helped her find the unsatisfying but helpful orgasm she needed – that gentle, devoted care would never ever be taken for granted by the brunette. Not even for a second.

“Oh I know you will” the keeper yawned and then sighed as she felt her mind and body both starting to slide back towards sleep. “I'm counting on it.”

Ali smiled to herself as she spoke once more before surrendering to slumber...“Happy Birthday my love.”

Chapter End Notes

1. I've had lots and lots of requests (here, via email, and on the Tumblr blog) for a follow-up scene to Ashlyn helping Ali during one of her bouts of excruciating period cramps. So here it is. I know it's not everybody's cup of tea but it was another nice way to show how their relationship has grown and developed over the past 12 years. There are only a couple of chapters left in this part but I promise I'll give you another smut scene, without the ick factor, before we're finished.

2. I love Christen Press and I support her decision. I personally have a really great feeling about Houston now that Vera Pauw is there and they seem to be taking things a bit more seriously. But who knows?? Maybe Christen knows all sorts of things we'll never know about how things are run there. The front office has been horribly ineffective since the team started and maybe it's still a mess, despite the new coach and the new attitude and the talented players. Selfishly I hope to hell she plays in the NWSL so I can watch her. But that doesn't seem likely at this point. Although you never know. There are two weeks before opening weekend and some sort of last-second ‘trade’ could still be made. The league would be STUPID to let her leave without giving it everything they had to keep her here. Sort of like they did with Mallory Pugh last year. Christen Press is a huge fan-favorite and puts butts in the seats - in addition to being one of the best strikers in the world. Somebody figure it out!!!!
It's happening people! Ali and Ashlyn are starting their own little family with their adorable puppy Logan. Cuteness overload with the three of them!! Ashlyn talking about her two girls? Sweet sweet stuff. :) Ok, so two chapters left after this one (maybe 3 but I'm not sure yet). Thanks again for your patience.

“Oh my goodness” Deb clucked and smiled as she looked at another picture on the iPad in front of her. “What on earth do we call that...guy?”

“He’s a grim reaper Grandma!” Drew explained with an excited smile.

Deb loved to see him still get that look on his face. Sometimes he seemed like a big, grown-up, 9-1/2 year old who was about to turn 16. But other times, like right now, he looked like a sweet little kid who was eagerly sharing one of his new favorite things with someone he loved.

“Oh, well, isn’t that a great costume then!” she enthused with her own big grin.

She spent almost an hour that afternoon looking at pictures from the 4-1/2 months of her grandchildren’s lives that she had missed that summer and fall. It was the Friday before Thanksgiving week and Deb and Mike had flown up to Boston that morning. It was the first big trip for Mike since suffering the heart attack back in June but he had handled it well. Ali had driven them right to their condo in Manchester so he could rest before coming over to the big old house to see the kids when they got home from school that afternoon. It was 5:15pm and Drew and Ashlyn had just walked in the door from his music lesson up in Rockport. The boy had made a bee-line for his Grandma and hadn’t left her knees yet as he showed her certain pictures he wanted her to see. Mike sat in the recliner and smiled at the scene. He loved his wife and she had been so good and patient with him throughout his ordeal. They had butted heads more than a few times when it came to his new diet and exercise routine but he understood that she was just trying to make sure he did what was best, even when he didn’t have the strength or willpower to do it for himself. As he looked at her now, in the middle of the big ‘L’ shaped couch in the front living room with a twin snuggled into each of her sides and Drew practically standing on top of her, Mike felt his heart clench – but in only the best way.

“What’s Ali?” Ashlyn asked as she stepped into the front living room from the mudroom after greeting the dogs and letting them outside.

“She went to pick up Josie from play practice” Mike replied from the recliner. “You just missed her.”

“I thought Pam was dropping her off afterwards?” the keeper frowned in confusion.

“Something happened and she couldn’t get there” he shrugged.

“Pam got stuck at work” Deb rolled her eyes and chuckled at her husband as she explained to her...
daughter-in-law. “One of the brokers gave her the wrong numbers to use for all the paperwork and the clients are supposed to close on the house on Monday but she had to redo everything with the correct numbers this afternoon or none of that was going to happen.”

Pam was Kayla’s mom and she worked part-time at a bank in town handling mortgages and loans. She didn’t get any of the glory that the bankers and brokers did but she sure did most of the work for them. Pam was someone who Ali and Ashlyn could usually count on as part of the mom network from school. It made sense because she was Josie’s best friend’s mom and the girls spent a lot of time together, just like it made sense for Sam and Lisa to help with Drew. It was all very reciprocal and that evening was a perfect example. Pam had been lucky that Ali was working from home that day or there would have been a scramble for Ashlyn, with all three other kids, to get to the school to pick the girls up after Drew’s lesson.

“Wow, that stinks” she shook her head as she listened to Deb’s explanation.

“Aless said we’ll leave for dinner as soon as she gets home with the girls” Grandma finished relaying the instructions.

“I thought we were ordering p-i-z-z-a?” the blonde carefully spelled out.

“Oh, I don’t know about that” Deb glanced at Mike who had turned his attention back to SportsCenter on the tv.

Ashlyn understood instantly that going to a restaurant where Mike had more and healthier choices than just pizza was the motivating factor behind the change in plans.

“Hey, that’s pizza” Dodge sat up and immediately perked up. “Are we having pizza?!” his eyes lit up as his brain registered what his mother had spelled out just to avoid this realization.

“We’ll have to see if the restaurant has some pizza on the menu Dodger...”

“Aww Mama” he whined and slumped back into the couch.

“Nice job with your spelling” she winked at him. “And stop complaining. You don’t even know” she shrugged at him with her hands in the air, palms up. “There might be pizza there and you’re just getting upset for no reason at all.”

“So we are having pizza?” Lily tried to understand what was happening even though she had only been partly paying attention to the conversation. She was much more interested in the picture on the iPad screen at that moment – it was of Fred and herself on the playroom floor, both with sparkly tiaras on.

“I don’t know guys” the keeper sighed. “But if there’s not pizza at the restaurant tonight we can get it for lunch tomorrow instead, ok?”

Ashlyn knew she could make that happen because Saturday was already going to be a crazy day. Much of the normal routine would be altered and tweaked. Josie had the dress rehearsal for the play from 8am to 12pm, which the director had planned on purpose because it gave them enough time to run through the entire play twice if they didn’t stop for more than 15 minutes in between. Then they were all going to James Dwyer’s 7th birthday party in the afternoon. Then they were all going to the opening night of “Seussical the Musical” at 7pm back up at the middle school in Gloucester. The second, and only other, performance was the Sunday afternoon matinee at 1pm. The only way any of that was going to work was that the NWSL season was over and the little league soccer season had also come to an end. They were enjoying that sweet respite between
soccer and basketball season that didn’t start until early January.

“What a good idea Mama” Deb praised and moved her attention back to the pictures, swiping for the next one and hoping to distract the kids off the subject. “Now is that Josie in another witch costume?”

“Yes but this time she was a purple witch instead of a red witch” Drew explained.

“And what were you dressed up as Miss Lily?” she asked as she swiped through a few more pictures.

“Grandma, are you kidding me?” Lily cocked her head at Deb. “I’m a chicken!” she giggled and buried her head into her grandmother’s arm.

“Oh, of course” Deb grinned and nodded. “I see it now. Best looking chicken I’ve ever seen.”

“I was a skunk!” Dodge added eagerly, leaning roughly on top of Deb and lunging for the iPad in her hands.

“Easy Dodger” Ashlyn warned. “She’s only been here for a few hours. Don’t break her.”

“Ooof, ok, ok, let’s find a picture of you, you little stinker” Deb laughed as she moved the boy’s elbow out of her breast.

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It wasn’t until the next morning that Ali got to talk to her mom about everything going on in her life and the changes both she and Mike had gone through. They were sitting at the nook table having a late cup of coffee and waiting for the first batch of homemade chocolate chip cookies to come out of the oven. It had been several years now of baking things to be sold at the concession stand through the Parent Teacher Organization, PTO, for different kid events. Ali had never caved and used store-bought cookie dough, even though Ashlyn had assured it that the practice was universally accepted by all the moms. Up until now, all of the events had been sports related and the brunette enjoyed the fact that she was baking for her first play that morning.

“But he’s doing ok, right?” she asked the question her mother had avoided answering three times already during their discussion that morning.

“Yes, he is” Deb sighed.

“Well that doesn’t sound like you really believe that” Ali gently challenged. “What’s going on mom?”

“Oh Alex” she sighed again. “He’s just so stubborn sometimes and I hate feeling like his mother or his nurse all the time. I don’t know why I have to talk him into doing what he’s supposed to be doing. It drives me crazy!” her voice had risen with every word and it was easy to see how frustrated she was.

“That’s awful” Ali reached across the table and took her mother’s hand, giving it a soft, reassuring squeeze. “I’m sorry mom.”

“Even Lori had to yell at him” Deb’s eyebrows both went up.

“Lori yelled at him?” Ali’s voice registered disbelief at the idea of Mike’s mild-mannered, sweet, almost-silly daughter somehow finding the strength to call her father out on anything.
“She sure did. He deserved it too” Deb was quiet for a few seconds as she slowly spun her coffee cup around in between her hands on top of the table. “Poor thing ran out of the house afterwards. I thought she had left but then I found her sitting in her car in the driveway almost an hour later when I went out to get the mail.”

“What was she doing?”

“She was crying her eyes out.”

Ali took in the information and tried to think of how to be supportive but critical at the same time. Her mother was absolutely right. She should not have to force Mike to take care of himself. And if sweet Lori had gotten upset enough to raise her voice to him, well, that told the brunette just as much as her mother’s words had.

“I thought he was going to the club a couple of times a week, and didn’t he join that walking group?”

“Yes, and yes” Deb sighed again. “But when he goes to the club he just sits around with the guys doing Lord knows what” she paused. “Probably eating all the wrong things and complaining about how terrible his life is post-heart attack” she rolled her eyes. “And we joined that walking group together but I have to beg him to come with me now. I don’t know” she sighed again and let her shoulders slump discouragingly. “I guess I don’t understand where he’s coming from. I mean, I can’t imagine surviving a heart attack and then not being willing to make the changes I needed to keep living and staying healthy.”

“Yeah, I don’t get that either” Ali agreed softly. “Unless...do you think he’s depressed?” her curious, caring eyes focused on her mother’s worried ones as they stared at each other for a minute.

“They warned us about that. But he says he’s not and I really can’t tell. Am I supposed to just ignore the fact that he says he isn’t depressed? It’s complicated” Deb admitted and dropped her eyes.

“Listen mom” Ali reached both hands across the table to grab and hold onto her mother’s hand and forearm. “It’s always complicated when it comes to mental health. I’ve had way more experience with it than I ever thought I possibly could and it’s never easy or straightforward. But it’s so important” she paused, still unsure how hard to push. “Maybe Ash can talk to him a little, just the two of them” she shrugged her shoulders and watched her mother’s reaction.

“I’m trying to get him to see a therapist because I don’t think it could hurt anything...”

“No it won’t hurt anything! You’re right! It might even help make everything better” Ali sat up straighter and smiled. “I know there’s been a lot of progress over the last several years and people don’t see mental health as such a taboo subject anymore. But it’s still hard, especially for older guys who aren’t used to being challenged on things like that. Can you go with him? Maybe that’ll help ease him into it?”

“I’ll try again” Deb managed a small smile. “Maybe if both Lori and I suggest it he’ll realize it’s the right thing to do.”

“I’m sorry everything’s so hard right now mom.”

“Oh, it could be a lot worse I suppose” she tried to chuckle but couldn’t quite pull it off. “At least he’s here” she looked up and met her daughter’s concerned gaze. Deb’s eyes were watery as she spoke. “At least he’s still here with me. I feel greedy asking for more than that.”
“I know you do mom, but you’re allowed to be greedy when it comes to the one you love. You should always be greedy and want more from them. That’s how you know you’re doing it right, right?” Ali encouraged and tried to keep herself from crying as tears slid down her mother’s tired and stressed-out face. “It’ll get better. It’s only been a few months. You’ll see.”

“How did you get to be so wise?” Deb asked softly after a couple of minutes of quiet breathing and sniffling.

“Well, I had a pretty great teacher” the brunette squeezed her mother’s hand and grinned at her.

“Oh boy, I see your wife’s charm has rubbed off” Deb chuckled, her face breaking into a real, sincere smile.

“Hey, I’ve always been charming,” Ali defended herself with a giggle. “It just doesn’t seem like much when you compare it to her, that’s all.”

“Shouldn’t she be back by now?”

“Oh, she texted while you were officiating the licking of the mixer beaters battle” Ali giggled as she remembered her mother trying to convince both twins that there was exactly the same amount of cookie dough on each beater because it was a baking rule that everybody knew. “She stayed at the dress rehearsal to help the crew finish painting the set pieces for tonight.”

“They’re not done with the sets yet?” Deb’s eyebrows shot up.

“Nope. But I guess that’s pretty typical. Niki had to step in at the last minute last year for Evan’s play too. But she actually helped them finish building them, forget about just painting” the brunette rolled her eyes and smiled. “I’m surprised Ashlyn didn’t come back home and change though. Those are her favorite jeans and she’ll be pissed if she gets paint on them” they both chuckled at the thought.

“I’m surprised Ashlyn didn’t come back home and change though. Those are her favorite jeans and she’ll be pissed if she gets paint on them” they both chuckled at the thought. “You know you guys don’t have to come tonight. You know that, right?”

“Alex, if you think I’m missing one more thing my wonderful grandchildren do this year, you’re very mistaken.” Deb quirked her eyebrow at her daughter. “I know you hate people feeling obligated, you’ve been that way forever, but especially with your kids. I remember how bad you felt having Drew’s first birthday party for God’s sake” she laughed out loud and patted the table for emphasis.

“I know, I know” Ali agreed sheepishly. “I can’t help it.”

“Well quit telling us we don’t have to go to Josie’s play. We know. And we still want to go, so deal with it.”

“Mom, can I go to the restaurant with Ethan?” Drew called out as he trotted into the family room from the kitchen.

“We have a busy day today buddy, why do you want to go to the pizzeria?” Ali asked as her son skidded to a stop by the end of the table. She pulled him in for a kiss which he tried to squirm away from but really loved and all three of them knew it.

“His dad’s gonna show us how to cook something!”

“Really?” Ali’s face registered surprise as she released the boy. “Like what?”

“Umm, I forget” he scrunched his face up as he thought hard about what his best friend had said on the phone a few minutes earlier. “Oh yeah, grilled cheese!” he grinned.
“Yummmm” she hummed. “I love grilled cheese. You’d better pay attention ok? Ask questions if you don’t know what Sam’s doing or why he’s doing it. He might be assuming you know it already but it’s ok if you don’t.”

“Is that a yes?” he stood up on his tip toes a few times in rapid succession as his whole face turned into one big smile.

“Yes, it’s a yes. But you have to be home by 1pm so we can go to James’ party. Do you understand me?” she grabbed his nearest hand and tugged it to get his attention.

“Ah-huh” he nodded.

“What are your brother and sister doing down there?” Ali asked while she had him there.

“Lily’s playing one of her games on the iPad and Dodge is playing Mario” he answered quickly.

“Ok, how are you getting to the restaurant? Do you need me to drive you?”

“Nope, they’ll pick me up on the way.”

“Ok, call him back” she smiled as he turned to run towards the phone in the mudroom. “And be polite and say thank you.”

“Oh Mom” he called out over his shoulder. “I will.”

Ali went into the group text she and Ashlyn shared with Sam and Lisa and typed out a message of thanks to Sam, telling him they would pick him up at 1pm if he wasn’t home before then.

“All of that’s still going well?” Deb finished her coffee and watched her daughter’s face.

“You mean us and Sam and Lisa?”

“I don’t mean Drew and Ethan” she laughed softly as they both kept their voices down, unsure how much Drew might be able to hear.

“It’s good” Ali nodded as she thought about the answer to the question. “It’s really no different than how it is with Pam and Steve, although we never see Steve very much” she referenced Josie’s best friend’s parents.

“Good” Deb nodded her approval. “That’s good. I’m glad he found somebody because I think that’s better for Ethan too” she continued. “But I’m also glad I don’t have to see him very much anymore.”

“I know mom, me too” Ali gave her mother a look that was full of appreciation and love, knowing how much her parents still worried about her. “Believe me, I know.”

It had taken Ali going through the drama of Josie’s birth and near death to really, fully understand the hell her own parents had gone through when she had nearly died in college. Once you get a scare like that with one of your kids, it changes you – even if you try like hell not to let it. Ali knew she would always worry about Josie’s well-being a little differently than she did her other kids. One wasn’t better or worse, they were just different. Her own poor parents had gone through so many terrifying scenarios with Kyle before he got clean and then for Ali to have her own near-death experience on top of all that just seemed unfair and extra cruel. The brunette understood why her mother had just said those words to her and she knew what they meant and the fear and the fury they held within them.
“Yes Alex, I think you do.”

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The play went off without a hitch, which was a minor miracle considering how rough both versions of the dress rehearsal had been that morning. The whole local Krieger clan was there, except for Koty and Brianna who were going to the Sunday matinee with Tanner and his new girlfriend the next afternoon. The Dwyers, and Sandi Leroux were also there as were Whitney and Becca Flanagan. Ryan stayed home with 18-month old Tommy who would never have made it through the show without pitching a fit. Niki and Molly brought Evan and Penny to the Sunday matinee, leaving big, almost a teenager, Noah at home alone. That was a level that Ali and Ashlyn felt like they were getting close to with Drew too. If not for the twins, they probably would have felt comfortable leaving Drew and Josie home alone for a couple of hours, with some strict restrictions and rules of course. But that whole concept was on hold because the 5-year old twins were still a lot for any grown-up to handle, forget about their 9-1/2 year old sibling.

Ashlyn and Ali gave their little Who and Jungle Creature a small bouquet of flowers after the performance and had paid for a small ad in the program to send their daughter a loving, congratulatory message. They almost missed the boat on that but Ashlyn had heard one of the other moms talking about it as they waited for rehearsal to end. The keeper had explained to her wife how all the parents paid for an ‘ad’ in the program where they wrote a sweet note of encouragement or congratulations to their child in the play. That was just the first of many routines and traditions that went along with performing in a school play. The bouquet of flowers on opening night was specific too. It couldn’t be too big because you didn’t want your bouquet for one of the chorus members to make the bouquet from the parents of the lead actress appear inadequate. Once Ashlyn realized how many ways they could screw up Josie’s first play experience, she started paying extra attention and asking lots of questions at pick-up and drop-off times.

Ali had agreed to work the concession stand at intermission of both performances and just barely got her butt back in her seat for Act II both times. Not surprisingly, Josie was a natural onstage. If anybody in the family or group of friends was shocked it only meant that they hadn’t been paying attention over the past couple of years as the little redhead turned into a song and dance factory. Ali almost pumped her fist and yelled out loud when she saw her little girl gently nudge the boy next to her to remind him that it was time to turn to the side and follow the rest of the jungle creatures offstage. At 7-1/2 she had a good awareness of what was going on, even in the bigger picture as it pertained to the play, and the presence of mind to try and help her fellow thespian out as subtly as possible. Ashlyn thought the kid was lucky that Josie didn’t just walk right by him and leave him standing there like a dope. Josie could be outrageously competitive, but both moms were happy and relieved to see that all of their lessons about teamwork had been absorbed by the bright girl too.

“Did you have fun tonight, sweetheart?” Deb asked the redhead Saturday night as she tucked her into bed.

Josie had missed spending time with her beloved Grandma over the past two days as she got ready for the play and had asked her to read to her that night. Ali and Ashlyn were happy that Deb had agreed.

“It was soooo fun Grandma” the girl’s eyes were still wide from the excitement of her stage debut.

“I can’t wait to do it again.”

“Oh, I’m so glad” Deb patted her arm beneath the covers and smiled down at her granddaughter.

“And it’s a good thing you get to do it again tomorrow afternoon” she giggled.

“Will you come see me again?” Josie looked down shyly.
“I can’t wait to see you onstage again tomorrow honey” Deb smiled again, touched by the look of adoration on the girl’s face.

“Really?” her eyes lit up.

“I’ll definitely be there Miss Josephine. Now you go to sleep so you can wake up nice and refreshed in the morning. You’re going to need your rest so you can give another wonderful performance tomorrow.”

“Ok Grandma” she replied and turned onto her side as Deb pulled the covers up even higher and then leaned over and kissed her cheek. “Love you” Josie yawned and snuggled into her pillow, her favorite stuffed bear under her arm.

“I love you too little one, so very much.”

Thanksgiving was the following week and Ali and Ashlyn were hosting this year for the first time in four years. Nathan’s parents, the Kimballs, had done it the past two years but they agreed to switch with Ali and Ashlyn and traded them Christmas Eve duties instead. The Holidays this year were a tense subject between the two wives because Ali wanted to make sure Ashlyn did what she needed to do to be there for Chris. And Ashlyn wanted to make sure that Ali was comfortable this year at all the holidays, which probably meant not spending every one of them with Chris. The keeper felt like she owed the brunette from last year’s horrible Thanksgiving and messy, sad Christmas. Neither of them wanted to go down to Florida for Thanksgiving but they had been tentatively planning to spend it with Deb and Mike in Miami. Seeing Deb and Mike wasn’t the problem. Dealing with the invitation they would have to make to the Harrises and all of the angst that would accompany it was the problem. That was until the Miami residents made the trip North for the five weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas which helped the Kriegers make some final decisions about their own plans. Ali and Ashlyn were going to enjoy Thanksgiving and Christmas up in Massachusetts with the extended Krieger family and Chris and Beth were going to stay in Satellite Beach with the Harris clan. Ashlyn would bring her family down to stay at Tammye and Carol’s beach house for the week between Christmas and New Year’s and then go to Miami for New Year’s Eve at the club again. It was a familiar routine and the more they thought about it, the more Ali and Ashlyn began to look forward to it. The people who were sort of stuck in the middle were Tammye, Carol, and Mike Harris. It’s not like there were two warring factions or anything. Everybody had made peace with each other and mended fences on both sides of the family. Except for Ali and Chris. Ali was on excellent terms with everybody, except Chris – but she was perfectly capable of being civil to him. And, to their credit, everyone in the Harris family understood why the brunette was having a hard time forgiving her wife’s brother. The fix for everything was time. Time and then more time.

“So wait a minute, tell me about the dolls in the classroom” Deb spoke up after the laughter died down and the conversation started to pick up again.

The kitchen of the big old house was bustling late Thanksgiving morning with Deb, Ali, Sandi Leroux, Nathan, and Iris Kimball all pitching in to get the meal prepared. Sydney was in there too, but doing what she did best – keeping things light and making people laugh their asses off. They had already broken out a bottle of wine thirty minutes earlier and each of them was enjoying a small glass to get things started.

“Oh, I love this story!” Sydney raised her wine glass up in a toast to the twins. “Here’s to Dodge and Lily opening the eyes of 5-year olds everywhere” she giggled and took a sip.
“Oh geez” Ali rolled her eyes and chuckled as she tended to the gravy on the stove top, stepping aside so Sandi could open the oven door and baste the turkey. “Go ahead Syd, you do the honors.”

“What was it, the second week of school? Or the third?” the coach squinted as she tried to remember.

“That would be the second week, thank you very much” Ali nodded and took a sip of her own wine. “Yep, we don’t wait long to make an impression our first year in a new school – especially the school we’re going to be spending 6 full years in” she nodded dramatically but couldn’t keep the grin from her face. “That’s just how we roll here” she laughed.

“So the second week of school, new kindergarteners Dodge and Lily Krieger are making friends and getting the lay of the land. They’re scoping out the toys and the hamster and the books and the art supplies... everything a good student does when they’re new to a classroom, right?” Sydney paused and waited for some agreeable replies.

“Well, of course” Deb chuckled. “That sounds just like my perfect grandchildren.”

“Sound like smart kids to me” Iris added with her own laugh.

“Ok, so towards the end of the second week, Ashlyn gets a call from the teacher...” Sydney looked at Ali for help with her name.

“Ms. Johnson” the brunette filled in and winked at her best friend who was leisurely moving from one end of the kitchen to the other as she told the story.

“Right, Ms. Johnson” the coach repeated. “She wants our wonder-mommies to come in for a meeting so they can have a little talk.”

“Oh God, I remember this now” Nathan laughed out loud from his spot at the small kitchen table where he was getting the rolls arranged on the baking pan to go into the oven.

“Am I the only one who doesn’t know this story?” Deb asked.

“Nope, I don’t know this one either” Sandi replied.

“Me either” Iris piped up and put the pot with the broccoli ready to be steamed right next to the stove top so Ali could put it on a burner when she was ready.

“So they go in the next afternoon, neither one of them having any clue what either kid could possibly have done...” Syd continued with a giggle.

“Boy did we grill them” Ali shook her head and chuckled at the memory. “We did everything but string them up to find out what they had done.”

Both Sydney and Nathan were laughing again.

“Oh come on, spit it out, I’m dying over here” Deb laughed.

“So these two nervous wrecks sit down with the teacher, imagining all sorts of things Dodge and Lily could have done that would have made the teacher call them in for a talking-to. And you’ll never guess what the problem was” Sydney teased wickedly. “Try and guess, come on.”

Iris, Deb and Sandi each took a turn and made their best guess, all of which were far worse than anything the kids had ever done before.
“Well it’s nice to know you all think so highly of my children” Ali quirked her eyebrow and made her way to the fridge to dig out the olives and pickles and other yummy things for the olive tray and appetizer plate. “Mom, will you watch the gravy while I put this stuff out?”

“Sydney Rae, help your girl will you?” Sandi urged her daughter. They all knew Sydney could handle the pickles and the olives without incident.

“Yeah, ok” the coach waved her mother off as she went to stand next to her bestie at the counter next to the fridge. They worked together arranging cheese and crackers and slices of pepperoni onto a medium-sized platter. “And you’re all wrong” she giggled. “The teacher…”

“Ms. Johnson” Ali provided again with a big grin.

“She caught the twins drawing on the dolls in the classroom!” Sydney finally revealed with a boisterous laugh.

“Drawing what on them?” Deb’s eyes were wide and she looked like she might not really want to know the answer to her own question.

“It was barbie dolls” Ali clarified, as if it made more sense that way.

“Tattoos!!!” Sydney cackled and bent over to slap her knee as she laughed hysterically. “They drew tattoos all over their arms and their sides” she gasped for breath, “just like their mommies have.”

The whole room cracked up and Ashlyn stuck her head inside the kitchen from the mudroom just to make sure everything was ok.

“What is going on in here?” she asked, her eyebrows raised at the sight of the six people laughing so hard.

“Oh babe” Ali grinned at her from her nearby place next to the fridge. “Syd’s telling them about Ms. Johnson and the Barbies.”

“Oh boy” Ashlyn rolled her eyes and shook her head with a laugh of her own. “That’s a good one” she nodded and took two steps forward and gave her wife a quick kiss. “Carry on then” she popped a black olive into her mouth as she turned around to leave.

“Sure sure, run away from the fact that your two youngest kids were caught defiling pristine barbie dolls in their kindergarten classroom” Sydney teased. “Run away!”

“So, what happened?” Deb asked, looking at Ali while Sydney tried to get herself under control.

“Nothing happened except we bought the classroom…”

“Donated” Nathan interrupted with a smirk.

“Right, yes, we donated some new barbie dolls to the classroom on Monday morning” Ali finished with a giggle and a sigh. “We let the kids draw on their Barbies here at home” she explained.

“Sure, I’ve seen them do it a million times” Deb nodded along as she faithfully stirred the gravy.

“Well we have them use a dry erase marker so you can wash the ink off afterwards if you want” the brunette continued. “And the kids used a regular marker at school, not realizing…”

“So did the teacher have a problem with the tattoos themselves or was it just the fact that they drew
on them at all to begin with?” Sandi asked suspiciously.

“Ms. Johnson has been really nice to us. Both Drew and Josie had her and she’s never been a problem for us before…”

“But that was Drew and Josie” Sydney gave her friend a challenging look.

“Well, yes, there’s that” Ali chuckled as she picked up the appetizer platter and turned to face the rest of the kitchen.

“Here, let me take that into the other room” Nathan crossed the kitchen, took the platter and walked through the mudroom into the front living room.

“Thanks Nate” she smiled at her brother-in-law as he left the room. “But I don’t think she had a problem with tattoos per se” Ali kept going. “I just think she was miffed that they had ruined the class barbie dolls” she finished using air quotes around the word ruined.

“So what did you guys say to her?” Deb asked.

“Ash explained about the dry erase markers, which made Ms. Johnson feel much better because I think she was sort of horrified that Dodge and Lily would be so disrespectful of things that weren’t even theirs in the first place” the brunette sighed and took a sip of wine as she put the broccoli on the burner while Iris put the rolls into the oven. “But we were both in such shock because we had worked ourselves up into a worst-case scenario” she laughed and shook her head.

“I still say there was something naughty in those tattoos” Sydney giggled as she leaned against the counter over by the fridge. “It’s just too convenient that she had already thrown them out before you guys went in to talk to her.”

“Oh no” Deb giggled and hip-checked her daughter as they both stood in front of the stove. “I don’t believe that for a second. Not my sweet grandbabies. No way” she shook her head and grinned.

“Well, we’ll never know so I’m not going to worry about it” Ali sassed her best friend back. “Besides, the only naughty things they know how to draw are boobies and penises” she lowered her voice as she said the ‘naughty’ words that weren’t really naughty at all. “And they’ve never seen any tattoos that look like that so I refuse to believe you Sydney Rae.”

“It doesn’t matter what they drew, or tried to draw” the coach came up and smacked Ali’s butt. “It just matters what Ms…”

“Johnson!” all four other voices answered loudly at the same time.

“…thought she saw” Sydney finished her thought and waved off the laughter aimed at her inability to remember the teacher’s name.

“It was a great teaching point and reminder about treating other people’s things with respect. So that’s how we handled it with the kids and that was the end of it” Ali turned and quirked her eyebrow at her bestie. “Despite what other drama queens want you to believe.”

“Whatever you say Alibaba” Sydney teased and smacked her butt again, laughing when the brunette whipped around and tried to strike back. “All I know is they’re lucky my girl Jojo didn’t decide to do that because she has real talent and could have drawn whatever she wanted” she raised her eyebrows and paused for effect. “Just think about that.”
The rest of the day was the usual combination of fun and games and food and family and friends. Ali noticed Deb watching everything Mike put in his mouth and wondered how they were going to survive this rocky patch. She knew her mother and her husband had fought through other tough times in the past, but this seemed different. Deb herself seemed different. Her smile wasn’t quite as bright as usual and Ali was worried about the toll all the stress and worry was taking on her. The brunette had done everything she could think of to make this visit easier for both her mom and Mike, even going to their condo and cleaning it from top to bottom before they arrived. The brunette washed their sheets and towels and changed the beds and made sure everything looked and felt fresh and clean. She had their Subaru serviced and cleaned and filled with gas. She even stocked a few basics in the fridge but couldn’t do much more than that because she wasn’t sure exactly what was on Mike’s new, restricted diet. Ali made sure her mom knew that whatever she and Mike needed to do with their time was ok with she and Ashlyn and the kids. If Mike wanted or needed to nap or whatever, she made sure her mom knew that they all understood the importance of it. Deb cried in her daughter’s arms when they came back to the big old house that first afternoon. She was so grateful for everything Ali had done that she literally couldn’t find the words and instead let her tears speak for her.

Ali and Kyle had both made a few short trips to Miami while Mike recuperated. They both knew that their mother had a pretty good support network down there, but, as much as they trusted her former colleagues from the high school and her country club friends, the siblings trusted nobody more than each other. They had spread their 3-day weekends out so they only overlapped once. Those trips weren’t for Ali and Kyle to have fun hanging out, they were for giving their mom a break and making sure she was doing ok herself. Deb knew what they were up to but was powerless to stop it, so she just did her best to enjoy it. Which wasn’t easy because she was incredibly tense and anxious about Mike. She was always proud of her kids, but the way they had stepped up when Mike was in trouble was really something that made her want to brag to anybody who would listen. That afternoon, Deb had gotten choked up at Thanksgiving dinner when they went around the table saying what they were most thankful for. Ali wished she had been sitting closer to her mother so she could hold her hand or squeeze her arm to tell her it would be ok. Instead, she had to watch from four seats away as one of the strongest women she had ever known fought back tears and tried to express just how thankful she really was for so many things.

“You doing ok baby?” Ashlyn asked softly as she turned off the last of the lights on the first floor and realized her wife was still standing at the kitchen sink, looking off to her right at the kitchen door a few feet away from her.

The keeper crossed the kitchen, wondering what Ali was so focused on. The only light in the room came from the light above the kitchen sink. Ashlyn put her hand on the brunette’s lower back and felt her body relax underneath it. Ali turned her head to look at her and Ashlyn had trouble reading her face. The brunette looked mostly happy and peaceful but with a large bit of sadness thrown into the mix as well. Ali took a deep breath and exhaled before answering her wife, feeling Ashlyn’s steady gaze on her the whole time.

“I guess” she shrugged and moved to the edge of the counter by the kitchen door, taking Ashlyn’s hand and pulling her with her. “Mom’s got me worried because she’s so worried about Mike” she sighed. “And I can’t stop thinking about how different today would have been if things had turned out badly in June” she shook her head slowly and kept her eyes on the vertical trim along the left side of the door.

Ashlyn finally figured out why her beautiful brunette had chosen this spot and this piece of trim to focus on at that particular moment. This was where they marked the different heights of their children over the years. It was their own tangible history right there for anybody to see. The keeper had a moment of déjà vu and remembered how happy she had been when Chris and Beth saved a
similar trim board when they renovated Gram’s house. They stood there in silence for a few minutes, each woman with a head full of memories and thoughts and a heart full of fears and love. Ashlyn wound her long arms around her wife and rested her chin on her shoulder as they both read the names and ages of the kids as they got taller and taller. By the time they had worked their way up to the most recent ones, marked in the last days of summer, just before the new school year started, they were both smiling and Ali was feeling less anxious about everybody’s mortality.

“I think spending time with her grandkids is going to help your mom a lot.” Ashlyn offered quietly, chin still on Ali’s shoulder as she hugged her from behind. “And we’ll do everything we can to help her too” she kissed the brunette’s cheek softly.

Ali nodded, wordlessly, and squeezed her keeper’s arms as they encircled her. She kept her eyes on the door trim for another minute, feeling more confident about both her mom and Mike’s well-being.

“I know it’s scary, honey” the keeper continued. “All of it, the kids getting older, our parents getting older, the dogs getting older, us getting older...”

“Ugh, I hadn’t even thought about the dogs” Ali groaned and closed her eyes as Ashlyn turned her around and pulled her in to a proper hug.

“It’s all terrifying if we spend too much time thinking about it. And I get why today’s got you feeling...contemplative” the keeper swayed them slowly from side to side as she held her girl tight.

“Ooooh, that’s the perfect word for it” Ali pulled her head back with a small smile. “Contemplative...that’s exactly how I feel. How do you always know what’s going on with me like that?” she kissed Ashlyn’s lips when she finished her question and then waited for her answer.

“I don’t know” Ashlyn shrugged and returned the small smile. “Thank you babe” the brunette kissed her again.

“But today’s been tough for a lot of reasons and I just want you to know that I get it” the keeper met her wife’s eyes and held her gaze for a few seconds before continuing. “Even though sometimes it feels like it’s been 20 years since it happened, last Thanksgiving was a horror show and I know that’s been bothering you today too. If there’s anything I can do to make it easier...”

“Ashlyn” the brunette spoke softly, their faces only a foot apart as they faced each other. “I should be helping you cope with what happened a year ago tonight” she shook her head and frowned. “Honestly, we should just be grateful for all of it...for everything we’ve just been talking about. Mike survived his heart attack. Chris got clean and sober and is doing really well. The kids are all doing great and my mom will be ok too. You’re right, honey.”

“Maybe we’ll just help each other tonight, how about that?” Ashlyn asked sweetly and started to walk them across the dark kitchen towards the backstairs.

“Oh, you being all nice to me just to butter me up so you can make a move on me?” Ali quirked her eyebrow.

“What? No way” Ashlyn pretended to be offended and then giggled as they got to the foot of the stairs. “You know I always want to make a move on you baby” she gave Ali a brief kiss. “But...it’s been a long day and I was thinking...ummmmm...”

“Geez, now you’re being shy? What kind of alternate universe are we in tonight anyway?” Ali giggled as they pulled back so they could start to walk upstairs.
Ashlyn looked up bashfully and took a breath.

“I was thinking maybe we could take a bath...”

Ali’s heart melted when she heard her sweet, thoughtful wife’s soft voice. She knew that Ashlyn had promised both of them more simple things that they could do together, like sharing a nice bath. She also knew that her wife probably had given herself some sort of quota to hit before the end of the year and there weren’t many days left on the calendar. It was late and they should just go upstairs and cuddle and fall asleep, but Ali thought it was adorable and romantic that Ashlyn wanted to take a bath with her. Yes, they would take care of each other tonight. Tomorrow they could worry about other people they loved. Tonight was just for the two of them.

“That sounds perfect, babe.”

Chapter End Notes

And in other news, I made my plans and am going to Orlando for four days at the end of June to watch two Pride home games. June 27th and 30th. I CAN'T WAIT!!! So if anybody's in Orlando then, or lives in Orlando, and wants to have a drink and talk soccer, let me know. It'll be fun. And I'd like to thank the soccer Gods for making it so that I can see my two Boston Mewis girls at those games too. The Dash (Kristie) are the Wednesday night game and the Courage (Sammy) are the Saturday afternoon game. I'm bummed that instead of watching 12 NWSL games live this season I'll only be watching 2, but that's better than 0 I suppose.
December Doings

December turned out to be one of the most wonderful months Ali or Ashlyn or Deb could remember in a long time. Right after Thanksgiving they all fell into a rhythm of sorts. Their schedules were free from soccer games and play rehearsals and even the music lessons stopped for a few weeks halfway through the month. The only thing that was a bummer was that Ali’s schedule at Knight-Harris was busier and more stressful than usual. Deb and Mike, when he was up to it, joined the young Krieger family almost every afternoon and evening doing all of their favorite seasonal activities. They cut down their own Christmas tree with Ken and Vicki again, this time cutting down three because Grandma needed one too. Ali and Ashlyn got the Christmas cards mailed out right after Thanksgiving, as planned, and they got the big old house dressed and decorated for the holiday season. As the kids got older they wanted more say in the decorating and it had been a bit of a struggle to find a happy medium. Ali was all for letting the kids help and she loved most of their ideas but the house still had to look somewhat presentable. She wasn’t normally fussy about things like that, especially after 9-1/2 years of kids, but Christmastime was her favorite and the brunette wanted to see her favorite things on the walls and shelves and windows too. She slowly caved, unable to resist each drawing that any of her kids brought to her. The only thing cuter than the look on their faces when she ooohed and aaaaahed at it, was the look on their faces when she suggested they hang it up as part of the decorations. The kids, especially Josie but all of them really, loved having their artwork displayed so proudly. The ornaments on the Christmas tree had changed a bit over time too. Ali and Ashlyn had continued to add their own favorite and meaningful ornaments, just as they had done from the very first Christmas they spent together, but now there were kid-made reindeer and snowmen and snowwomen and dinosaurs in Santa suits and sharks with red shiny noses strewn all around the tree as well. Lily drew a whole sleigh with all the dogs in her life substituting for Santa’s reindeer and Ashlyn had proudly found space for it on the family room mantle, right above all of the stockings that hung from there. On any given day there was likely to be glitter and other tiny, shiny art supplies on any surface in the big old house. That just went with the territory when you had four little kids. Also, glitter is impossible to clean up without an industrial strength vacuum or some sort of magic spell. But at Christmastime the odds of a glitter encounter quadrupled, easily. It was a fun house to be in and that was more true than ever during the month of December.

They made and decorated homemade Christmas cookies this year as the neighbor gifts, with the kids and Deb taking on most of the responsibility for that sizable task. Ali protested but Deb and Ashlyn assured her they had it covered. The brunette was surprisingly busy at Knight-Harris that month. December was historically a quiet time for the company but this year was their 10th anniversary and Ali, Ashlyn and Hilary wanted to fly everybody in for a big party to celebrate their continued success. They had picked the date out almost 9 months earlier so all of their employees could schedule their lives around it. Friday December 15th was the big night and Ali had taken point on organizing the event. Because the company had started less than publicly, they decided to use the official start date of January 2019 which was when Ali had started working there full-time after getting her MBA. Ali and Jared knew they had both worked their butts off for the two years before that as well, but the January 2019 start date had been decided upon years ago when they scripted their first company bio and used it then.

Ali and Marcy had sent invitations to all of their clients, from the biggest names to the rookies just getting started, and Ali was flummoxed by the overwhelming response. Everybody was coming. Everybody. The three founders were reminded of the media frenzy surrounding the awful Kamala Pierce crisis back at the end of 2021, but in a good way. For about three weeks everybody in sports and entertainment was buzzing about Knight-Harris and their hard-earned and much-deserved
success. And as more and more entertainers had gotten involved in sports teams, usually through ownership, that meant Knight-Harris was rubbing elbows with some of the biggest names onstage. As famous and wealthy actors, singers, musicians, and performers started to settle down and get married and have families, a new trend began. It was difficult to buy a team in one of the big men’s leagues in the country. But it was considerably easier to buy a women’s professional team and many powerful entertainers did just that. Lady Gaga had been the first when she bought the New York Power, the new NWSL team that had subsumed the former Sky Blue FC club in 2024. Katy Perry was part owner of the San Jose Quicksilver in California. LeBron James owned outright the Columbus Chargers in Columbus, Ohio and was clear when he said he bought it so more female athletes could have a place to play after college. Megan Rapinoe and her wife, former-WNBA superstar Sue Bird, had put together an ownership group out in Seattle that owned both the Seattle Reign in the NWSL and the Seattle Storm in the WNBA. Melinda Gates, Bill Gates’ wife and an incredible force for female empowerment, was the primary owner but Rapinoe and Bird ran the show. The same thing happened as the NWHL grew too. Probably the highest profile NWHL team purchase had been when Madonna bought the Detroit Vipers and saved them from bankruptcy. People often forgot that the Material Girl, a 66-year old grandmother when she bought the team in 2024, was from the Northern suburbs of Detroit. She dedicated the team to all the girls who wanted to grow up and be something that they couldn’t always see. She brought back the Detroit Shock in the WNBA the following year as well - the Shock had been sold and moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma back in 2009 and then again to Dallas in 2016. Madonna was waiting patiently for the NWSL to expand the league past the 20 teams they had been operating with since 2027 so she could introduce a new team in Detroit. The league wanted to wait until 2030 or 2031 before adding any new teams, just to make sure they could actually support the 20 teams already in place. The idea that female sports was something worthwhile to watch and enjoy had finally taken hold after the USWNTs in soccer, basketball and hockey had continued to make the USA proud with championship after championship over the years. The women’s professional leagues were still nowhere near as well-paid or well-run as the men’s leagues were, but things were definitely moving in the right direction. It would just take time. As frustrating as it could still be, the answer, now that firm, devoted ownership groups were in place, was always time.

So as much as Ali loved that month of December with her mother around and the Christmas spirit filling the big old house and everyone in it, she was wiped out by the time the K-H party had finally come and gone. She was distressed to learn that Ashlyn and the kids had delivered all of the neighbor cards and gifts without her while she had been so busy at work the first half of the month. The keeper thought she was helping and was proud of herself for finding something that was time-consuming to take off of her wife’s overloaded plate. She thought wrong.

“You don’t see why I’m upset that you and the kids did the neighbor gifts without me?” Ali’s dark eyes flashed with anger as she set the big shopping bag of gifts down on the table in the home office above the garage.

It was Saturday afternoon, the day after the big Knight-Harris party, and the day before the big family Nutcracker Sunday matinee, and they had just returned from a mommies-only shopping trip to get the last few Christmas gifts that Santa was going to be bringing that year. After taking Meg’s advice two years earlier, Ali and Ashlyn now stored any presents they didn’t want the kids to see up in the office in the loft of the garage. It was still a very functional home office that Ashlyn used almost every single day for her work with the Mental Health Initiative as well as K-H. The loft was the same size as the first floor, but the sides were shorter and sloped because of the roof. The back third of the space was separated from the front two thirds of the space by the stairs that ran horizontally across the garage. On the first floor the stairs started on the left side, just inside the side door of the garage that opened onto the backyard. And up in the loft, the top of the stairs was over on the right side of the space. Just in front of the stairs was Ali’s old, square dining room table
with three chairs, one on each exposed side, front, left and right. On the left side wall were two of the low and wide filing cabinets, along with the fourth dining room chair. At the back of the room, on the other side of the stairs, was the vintage plan table Ashlyn had found and bought for her beautiful brunette twelve years earlier. One of only two windows in the room sat just above it and looked out into the back right corner of the backyard, where the garden was. The big half of the beautiful wooden desk that Niki and Ashlyn had built for Ali was at the very front of the room, under the front window looking out onto the driveway. The smaller half of that desk was still up in Meg’s room, or the guest room. The right side of the office space was where the big tv was mounted, low on the shortened wall. That was set up for videoconferencing and skyping and all of the rest of the modern technology that the garage had been rigged up with back when it had functioned as the official Knight-Harris office space.

Ali used the office too, whenever she needed to and the kids all knew it was off-limits. If they needed something from the garage, their yard toys and bikes and sports equipment were all stored down on the first floor of the garage, they were welcome – but not up in the office space. No ifs ands or buts and both moms made hard rules for themselves about bringing the kids up there for any reason other than an emergency. As the kids got older and were able to keep quiet for longer stretches of time, they were invited to join their moms up there occasionally. They had to stay quiet and pretend they were in the library or at quiet study time at school. Sometimes they didn’t feel like joining either Ashlyn or Ali up there, but sometimes Drew or Josie especially, more so than the twins, would follow Ashlyn up the stairs and work or draw or read quietly in the back half of the space. The plan table was a favorite of all the kids, but they had learned early on that they had to treat it well because it was important to both of their parents. There were no comfy chairs or couches up there and that was by design. Ashlyn didn’t want any distractions while she worked up there. She liked to focus so she could be as efficient as possible. Sometimes she only had an hour or two at a time up there before she had to run and pick somebody up and drive them someplace else, so it was important to keep it basic and functional. More often than not when she was making her phone calls, she paced around the space, doing slow laps as she schmoozed potential donors for the MHI or chimed in on conference calls for the Academy or joined skype meetings for K-H. The desk chair was comfortable but that was it. The two stools at the plan table were padded and soft enough and the kids enjoyed spinning on them, but they were still just stools.

Christmas Eve was only 8 days away and they had four more holiday parties to attend between now and then, including one for the neighborhood families at the Riveras that very night. And that’s what had started the fight – the party that night. Ali had been discussing the logistics of bringing all the tins of cookies with them and distributing them on their way to the party. She had felt hurt and left out when Ashlyn told her the task had already been completed. Now they were standing on opposite sides of Ali’s old dining room table, the brunette on the left side near the filing cabinets, and the keeper on the right side having just finished climbing up the stairs with her arms full.

“Ali, of course I don’t or I wouldn’t have fucking done it in the first place” the keeper snapped back, slamming one of the bags she was carrying onto the table.

Ashlyn was aggravated. Shopping was never her favorite thing but she knew they had to take advantage of the babysitting time while it was available and they really didn’t have a better chunk of time than that afternoon anyway. She was tired from being up very late after the party last night and she had just endured almost 30 minutes of the silent treatment as she and Ali drove home from the mall. And now they had both just heard a loud crack and knew that one of the brand new gifts had been broken by her impetuous, immature slam.

“Oh that’s great” Ali rolled her eyes and turned to start tucking their purchases into the filing cabinet drawers wherever she could find space. “Why don’t you just break everything in the other
bag too. We’ve got nothing but free time to go back to the mall again. Jesus fucking Christ” she muttered the last line as Ashlyn stood there with her hands on her hips and a scowl on her face.

“Fuck!” Ashlyn yelled and then scrubbed her face with both hands.

Ali jumped at her wife’s shout and whipped around to face her with a hiss.

“Shhhhh...keep your voice down. My mom has enough to worry about without thinking we’re falling apart too.”

They both glanced towards the small window at the front of the garage that looked onto the driveway, as if they could see Deb inside the house, which they could not. Ashlyn sighed heavily and used almost all of her willpower to keep from saying something she knew she would regret. Instead, they worked quietly with grim faces and abrupt motions as Ashlyn handed her wife the toys from her bags so the brunette could stash them away. Fifteen minutes later, when they got to the very last toy, the one that the keeper had broken in her fit of frustration, they looked at each other. For the first time since she told her wife that she and the kids had already delivered the cookie tins to their neighbors, Ashlyn saw the sadness hiding behind the anger in Ali’s whiskey-colored eyes. She squinted a bit to try and get any more information she could, but Ali dropped her eyes down to the owl-shaped plastic piggy bank that had movable wings and beak, and eyes that opened and lit up when any coins were added to it. The keeper’s head spun as she tried to process the new information before her wife left the office to go start getting the kids ready for the party. If she hadn’t been so tired maybe she could have put all the pieces together faster, but as she stood there grimacing from the effort, Ali tossed one of the empty bags at her and put the receipt on the table.

“Here, you’ll need this to exchange it” the brunette said brusquely and started to walk past the table and her wife. “You won’t have time now” she shrugged with a self-righteous but resigned look on her face.

Anger spiked in Ashlyn’s chest but she fought it back. She had to close her eyes for a second to block out the obnoxious look on the brunette’s face. She told herself that Ali must be feeling...something...to make her behave this way and willed herself to rise above it. When she opened her eyes, Ali was two steps down the stairs already, her left hand still on the top of the bannister.

“Wait!” Ashlyn quickly covered her wife’s hand with her own and tried to work her fingers underneath it so she couldn’t pull it away, which she fully expected her to try to do.

“We don’t have time...” Ali exhaled in an annoyed voice while she tried to extricate her hand from the keeper’s larger one, all without casting even a glance back at her.

“Just...wait” the blonde moved her other hand to Ali’s forearm and held her securely in place from the other side of the railing, reaching down like she was trying to pull her back up out of a well or something. “I’m sorry” she offered softly, even as the annoyed sigh she got from her wife in response made her grit her teeth. “Please, can we talk about this for a minute?”

“We don’t...” the brunette began again, this time looking up into her keeper’s hard to read face.

“I know we don’t have time” Ashlyn shook her head and frowned. “Fuck the damned party. I want to know what’s going on. I know I fucked up, but I don’t understand how and maybe it’s because I’m tired from last night or maybe it’s because I’m missing something...I honestly don’t know” she spoke quickly and earnestly, never loosening her grip on Ali’s arm or hand. “But I was only trying to help.”
Ali let her shoulders sag when she heard the end of her wife’s statement. In all her umbrage she hadn’t stopped to think why Ashlyn had done it. All that mattered to Ali that afternoon was that it had been done, and without her. She turned her body to the left and looked up into her keeper’s face again. This time she saw remorse and regret mixed in with the frustration and anger and she climbed back up the two steps to stand in front of the blonde.

“You were?” her voice was quiet and questioning and hesitant as she tried to do her own sleuth work.

“Well, yeah, of course” Ashlyn gave her a confused look as they faced each other. She was still holding Ali’s hand.

“How did you think taking the kids and doing something as a family, but without me, would help me?” the words could have sounded really bitchy if they hadn’t been delivered in the soft voice with the hurt look that accompanied them. “One of my favorite things to do at Christmas every year...” she added slowly, with her bottom lip quivering just a little bit.

“Aw, honey” Ashlyn closed her eyes and shook her head sadly at her wife’s tiny voice and trembling lip. “I’m so sorry” she pulled Ali into a hug, relieved that the brunette allowed it. “I never thought about it like that, not for a second” she explained from inside the hug. “I swear to God, I just thought it would help you because you were so busy this month and it was something that I could do without, you know, doing it wrong” she chuckled softly and sighed when she felt her wife hug her back. “So much for that theory.”

Both women had adapted and eased many of their previous expectations and requirements over the years. For example, Ali had given up trying to get Ashlyn to fold the bath towels the way she wanted them and had just started folding them Ashlyn’s way instead. Likewise, the keeper had relaxed her demands about how the pantry shelves were organized. They had both made concessions as they tried to manage a household with four children and two dogs living in it every single day. Ashlyn knew her wife loved everything about Christmas but she had no idea the neighbor gifts would become such an issue this year. The keeper had helped Ali deliver the neighbors gifts in prior years, one time, when Drew was a baby, she even did them all herself. She had thought it was an idiot-proof task that she and the kids could handle this year and had done just that without considering the brunette’s feelings for a single second. When Ashlyn thought about how she would feel if Ali and the kids had done something like that without her, she felt terrible.

They hugged quietly for a long couple of minutes before Ashlyn spoke again, this time pressing a kiss into Ali’s ear before she started.

“I had no idea it would upset you sweetheart” she whispered into her ear. “I’m really really sorry.”

She wasn’t sure why, maybe it was because she was standing there in Ashlyn’s strong arms, or maybe it was the keeper’s lips so close to her ear, or maybe it was because she was just too tired to fight about it anymore, but Ali suddenly felt better.

“Still not a mind-reader huh?” the brunette laughed softly as she pulled back to look into her keeper’s beautiful hazel eyes. She wasn’t surprised to see concern and a little wariness there. “It’s ok” she nuzzled her forehead into Ashlyn’s neck and took a deep, settling breath. “I’m better.”

“You don’t have to be better Al. You have every right to be mad at me. I just wasn’t thinking...”

“It’s ok, I promise” Ali interrupted. “I mean I like doing it but it’s not that big of a deal. I don’t know why I freaked out about it like that. I’m sorry babe.”
“I may not be a mind-reader but can I take a crack at this one?” Ashlyn gave her wife a squeeze and then began moving her hand in soothing circles across her back.

“Sure” Ali chuckled. “But, let’s both agree not to make this any worse than it already was…”

“No, gotcha” the keeper nodded. “I’m glad we’re on the other side already but…”

“But what?”

“But I’m not sure we hit the real issue here.”

Ashlyn’s heart stopped for a second when she felt her wife’s body tense up in her arms.

“Are you sure there’s an issue here besides me just being a baby about the neighbor gifts?” Ali quirked her eyebrow at her wife.

“Maybe not, but I want to make sure. Al, this is your favorite time of the year and I don’t think you’re enjoying it very much. You’re so busy and I can’t thank you enough for that amazing party last night. It was…fucking awesome…and you killed it, every single part of it.”

“So far I like how this is going…”

“ Seriously Al, I’m worried about you. I think this neighbor gift thing is a good example. I think it bothered you so much because not only did you not get to deliver them, but you didn’t even get to bake the cookies. You didn’t get to participate in any part of it this year. And then, on top of that, it wasn’t just me who delivered them. I took all the kids with me” Ashlyn sighed sadly. “When I think about it now, it was almost mean.”

“Hmmm… I never thought about all that” Ali pursed her lips as she considered it.

“And you’re stressing out over this party tonight and I’m afraid you’re going to be a wreck tomorrow and you won’t be able to enjoy the Nutcracker.”

“I have been extra busy and stressed” the brunette admitted in a soft voice. “But now that the Knight-Harris party is over everything should be fine” she reasoned with a small nod, almost as if she was convincing herself. “And I think you’re right about the cookies. I probably wouldn’t have cared as much that you guys delivered them if I had been there and at least baked them with the kids.”

Ali exhaled and looked relieved the more she spoke. Ashlyn took it as a good sign.

“If it makes you feel better, Mr. Woods was still a jackass” the keeper admitted and they both chuckled. “I’m surprised we didn’t get another visit from Officer Fulkerson after we left” Ashlyn rolled her eyes and shook her head at the memory of their unpleasant backyard neighbor who still hadn’t repaired his damaged shed, almost two years later.

“As much as that would have sucked, at least Dodge would have been excited” Ali smiled at the thought.

Ever since Officer Fulkerson had made his first visit to the big old house the year before, after the February 2027 Nor’easter, Dodge had been obsessed with the police officer. His main goal in life after that was to become a police officer just like him. Ashlyn had thought there was something seriously wrong with her son one afternoon last Fall when she picked the twins up from preschool and he could barely speak. Just as the keeper had decided to go back into the school to find out what had happened to traumatize her son like that, Lily had explained that the class had a visit from
Officer Fulkerson as part of their safety and awareness program. Dodge had reacted just as strongly the next time the young, attentive officer had come into the elementary school this year. Officer Fulkerson and another, female, officer came in to talk to the entire elementary school shortly after the school year had begun and Dodge had talked about it non-stop for at least a week.

“Too bad we can’t wrap Officer Fulkerson up for him for Christmas” Ashlyn joked and they both laughed. After a beat she continued. “So, just to be safe, let’s make a list of everything left to do for Christmas and then you tell me what I can do to help. Ok?” the keeper suggested as she ran her fingers through dark brunette locks.

“Yeah, ok” Ali smiled against her wife’s neck and Ashlyn could feel it.

“You already have the list made, don’t you?”

“Of course I do” the brunette giggled and then squealed when Ashlyn tickled her. “Don’t tickle me!” she gasped and jumped back, but not out of her wife’s arms. “That will definitely stress me out” she giggled again.

“Alright, alright” the keeper laughed and brought their lips together in a sweet kiss. “No tickling. But how about tonight I give you a nice massage?”

“Yes, please and thank you very much” Ali studied her wife’s face for a few seconds. “You’re really worried about me, aren’t you?” her voice was serious but soft.

“I am” Ashlyn nodded, just as seriously. “I know...I know you’ve got a lot on your mind with your mom and Mike... the last ultrasound was clear but I know how that weighs on you sometimes, and I know you’re trying hard to be ok with seeing Chris again in a few weeks...”

There it was. Ashlyn had been trying to find a way to tell her wife that she didn’t care where she was at with Chris for weeks now but hadn’t been able to bring it up. But that afternoon in the garage loft, after they had already made up from their fast and furious fight, she heard the words leave her lips and swallowed hard, hoping she hadn’t just ruined the whole rest of the weekend.

“Ash...” Ali sighed and dropped her eyes to the floor between them. “I’m trying...”

“I know you are. I know you are. And that’s all I’ve ever asked and I’m not complaining or asking you to do more, I swear” the keeper blurted out, hoping to avoid the next fight.

“You’re not?” the brunette looked up again and tilted her head as she looked at her wife’s anxious face.

“No, I’m not. I promise. All I want is for you to enjoy Christmas and our time at my mom’s house and the kids and the beach...”

“That’s what I want too” Ali closed her eyes when Ashlyn cupped her face with both hands, gently rubbing her thumbs along her cheekbones.

“Then let’s just do that. Forget Chris. I don’t want you to worry about any of that baby. I mean, we’ll have to see him but...”

“Of course we’re going to see him Ash” the brunette opened her eyes and blinked at her thoughtful wife. “I would never try to keep you, or our kids, from seeing him or Beth and the kids. That’s never going to happen. I just...ugh...” she paused and looked like she was in pain. “I just still hate him” she closed her eyes again, ashamed to look at her wife.
“Hey, hey” the keeper tried to get her to open her eyes. “Look at me Al, please.”

The brunette opened her eyes hesitantly, afraid of the disappointment she was going to see in her favorite hazel ones. But Ashlyn didn’t look disappointed. She looked worried.

“I’m sorry...”

“Ali, listen to me. I don’t blame you for how you feel. Of course I want you to find a way to forgive him, but I don’t know if I could do it” she shook her head as she spoke urgently. “But even if you can’t forgive him, that’s ok. I swear it’s ok honey. Nothing in this world is more important to me than you and your happiness, not Chris or his kids or my parents or anything. We’re going to do the best we can with this situation and that’s all there is to it. I don’t want you to worry about it anymore. It’s not your fuck-up. You shouldn’t be the one stressing out about this. I’ve forgiven him for what he did to me, but I’m starting to have a hard time with what this whole mess is doing to you. That’s making me mad.”

“I’m sorry” Ali began to cry, her face still in her wife’s strong hands. “I’m so sorry Ashlyn” she blubbered as her tears gained momentum and turned into full-blown sobs. “I’m trying so hard” she gasped out as she sank to her knees, Ashlyn’s arms moving to her sides to help support her on the way down. “I don’t know what else to do” she whimpered, collapsing into her wife’s lap as soon as the keeper knelt down in front of her.

“Shhhh, it’s ok” Ashlyn tried to soothe the brunette, rocking her slowly in her arms and trying to move her hair out of her face so she could breathe. “It’s ok, I’ve got you. You have nothing to be sorry for honey” she kissed the top of her head. “Shhhhh...I love you so much and that’s all that matters. Please don’t spend another minute trying to fix things with Chris. It’s not worth it, not if it’s this hard. I’m sorry I ever asked you to even try. I’m sorry baby” she whispered as tears began to slip down her own cheeks.

“Mama!” Drew yelled from inside the door at the side of the garage, close to the foot of the stairs, and made both his mothers jump.

Ashlyn leaned their bodies as far away from the stairs as possible in case their son looked up them. She didn’t want to have to explain why both his mothers were bawling their eyes out on the floor of the office.

“Yeah bud” she replied, trying hard to make her voice sound normal. “What’s up?”

“Grandma says to remind you and Mommy that the party starts at...ummmm...” he paused, unable to remember the time Deb had just told him.

“Oh, we’ll be right in. Thank you” she managed to get out without sounding like a blubbering fool.

They both sat still and tried to get themselves under control as they listened to Drew leave the garage, slamming the door behind him and then yelling ’sorry’ from outside as he ran back to the house.

“Oh fuck” Ali groaned as she wiped the tears from her face as carefully as possible.

“You ok?” Ashlyn asked as they knelt opposite each other.

“Yeah, no, I don’t know” the brunette exhaled loudly. “Ugh, I guess I really needed to hear you say that” she sniffled and looked up bashfully.

“Oh sweetheart, I told you that back when he went into rehab” Ashlyn’s face was distraught,
thinking her wife hadn’t heard her or hadn’t been paying attention.

“No, I know” Ali leaned forward and carefully slid her thumb under her keeper’s left eye to clean up her mascara that had started to run from all the tears. “And it meant a lot then, but I guess...I don’t know” she shrugged again and then repeated the motion under Ashlyn’s other eye.

“Tell me.”

“I think I’ve been making it too big a deal in my head” Ali sighed sadly and dropped her hands into her lap. “And even though I know that’s how you feel, it was good to hear you say it again” she finished with a small smile.

“I would have said it to you every single day if I thought you wanted me to” Ashlyn lifted Ali’s hand to her lips and kissed it. “I’ve been afraid to bring it up in case, maybe, you’d found a way not to think about it so much.”

“You’re so sweet to me babe, thank you” Ali stood on her knees and pulled her wife into another hug. “And thank you for taking care of the neighbor gifts this year, I really appreciate it.”

Ashlyn opened her mouth to defend herself from what she thought was a sarcastic attack but closed it again when she saw the sincere look on the brunette’s face.

“Next time I’ll ask first, I promise” the keeper winked as they stood all the way up and looked around the room one more time to make sure they hadn’t left anything in plain sight that shouldn’t have been there.

“I can exchange the owl bank” Ali offered, extending the olive branch as far as possible.

“Nah, that’s sweet of you to offer, but I broke it, I’ll exchange it” Ashlyn chuckled as she picked up the bag to stash in the Jeep until she could get back to the mall. “Dodge really doesn’t need it anyway, he’s got so much coming this year.”

“Yeah, but he’s going to love that” Ali blinked softly as she thought about the look their youngest son would get on his face when he dropped the first coin into the owl bank. “We have to get it for him, don’t you think?”

“I do” Ashlyn nodded and grinned as she thought about how much Dodge loved owls and how strange it had seemed to her at first. They attributed it to Harry Potter but it was impossible to be sure. “Gotta get the boy his owl bank. Definitely.”

They took one more minute to try and make their faces look less like they had both been crying and then walked down the stairs together, hands linked the whole way. There was no way they’d be on time for the party now, but too bad. Sometimes, often when you least expected it, things happened that led to other things that ended up being kind of important. Those important moments weren’t always easy to schedule. That was something else you learned when you were trying to raise a young family.

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The holiday party overload continued with the first ever gala for the Engen Foundation on Wednesday night, December 20th. Ashlyn was thrilled for her bestie and pulled off the biggest surprise in a very long time by flying out Whitney’s parents and her brother and his wife to be there for the big night. The lawyer thought something was up when her parents, who were both awful liars, kept telling her a slightly different story for the reason they couldn’t come to Boston for Christmas that year. But, instead of thinking of some benign reason for the falsehood, Whitney
feared that something was wrong with one of her parents health-wise and they were just trying not to tell her until after the holidays. Whitney Elizabeth Engen Flanagan had never been more happy to be wrong about anything in her entire life.

The two blonde best friends had taken a pretty drastic measure earlier that summer when they felt like they were starting to drift apart a bit. They had a heart to heart, initiated by Ashlyn but warmly embraced and received by Whitney, in which they promised to try harder to see each other. It was hard when your whole existence revolved around taking care of the needs of your children, to carve out time for other people in your life. They both knew it and had struggled with it before, but never when it came to each other. And, to their credit, things hadn’t become a problem yet but they both knew they were on that path. Ashlyn reminded her bestie of what had happened between Ali and Sydney and explained again how that would only happen to them over her dead body. After Ali’s girls’ night back in early May, Ashlyn had fully intended to schedule something like that with Whitney and Niki. It had taken nearly non-stop nagging from Ali to get Ashlyn, Niki, and Whitney to commit to one night away from home, no spouses, no kids. Ryan took Becca and Tommy down to Long Island for the last weekend in June, one of his rare off-weeks in the middle of Lacrosse season, to satisfy his mother’s insistent request for a visit. That provided an entire, spouse-free and kid-free house in Winchester, Massachusetts. Niki tried to back out at the last minute but both Ashlyn and Whitney made it clear that was not going to happen.

The three friends spent about 24 hours together from 2pm Saturday afternoon to 2pm Sunday afternoon and it had been glorious. Niki and Ashlyn both posted frequent, foolish updates on their social media accounts and both Ali and Molly had to admit they were a little jealous of the stupid fun they seemed to be having. Whitney was having just as much fun, but she declined to share much of it for the rest of the world to see. They watched soccer and movies and played FIFA, mostly just to prove that they still could. They refused to cook a single thing and ordered take-out or delivery for every meal except Sunday brunch for which they dragged themselves down to a diner in Winchester Center. It seemed like such a simple and basic thing to do – to go hang out with your bestie for a night, but they couldn’t remember the last time they had done it. Sure, they all got together in different versions of the 4-family group, depending on who was around on any given weekend. But as much fun as that always was, it wasn’t the same as actually getting away from everything for a night. Everybody promised to do better at those excursions going forward. Ali and Ashlyn had both felt the positive impact girls’ night could have and knew they would keep trying to make it happen whenever they could.

The other and last big holiday party that year was the annual Mental Health Initiative Gala in Boston, two nights before Christmas Eve. The Kriegers continued their trend of attending as a smartly dressed family who spent a ton of time on the dance floor before making an early exit to get the kids home to bed. Lily had opted for a princess dress like her mommy and big sister, while the boys wore their small tuxes like their Mama. This year Deb and Mike joined them and Ali realized she hadn’t seen either of them so dressed up since their wedding. Helen Siegfriedt had done exactly what she had promised Ashlyn the year before. She had hired someone to take over her managerial position at the MHI and then spent the entire year training her on exactly how to do the job. Taylor Gervasio was an attractive brunette in her late 30s with a lot of experience in non-profit organizations. She was talented and smart and hard-working, in addition to being beautiful and charismatic. She had done almost every part of the non-profit program from grant-writing to stuffing envelopes to schmoozing potential donors and everything else in between. The only position she had no experience with was the daily leadership and managerial role that Helen had performed for the MHI since early 2022. Ashlyn had been skeptical at first, despite how great the candidate looked on paper.

“Honey, how in the world are you judging this poor woman for not having managerial experience when you won’t give her the chance to come and run the MHI?” Ali pointed out good-naturedly in
January once Helen had told the keeper about Taylor. “Somebody has to give her a chance at her first managerial position or she’ll never get any experience.”

“I know” Ashlyn sighed. “It sounds so stupid, but I can’t have the MHI take a step backwards Al. It just can’t happen.”

“Maybe if you show a little more faith in both Helen and...”

“Taylor.”

“Right, Taylor” the brunette nodded, trying to remember the name once and for all. “Maybe if you show more faith in Helen and Taylor you’ll see that the MHI doesn’t have to take a step backwards. Maybe they just hold steady for a year until Taylor works out some of the kinks. But they’re not stepping at all, in either direction, just holding steady until everybody’s up to full-strength. Have you considered that?”

“No, of course not” the keeper sighed loudly as she paced back and forth in her wife’s office in Cambridge. “That would make too much fucking sense” she groaned. “Thanks baby. I love the way your brain works” she gave the brunette a sheepish grin.

“Thanks” Ali laughed. “Just give the new girl a chance. It’s tough being new and if you help her out maybe she’ll be way better than you ever hoped.”

Fast forward to the MHI gala 11 months later, which was doubling as the big welcome party for Taylor Gervasio, and Ali started to regret her smart, level-headed advice to her wife. Taylor had been a model student over the past 11 months and had learned a tremendous amount from Helen and other members of the MHI team, including Ashlyn. Even the keeper had to admit that Helen’s replacement had been a very good hire and would represent the MHI with the same dignity, class and enthusiasm that Helen always had. They were different people, that was for sure, but they seemed to be cut from similar cloth. Helen was leaving the MHI as a 56-year old professional with contacts and colleagues who would do anything in the world for her. She was going to another young, start-up non-profit group who needed her help to get their dreams to become reality. She was wise and savvy and had seen every trick in the book during her three decades in the business. Taylor was taking over as a 37-year old go-getter who had enough experience to guide her away from trouble and enough charm and appeal to attract a whole other category of donor to the MHI. It was a crappy fact of life. There were some older white men, and a few women, who had money to give away to whomever caught their eye. Taylor’s beauty and her brave willingness to flirt her way through a room, were viewed as an undeniable upgrade over Helen’s more reserved approach to fundraising, to those select people. Taylor wasn’t blatant or overtly sexual and she never ever crossed any lines. She was just as professional as Helen had ever been, but there was an appealing warmth to her charm that made people respond positively to her.

Ali had only met the woman twice before during the year and they had exchanged pleasantries each time. The very first time, Ali had been struck by how attractive and charismatic Taylor was and, when Ashlyn had joined them a few moments later and greeted the manager-in-training with a warm hug before giving her wife a sweet kiss on the lips, heard every one of her jealousy bells ringing loudly in her head. She had an uneasy feeling of déjà vu and thought back to Paula the intern and that horrible summer they all spent cringing every time the determinedly inappropriate intern was anywhere near Ashlyn. Ali had convinced herself to stay calm. She had reminded herself that Ashlyn loved her and only her and that she would never leave her. Not even for a younger, more attractive version of herself – which is exactly what Taylor seemed to be. Fucking hell.

That night at the gala Ali felt her jaw set as Taylor moved gracefully through the dance floor towards her wife and family as they danced together to the popular ballroom standards the band
was playing. Ashlyn’s back was to the new manager as she faced Ali and made silly faces at her kids while they danced. The brunette saw Ashlyn’s face frown as she looked at her own pinched face and clenched jaw as they each danced with a twin in their arms. Deb was dancing with Drew and Mike with Josie but they were oblivious to Taylor’s advance. Ali tried to smile back at her wife and hide her mounting displeasure but only managed an odd sort of smirk as Taylor finally reached them. The younger woman placed her hand on Ashlyn’s shoulder from behind and leaned in close to her ear to whisper something. Both women glanced subtly towards the entrance where a few big donors were preparing to leave the party early. Ashlyn stopped dancing and turned around to face the door and the donors, Lily still in her arms. Ali’s eyes narrowed as she watched Taylor hold onto her wife’s bicep and lean into her as they both scanned the room for another target Ashlyn needed to talk with for a few minutes. Ali wondered if Taylor was brushing her fingers against the side of Ashlyn’s breast the way she herself did every time she wrapped her hand around her bicep like that. That was one of Ali’s favorite moves and she tried hard to swallow the jealousy and possessiveness she felt sweep through her entire body. It took great effort not to step forward and separate Taylor from her keeper’s body.

“Whoa, baby” Ashlyn pulled back from the heated kiss her wife was giving her in the middle of the dance floor with their children and other party-goers all around them a short while later. “Easy now” she kissed Ali’s cheek and gave her a quizzical look as she put some distance between them to try and cool her girl down.

It wasn’t until they got home a couple of hours later that Ali picked up where she had left off. As soon as the kids were all in bed she found her wife changing out of her tuxedo in their bedroom and wasted no time. Ali pushed the blonde, who had already removed her shirt and was still wearing her sexy bra and tuxedo pants, up against the dresser in the narrow entryway to the room. She put her hungry lips to work on Ashlyn’s neck while her fingers dug into the soft skin at her waist.

“Hey...” Ashlyn chuckled and then moaned softly as the most talented mouth in the world worked its magic on her flesh. “Damn, Al...what’s gotten in to you tonight?” she chuckled again, this time lower.

“Nothing, why?” Ali replied on her way up to the soft, sensitive skin behind Ashlyn’s ear.

“I’m not complaining...mnmnmnmnm...” the keeper moaned again and let her hands find that sexy ass she loved so much. “But something’s going on with you tonight and I think it’s more than just how good I look in my tux” she smirked.

Ali gave her another push as she grabbed both breasts in her hands and squeezed them. The dresser wobbled and something heavy fell off, landing behind it with a thud and catching Ashlyn’s attention.

“Come on honey, tell me what’s going on?” she pushed the brunette back and stood up straighter, rocking the dresser back in place and sending something else tumbling to the floor. “Shit Al.”

Ali saw the slight annoyance on her wife’s face and couldn’t help wondering herself what had fallen off the dresser. She was guessing one of Ashlyn’s watches and maybe her phone, but she wasn’t sure. The idea of breaking either of those two expensive things because of a jealous fit made her feel ashamed and she backed up even farther so her back was against the sliding closet door.

“What was it? Can we get it without pulling the dresser out?” the brunette asked as she started to get down on the ground to look underneath the large, heavy piece of furniture.

“My watch I think” the keeper replied without taking her eyes off of her wife. “Come up here and
“No, I’m sorry” Ali shook her head and lay flat on her stomach, fancy dress be damned. She reached her arm under the dresser and stretched it as far as she could before pulling it back out with the beautiful silver watch in her fingers and several dust bunnies stuck to her arm. “Here” she quickly dusted the watch off and handed it up to her wife without lifting her eyes up. She was afraid to ask if it had been damaged. “What else fell?” she stayed on her knees, scanning the floor around them.

“Al, come on, get off the floor” Ashlyn finally lifted the brunette up herself, dusting off her elegant dress and turning her around to face her. “Something’s bothering you and I’d really like you to tell me what it is. Please?”

“Oh God, it’s just...embarrassing, that’s all. I’m sorry babe. I’m just...ugh...just pretend that didn’t happen, alright?” she stepped past the blonde and moved further into the room towards her closet in the far corner up near the head of the bed. She stopped after three steps and spoke in a flat, even voice, hoping Ashlyn would just let it go. “Will you unzip me please?”

Ashlyn bent down and picked up the small leather notebook that had fallen from the dresser and returned it there, then went and unzipped her wife’s dress. She helped her step out of it and kissed her bare shoulder before watching her hang it up on the outside of the closet door. That was the ‘take to the dry cleaners’ spot and the keeper would add her own shirt there too. When Ali turned back towards the dressers to get some pajamas and finish getting undressed, Ashlyn blocked her path and wouldn’t let her pass.

“I just want to change and go to bed, so move please” the brunette said quietly, still feeling the sting of her own insecurities and jealousies – now with the addition of embarrassment.

“Nope. Not until you tell me what’s got you so pissed off or...worried?...I’m not even sure what mood you’re in right now” Ashlyn’s soft, playful giggle was almost impossible for Ali to resist. It disarmed the brunette as the keeper put her hands on her wife’s hips and held her in place.

That touch. The simple but potent sensation of Ashlyn’s fingers on the bare skin of her hips as she stood there in her light blue panties and matching silk bra. It did it every fucking time. It melted her brain and broke her resolve. She closed her eyes, unable to meet her keeper’s curious, careful gaze. Ali moved her right hand out and rubbed Ashlyn’s left bicep, blindly finding it because she had reached for it a million times before.

“This is my bicep” her words were hot, her eyes still closed. She cupped the back of her keeper’s upper arm, wrapping her fingers around it and letting them graze the side of her breast. “This is all mine.”

Ashlyn sucked in a breath when she saw how dark Ali’s eyes were, once she opened them a few seconds later. It didn’t require much more explanation than that. Ashlyn didn’t know who had made her wife jealous that night, but somebody sure as hell had. That explained the hotter than usual kiss on the very public dance floor too. The idea that her beautiful, perfect, brunette could think that Ashlyn would ever be interested in another woman’s body always baffled the keeper. They had both made mistakes in their relationship before, and probably would again, but that had never been one of them. It was almost laughable to even think about it. Except that the look on Ali’s face was anything but funny and Ashlyn swallowed hard before replying.

“Damn right it is, my queen” the keeper husked out. “Nobody’s but yours” she pulled Ali into her, embracing her and feeling the familiar yet exciting electricity zip between their bodies. “I belong to you...and that’s just the way I like it.”
Lori Christopher came up to spend a week with her dad and Deb around Christmas and was a welcome addition to the festivities. Donnie, her older brother, was supposed to join her so they could both spend the holiday with the father they had almost lost. But, as had so often happened during the previous 6 months while Mike recovered and rehabbed and figured out how to live his new heart-healthy life, Donnie’s busy work life got in the way of his visit. Lori had arrived Wednesday the 20th of December and would be flying back to Miami with both Mike and Deb on the following Wednesday, the 27th.

As Ali pulled the minivan into the driveway of her mother’s condo in Manchester, MA the Saturday before Christmas, she frowned when she saw her step-sister talking animatedly into her cellphone as she stood just outside the door. The condo was half of a duplex with its own driveway, small garage and front door. Lori looked up when she heard the vehicle pull in and waved awkwardly at Ali before turning away and continuing the intense conversation.

“Alright, girls” Ali turned to look at Josie, Cristina and Lily who were strapped into their booster seats.

The words caught in her throat for a second as she had a flashback to when her daughters were younger and needed full-fledged carseats to secure them on the road. Now they were big enough, as was Cristina, at 7-1/2, 5-1/2 and 2 months shy of 7 years old, to need only the short booster seat to lift them up about six inches so the seatbelts that crossed their bodies didn’t decapitate them if they ever did get into a serious accident.

“Wait here” she continued as she unbuckled her own seatbelt and opened the driver’s door. “I’ll be right back with Grandma and Lori and then we’ll be all ready to go” she smiled happily as she hopped out of the minivan.

“But where is Auntie Syd?” Josie looked annoyed from her spot in the middle of the minivan.

“She and Grammy Sandi are right behind us” Ali reminded her daughter for the third time in the past 15 minutes.

As the brunette walked towards the door of the condo, Sydney and Sandi pulled in behind the minivan. Ali smiled over her shoulder when she saw her best friend get out of the car and walk up to the minivan to keep the girls entertained in her absence.
“I don’t care what the excuse is Donnie, it’s fucking bullshit and you know it!” Lori’s voice carried louder than Ali thought she realized.

Ali hesitated for a couple of seconds, wondering if she should turn back around and give Lori another moment of privacy or not. But they really didn’t have time. Their reservations for afternoon tea were at 3:20pm and the hostess had cautioned them about how difficult it would be to accommodate any parties that arrived late. There was no way in hell the brunette was going to deal with three little girls having hissy fits because the Wenham Tea House turned them away for being late. Not gonna happen. It was two days before Christmas and a Saturday and everything and everybody was busy and starting to feel the strain of the impending shopping deadline. The only reason they had been able to get the reservation in the first place was because Sydney used to coach one of the daughters of the owner. That and Sydney had promised they would tip very generously. Ali and Sydney used to do ‘afternoon tea’ with Deb when they were little and now that they had their own kids they started taking them to tea at one of the two fancy tea houses on the North Shore of Boston. It wasn’t always just a girls trip either. Sydney had brought all three of her boys to tea and Ali had brought both of her sons. As they got older and were better able to express what they were each interested in, it had become more of a girls thing. Nobody in either family had said or done anything to make the boys feel like they weren’t welcome. But they weren’t idiots. They saw that most of the people who went to tea were women and girls.

Ali and Sydney tried to go to tea once every time Deb was up North and they preferred to do it in warmer weather so they could enjoy the beautiful flower garden at the Wenham Tea House in Wenham, MA which was next to Beverly, MA and not too far down the coast from Manchester. The other fancy tea house was Heath’s Tea Room in Rockport – the town just to the North of Gloucester where the Kriegers spent a lot of time and attended several activities all throughout the year. Heath’s had a beautiful wildflower trail you could ‘hike’ before or after your tea which made it their favorite tea place. It was just a glorified walk, really, but it was perfect for kids and older folks who didn’t officially hike well. But at Christmastime the Wenham Tea House pulled out all the stops and did a big holiday-theme. Everything you saw was decorated for the season and that included each piece of fine china and table linen and lampshade. That was why they opted for Wenham at Christmastime.

Ali pushed forward, clearing her throat to remind Lori that she was there, and approached the door.

“Yeah, well you’ve been saying that since July. I can’t believe you’re being such an asshole” Lori huddled into herself for warmth, holding her arms around her body in a self-hug as she gave her brother a piece of her mind. She didn’t seem to realize that Ali was only a few feet behind her, about to knock on the door before entering her mom’s home. “He’s your father!” she yelled. “You can tell him yourself. I’m not doing it anymore. I can’t take the sad look he gets on his face every time you blow him off.”

She turned and seemed surprised to see Ali standing there. They exchanged a quick look and the brunette could see the angry tears in Lori’s eyes as she finished her phone call. Ali knocked lightly on the door and then stepped inside, leaving the siblings to their dispute.

“Yeah, well fuck you for being such a selfish prick. Merry Christmas.”

It wasn’t until a much quieter moment when the two grandmas had taken the three little girls to the bathroom towards the end of their Christmas tea that Ali had a chance to check on her step-sister.

“Hey, so I’m sorry about whatever’s going on with Donnie” the brunette reached over and patted Lori’s forearm. “I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but it sounds like he’s not coming?”

“I thought he was coming tonight?” Sydney looked from Ali to Lori, confused. “He changed his
plans again?"

“Yep, what else is new?” Lori sighed and looked dejectedly into what was left in her beautiful, festive teacup.

“He’s not coming at all now?” Sydney clarified, not believing what she was hearing.

“No, something...”

“Came up at work...” Sydney scowled and shook her head as she finished Lori’s sentence.

Sydney and Lori weren’t best friends but they knew each other pretty well because, when they were both single, Ali and Sydney used to visit Deb in Miami a few times every year. The coach knew Donnie too and he had never been her favorite person. She didn’t have any hard proof, but she had always had a feeling Donnie didn’t like the color of her skin very much. The only other person who knew her theory was Ali and the two had agreed to just keep it to themselves. But Ali had started being more observant after Sydney had confessed her suspicion and she had to agree with her bestie, even though it made her sick to her stomach to even think about it. Donnie never ever said or did anything obvious, not even when they were alone. But he just always found a way to subtly avoid Sydney as much as possible, in any situation.

“Your poor dad” Ali commiserated, knowing that was what Lori was really worried about. “I’m sorry Lore.”

“Thanks” Lori gave her a half-smile and popped another adorable and delicious tiny cookie into her mouth. “I’m trying to suck it up and not let dad or Deb know how pissed off I am...”

“You’re doing great” Ali returned the smile and enjoyed another cookie herself. “We’ll make sure your dad has a nice Christmas, I promise.”

“Yeah, just think how happy he is not to be here with us this afternoon” Sydney giggled and Ali and Lori soon joined her.

“Any other year and I’d almost pay money to see that” Ali chuckled.

As the three women sat at their table waiting for the bathroom group to return, Ali paid the check and assured Sydney that she was leaving a very generous tip. They all smiled as the waitress thanked them and wished them a Merry Christmas. Sydney caught sight of the bathroom group and grinned as she watched them start to tromp up the small aisle between tables. Josie led the way with Sandi close behind her, ready to guide the little girl in case she got disoriented trying to find their table again. Cristina was next as it appeared they were lined up oldest to youngest but they all knew that hadn’t really been on purpose. Then came Lily with Deb bringing up the rear. Ali and Sydney both knew, having been in that position themselves a thousand times each, that Deb had been the last one out of the restroom because she had done a sweep to make sure nothing had been left behind. It had happened to them all at one point or another. Somebody’s favorite stuffed animal or beloved little knick-knack or brand new tiny toy had been dropped and forgotten while small hands were busy with other things. Forgotten, that is, until right around bedtime that night when whichever child had done the dropping became inconsolable without said toy. They had all learned the hard way and Ali loved her mom more than ever in that moment, especially with Lily’s penchant for carrying several tiny things in her pockets or hands and losing them all over the place. That was another nightmare Ali didn’t want to have to go through, thank you very much.

Just as Josie and Sandi got back into their seats, Cristina turned her attention to one of the tables she was walking past and stumbled over her own two feet. She must have been distracted by the
tower of pretty little sandwiches and cookies that had just been placed on the next table, because she tripped and fell forward in a heap. She reached out to break her fall and banged her elbow hard into one of the nearby chairs. Sydney and Deb had seen the whole thing from opposite perspectives and Ali, sitting opposite the coach, had turned to see the very end of the fall once she had noticed the horrified look on Sydney’s face. It happened too quickly for anybody to do anything, but Sydney had stood up and started to move towards Cristina at the same time Deb had tried to move past Lily to get to her as well. Cristina burst into tears and clutched her elbow as she sat herself up on the floor. The woman who was sitting in the chair leaned down and lifted the little girl up so she was standing again. There had been a time, not so long ago, when that small act of kindness would have set Cristina off into her own nightmare of terrifying memories and images from her brutal past. Sydney, Deb and Ali all held their breath and froze, instinctively, as Cristina tried to get her bearings through her tears. She finally focused on Ali and ran the last few steps to her, still holding her injured elbow and crying.

“Oh sweetheart, that must really hurt” the brunette frowned, opened her arms and let the girl climb up into her lap while everybody else took their seats again too.

Cristina would be turning 7 years old in early February and wasn’t so little anymore. She sat sideways on Ali’s lap, her injured arm up and her head tucked under the brunette’s chin. Ali held her and squeezed her and rubbed her back to try and soothe her. Cristina and Ali had come a long way in the almost three years they had known each other but this was a first. Ali knew, as did everybody else at the table except for Lori, that if Ashlyn had been there she would have been Cristina’s first choice for comfort. But Ali couldn’t deny how moved she was to be the first choice out of the group assembled that afternoon. She thought Deb would have been the one Cristina would have run to. Maybe the fact that Grandma hadn’t been around her grandkids as much that year had tilted the scales in Ali’s favor.

“Shhhh...you’re ok now baby girl” she cooed into the top of Cristina’s head and left a soft kiss there too. “It’s ok Cris, I’ve got you honey. You banged your elbow on the chair, that’s all. You’ll be ok” her words and voice were soft and warm and steady.

Ali gave Sydney a look that told her to start a conversation about anything so that Cristina wouldn’t have to be the center of attention anymore and could start to settle down. The coach quickly obliged and had the table giggling about how awful her cookies would look if she tried to bake pretty little ones like they had just eaten. It took a couple of minutes but Cristina’s breathing steadied out and the tears slowed to a gradual stop. It was ten minutes in a hectic day in the middle of one of the busiest weekends of the whole year but Ali would never forget a single moment of it. She had been patiently waiting for Cristina and Edgar to learn to trust and love her and here was proof that it was happening even though it wasn’t always easy to see or feel. Patience really was a virtue and progress was definitely a beautiful thing.

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Early the next morning, Christmas Eve day, Ali tugged her wife’s arm as they walked through the darkness towards the ocean.

“Come on” she tilted her head to the side, smiled shyly, and pulled Ashlyn’s arm harder.

All the keeper could do was wonder how on earth Ali could look so adorable when it was so early and so cold. They were both dressed for the late December weather, complete with winter hats and scarves and mittens, and Ashlyn was having a hard time getting over the fact that her wife had dragged her out of their warm bed at 6:40am and forced her to go out into the 29 degree cold before she’d even had any coffee. The blonde’s brain wasn’t firing on all cylinders yet but she
shuffled along, willing her legs to move to keep warm.

“I’m coming” she grumped. “You see me walking down the street, right?”

“I do, cranky pants” Ali kept up her pace and positive attitude, chuckling in her throaty, morning voice. “But there’s coffee at the end of our short walk, so keep moving, slow-poke.”

As they walked onto the beach Ashlyn expected to stop and drop one of the big beach blankets she was carrying. Well, Ali had more or less draped it across the keeper’s shoulders, sort of like she was a pack mule. But Ali kept going all the way across the beach to the other side. To the big rock. Ashlyn’s rock. Their rock. It was windy and chilly and still dark, although the sun was starting to warm up the edge of the distant horizon to the East, over the ocean. Finally all the pieces fell into place and the keeper had to fight to keep her emotions in check. She pulled Ali into a hug, squeezing hard to make sure she could feel it through all of their winter clothes and jackets.

“I love you” she whispered into Ali’s ear.

“There she is” the brunette smiled. “Now get that sexy butt of yours up there. I don’t want to miss the sunrise.”

When they were finally set up on top of the rock, facing the ocean with the sunrise just starting to color the sky, Ali took two thermoses out of the backpack Ashlyn hadn’t even seen her wearing, and they toasted the sun. They snuggled together on one blanket with the other one gathered tightly around them to break the wind as they watched and waited and warmed up just enough to keep Ashlyn from whining about the cold. They talked about how different the last week had been compared to the insanely busy first two weeks before the big Knight-Harris party. They talked about Deb and Mike and Lori and Donnie and Ali filled her wife in on the latest change in plans.

“Tell me something you’re happy about this Christmas and then something you’re sad about” Ali asked from her usual spot, between Ashlyn’s legs. She was sitting sideways with her legs across one of the blonde’s legs so they could see and hear each other as they took in the gorgeous sea and sky. “If you want to.”

“I think that’s cool” Ashlyn nodded as she thought about it. “I want to. But can I do the sad thing first and finish with the happy thing?”

“Even better” Ali agreed, loving the way her wife tried to take care of herself even in such small and seemingly insignificant ways.

“Ok, ummmm...well, I’m sad that Meg’s not here” she confessed, her whole face changing and becoming bleaker at the thought. She was quiet for a couple of minutes and Ali wondered if she should try to make her feel better or not. They hadn’t discussed how this was going to work.

“That makes me sad too” she decided to go with her gut and talk about it. “But then it makes me happy knowing that she’s probably having a blast in Aspen with her friends” Ali smiled softly at her wife and was relieved to see some light come back into her face.

“Yeah, that’s a good point” Ashlyn nodded. “Hannah will spoil them and make sure they all have a great time. You’re right.”

“We can still miss her like crazy though” Ali leaned up and kissed Ashlyn’s cheek.

“Good, cuz I do” the keeper hugged her wife and re-positioned the blanket higher around her neck.
“And we’ll have her in Florida with us in...” Ali counted the days in her head, “three days.”

“That’s even better” Ashlyn smiled.

“Now a happy one” the brunette encouraged.

“Ummm...let’s see” the keeper paused and put her mind to work. “This is going to seem silly and I don’t want you to think that all the awesome things the kids do don’t make me happy every day...”

“Honey, I’m not going to criticize your happy” Ali chuckled. “Don’t edit yourself, just tell me.”

“Ok, well, I’m happy that Marisol finally gave us her real Christmas card, instead of the generic one she gets us every year” she finished and gave her wife a sheepish look.

“Oooh, that’s a really good one” Ashlyn nodded approvingly. Their house cleaner, Marisol, had been extraordinarily private about her own home life ever since she took over for Mrs. Riley six years earlier. All the Kriegers knew was that she was a single mom and that she had three young children. “That makes me happy too. They look like good kids, I mean, you know, like they’re ok...” she stammered, trying to explain herself.

“I know what you mean Al” Ashlyn let her off the hook. “They look like their mom takes good care of them, and like they’re happy, which has been driving you crazy not knowing that for all these years.”

They both chuckled because it was true. It had practically driven Ali insane to have Marisol in their lives and in their house twice a week for 6 whole years and not know anything about her life or her kids. After a short pause where they finished what was left of their coffee and snuggled even closer to fight the cold, Ashlyn prompted her wife.

“Your turn, sugarplum.”

“This is going to sound really self-serving, but I don’t mean it as a kudos to myself...”

“What did you say about me not editing myself?” the keeper pressed her freezing cold nose into Ali’s cheek and teased her. “Just say it. I’ll know what you mean.”

“Alright” Ali hesitated another couple of seconds. “I’m so happy about Tanner’s new contract. He’s worth every penny and I really wasn’t sure the Revs would pay him and then he’d have to go to another team and we wouldn’t get to see him...” she strung the words together quickly and Ashlyn had a hard time understanding her with the additional challenge of cold, stiff lips. “I’m happy for Tanner and for Vicki and for my dad...I’m happy for all of us” she beamed.

“Damn, that’s a good one” Ashlyn grinned as broadly as her freezing face would allow. “And I know you won’t say it but I can because you’re my wife and I’m allowed to say how awesome you are” she quirked her eyebrow at the frown Ali gave her. “You kicked ass putting that contract together for him. I’m so proud of you honey.”

“Thanks babe” the brunette ducked her head shyly.

They were quiet again and Ashlyn wondered why Ali hadn’t started with her sad. Then it hit her.

“You don’t want to tell me your sad, do you?”

“What? No, I mean, it’s not really a sad...” the brunette turned her head to the side to look out at the ocean with the seagulls and other shore birds trying to find food and navigate through the strong
wind.

Ashlyn was a little hurt that Ali didn’t want to share her feelings, but she didn’t want to push her either. The keeper stayed as still as she could while she waited for her wife to confide in her, but the cold made it nearly impossible. Ashlyn’s body started shivering after about four more minutes. She thought Ali had more to say but was struggling to get it out. The blonde couldn’t wait in the cold any longer.

“I love you Al, but I’m freezing and I need to go warm up. I’m sorry” she leaned back and separated herself from the warmish body in front of her.

“Right, oh my God, Ashlyn you’re shivering” Ali moved quickly to pack up the two empty thermoses. She stood up and collected the blankets after helping the keeper to her feet. “Alright, let’s go babe. I’m sorry. I don’t know...”

“It’s ok. I’m not frozen solid yet” Ashlyn chuckled. “There’s still time to save me” she tried to lighten the mood or change the subject. But failed. “But you could tell me what’s on your mind, just in case. That’d be great.”

It took Ali until they were almost back at the big old house before she mustered up the strength to say the words that had caught in her throat up on the big rock. She stopped at the foot of the driveway, hoping none of the kids or dogs had seen them through the windows yet. Kyle and Nathan would be fine with all 6 kids for another few minutes. Ali took a deep breath and then almost chickened out again when she saw the concern and anxiety and love swirling around in her favorite hazel eyes as they stared back at her.

“Just tell me” the keeper implored as she hugged herself and hopped up and down to try and keep warm. “Please don’t make me imagine something...”

“No, I don’t want that” Ali shook her head at the idea of Ashlyn’s creative imagination cooking up something truly horrible in place of having the honest truth. She inhaled deeply, closed her eyes, and pushed the words out of her mouth in a rush of breath and sound. “I’m afraid you’re missing out on too many things, too many opportunities, so you can be here in the afternoons for the kids. I feel like you’d never admit it, not even to me, but it makes me sad to think you’re giving up things that might be important to you...”

“Ali...” Ashlyn shook her head slowly from side to side as a small smile creased her nearly frozen lips. “No way baby” she reached out and rubbed the brunette’s arms, as if warming them up might make her own limbs regain feeling again. “No fucking way. I love my life, our life, and I don’t feel like I’m missing anything.”

“Are you sure? We don’t really have time to talk about it now anyway, so maybe we should both just think about it and then talk next week when there’s more time” Ali suggested, aware that they had been out in the cold for a long time now.

“I don’t need time” Ashlyn cocked her head a bit to the side as a frightening thought ran through her mind. “But do you? Are you not happy with things the way they are?”

Ali couldn’t help but see the worry wash across the beautiful face in front of her.

“No, this wasn’t a backhanded attempt to say anything like that” she spoke clearly as she cupped Ashlyn’s cold cheek with her mittened hand. “I’m good. I mean I miss the kids when I’m not here in the afternoons, but I’m good. I want to make sure you don’t feel...stuck here or something like that.”
Ashlyn could see there was no ulterior motive in her wife’s answer. The brunette was being honest and straightforward, as usual. The keeper was touched that Ali had been thinking so much about her well-being that she had let it worry her enough to talk it out.

“I can do anything I want to do all morning long. As long as I leave the city by 1:15pm so I can pick up the kids at 2:30pm I’m as free as a bird” she smiled and winked at Ali and then they both laughed and hugged each other again. “Now can we please go inside before I start losing my toes?”

“Yes, you big baby” Ali playfully smacked her arm as they turned to walk up the driveway towards the house. “See if I ever take you to see a romantic sunrise again” she hip-checked the blonde. “You’ll notice I don’t complain when you wake me up to do these things” she quirked an eyebrow at Ashlyn as she leaned into her with her face turned up waiting for a kiss.

“And you’ll notice, my queen, that when I wake you up for romantic sunrises I do it in Florida where it’s a hell of a lot warmer!” Ashlyn pecked her on the lips as Ali laughed out loud and swatted her arm.

“Whatsoever” she rolled her eyes, still chuckling as they approached the mudroom door. “So ungrateful” she teased some more.

“Listen” Ashlyn stopped them just outside the door and waited for Ali to look up at her again. “I loved our sunrise today. Even though it was freezing. And even though you made one of the longest days of the entire year even longer by making us get up before Dodge was even awake...”

“Oh yeah, I can feel the love alright” Ali snorted and then giggled.

“No, seriously Al, thank you.” They gazed at each other for a couple of seconds, letting the moment settle around them. “Please don’t ever stop taking me to see the sunrise with you. Ok?”

“That’s a promise, babe.”

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Christmas Eve continued and the Kriegers all gathered at the Kimball house in Ipswich for the evening’s festivities. It was strange for a few minutes, not being at the big old house where so many of their recent Christmas Eves had been held, but then everything felt really familiar and warm and fun. Bill and Iris Kimball had even adopted the Krieger custom of not putting the star on top of the tree until that night and that had practically made Ali cry when she realized it. It was Edgar’s turn to put the star on top and he grinned from ear to ear as Kyle and Nathan lifted him up high so he could reach. Cristina knew next year would be her turn and she was excited just thinking about it.

It was a full house that night with the Kriegers and the Dwyers and even the Flanagans and Engens joining them for a rare treat. Whitney’s family was still visiting and would be there through New Year’s, enjoying their New England Christmas. Whitney’s brother, Taylor, was there with his wife, Camila, who was almost 4 months pregnant with their first child. Deb, Mike and Lori Christopher were there enjoying themselves and trying not to let the fact that Donnie had failed to make the trip bother them. Sandi Leroux kept Deb laughing and at ease for most of the evening while both grandmothers marveled at all of their grandchildren and how big and distinct they had all gotten. Everybody made sure to tell Mike how happy they were to see him, the recent health scare fresh in everyone’s mind. Ken and Vicki and Koty and Brianna were all there, but Tanner was not. Likewise, Jared Kimball was the only member of his family not present that evening and their absences were noticed.
“So, who’s going to get hitched first?” Kyle posed the question on everybody’s mind over the past few family gatherings.

“You mean between Tanner and Jared?” Sydney clarified and laughed. “Neither!”

“What? Why not?” Whitney asked, curious about the surprising take from the coach.

“Yeah, Tanner seems pretty serious about this one” Brianna offered.

“Mmmm hmmm, and what’s her name?” Sydney challenged with a knowing smile.

“Oooooh, savage Syd” Ashlyn chuckled and shook her head.

“What am I missing?” Lori asked with an inquisitive smile. She had met both young men during previous visits but barely knew either of them at all. She and Donnie had only been up to New England a few times over the past several years and didn’t always see everybody in the extended family. “They’re both cute, and nice, and...”

“It’s Steffi, I think” Brianna furrowed her brow as she concentrated. “Or Stacy? What’s her name Koty?”

“Sara” Koty nodded thoughtfully, trying to pretend that the answer had come to him more easily than it really had.

“See? You don’t even bother to learn their names anymore” Sydney cackled and most of the room laughed with her.

“They’re the bachelors” Dom supplied the answer to Lori’s question. “They always seem like they’re ready to settle down...”

“Hell, they complain about being single all the time” Kyle laughed. “And then they do everything they can to stay single.”

“...but they never really are” Dom finished and joined Kyle’s laughter.

“I think it’ll be Jared” Brianna shrugged. “Tanner seems to be enjoying himself too much right now” she smirked.

“He’s only 27, let’s let him live a little” Koty spoke up, quietly defending his younger brother.

“Well Jared’s only 32 so let’s let him do the same” the other big brother, Nathan, added.

“Hey, they’re both spending Christmas Eve with their boyfriend and girlfriend” Kyle reminded everyone. “Which is a big deal for either one of them. That’s the only reason I brought it up. I’m not ragging on them.”

“You’re just jealous!” Sydney laughed loudly and poked Kyle in the ribs as she stood next to him. She gave him a side-hug to make sure he knew she was only teasing him.

“Girl, please” he replied dramatically. “I was single for sooooo long” he rolled his eyes, “you couldn’t pay me all the money in the world to go back to that mess.”

“That’s right hon” Nathan winked at his husband. “I snatched him up at 38 years young and it was the best thing I ever did.”

“Dad, will you tell Cris to let Peaches go?” Edgar stood in front of Kyle, looking up at him,
oblivious to everything else going on in the room around him. “I want to play indoor fetch and she wants to too but Cris won’t let her go.”

“Why don’t you play with Persey then?” Kyle suggested as he squatted down to talk with his son. “She’s always up for fetch, and she’s better and faster at it than anybody else too” he whispered, “but don’t tell Peaches I said that.”

Nathan watched his husband and his son interact, a loving smile on his face. “Well, one of the best things I ever did.”

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Christmas Day was just as much fun, although there was a big brouhaha among the kids because some of them got the coolest new toy that had been impossible to find for the past three weeks, and most of them didn’t.

“You either share your new toys or nobody plays with them” Ashlyn spoke sharply as she broke up a scuffle between 4-1/2 year old Maddox Dwyer and 5-1/2 year old Dodge. “You guys know the rules.”

Dom’s parents had gotten their hands on the toys, the 2028 version of fidget spinners, over in London and sent them for their three grandsons to open Christmas morning. They lasted until almost 3pm, a couple hours after all the families converged at Ken Krieger’s house, before they had to be taken away permanently for the rest of the day. Three super cool new gadget toys being shared among nine kids was a recipe for disaster. It had been a brutal 45 minutes immediately afterwards, but then the remaining 5 hours of the holiday were much more peaceful for everybody.

The weather was unusually cold that year so everybody stayed inside for most of the day. There was a brief excursion around the yard with the dogs for several of the more intrepid kids and adults, but it didn’t last very long. Hot chocolate took the sting out of the adventurers once they unbundled themselves. Even the dogs seemed happy to be back inside again, willing to trade the freedom and space of the yard for the more restricted area inside the warm and cozy house. Ali stood off to the side of the kitchen, near the door into the garage, and watched Sydney, Vicki and Deb pour the homemade hot chocolate into mugs and set them on the coffee table in the living room for the kids to gather around. Kyle, Koty and Iris were helping the kids out of their outerwear and boots while Ali, Ken and Dom, the adults who had ventured outside with the kids and dogs, took their own gear off by the side of the room, out of the way.

The dogs, all six of them, wandered around the large kitchen at different speeds, looking for anything yummy that might have been dropped on the floor during the thirty minutes they had been outside. It was Bandit’s house and he was in charge, even though Boss was the real ringleader of the group – when he wanted to be. The other dogs followed Bandit’s lead and when he sat politely and quietly in front of Ken, leading to a raggedly formed half circle of sitting dogs around both Ken and Ali, they were all rewarded with a treat. Peaches was still a spaz and the worst-behaved of the bunch, but she was getting better. It helped for her to be around other well-behaved dogs like Persey and Fred and Bandit. Ziggy, the Dwyer’s younger Goldendoodle, wasn’t quite as good as those three but he was much better than Peaches. Boss was his own deal. He somehow existed separately from the other dogs a lot of the time. He was the only truly small dog so he was allowed to go places the bigger dogs weren’t always able to fit – like on the crowded couch. Boss was almost always in somebody’s lap or up on the top of the couch behind somebody’s shoulders. He was older and more fickle, sort of like Persey in that regard. But Persey was active and always had to know what was going on in every room. Boss had the same nonchalance that Fred did, although Fred’s indifference was largely because he was too lazy to get up and check anything out.
And he never really had to. Persey always did that for him and then reported back. Bandit, as expected from his mix of breeds – hound and great Pyrenees, was the biggest physically, and the most dominant personality-wise, except for Boss, and he was one of the best dogs Ken Krieger had ever owned. He literally herded the kids sometimes. He got up and escorted them from room to room whenever he wasn’t too tired from running around with them in the yard. It was a great group of dogs and the adults knew they had lucked out with dogs that loved kids and vice versa. There just wasn’t any other way to go with their large, extended family.

Jared Kimball showed up solo, as expected, and endured the good-natured teasing from everyone, continuing the bachelor conversation from the evening before. Tanner Wild brought his current girlfriend, Sara, which was an enormous step for the young man. Vicki did her best not to fawn all over the woman while Koty and Brianna tried to make Sara feel comfortable. They had met her once before and were the only people the newcomer recognized in the big house full of so many people. Sandi Leroux’s ‘don’t call him my boyfriend’ stopped by for a few hours around the official Christmas dinner and as easy as it was to tease her about him, everyone could see how much she really cared for him. They still weren’t officially dating exclusively, but they were a couple whether they wanted to admit it or not. They were more like an old married couple who just didn’t live together. Sydney was happy for her mom but couldn’t help thinking she could do better. But she never admitted that to anybody but Ali. Instead, she teased her mother mercilessly about the quiet guy who loved cats and didn’t really care very much for dogs. It was her way of telling her mom that she approved and Sandi knew it.

The Scott Krieger family arrived in full force in the afternoon, adding their matter and volume to the equation. Ashlyn found herself having the same conversations about the Patriots playoff chances with the Krieger men that she did every Christmas. She didn’t mind though. It had become their own little tradition over the years and this year they even included Jon’s 6-year old son Seamus in the debate. Scott and Becky Krieger had 6 grandchildren and Ali couldn’t believe what a difference it had made in her aunt’s overall disposition. Both Kyle and Sydney had told the brunette about Aunt Becky’s first meeting with Edgar and Cristina at Thanksgiving last year, but this was the first time the brunette had seen the old woman in action herself. Becky absolutely doted on her grandkids and the love and affection she showed them almost made her appear to be a normal, loving human being. Ali exchanged the occasional surprised look with her mother throughout the day, but she had to admit that this Becky Krieger wasn’t so bad. Of course, they all had to listen to her brag endlessly about her grandchildren.

Little Allie was 17 years old and the only thing that had ever made Ali Krieger feel older than that was when Meg had turned 16 earlier that same year. When did the two little flower girls from her wedding become these beautiful young women? Jesus fucking Christ! Ali’s eldest cousin, Jeff, and his wife Vivian had experienced lots of difficulty getting pregnant. But Viv had finally given birth to Madeline who was now a big, 8-year old, only child. She was incredibly close with her cousin who was also 8 years old, Amanda or Mandy as she was called. Mandy was Little Allie’s baby sister and Rachael, Ali’s favorite cousin, and her husband Carl had stopped after their ‘surprise’ baby. It had been a shock to their systems to have another baby nine years after Little Allie. It was the best surprise of their lives though and Rachael loved the fact that Mandy and Madeline were so close. It made her think of how she and Ali had grown up only four years apart in age.

In between Jeff and Rachael in the Scott Krieger family was Jonathan. Jon was a year younger than Ali and he and his wife Kelly had always been the most open-minded and accepting members of their family. They had three adorable little kids and had done Becky Krieger the supreme honor of having two boys who would carry the beloved Krieger name down to the next generation – the way it was supposed to be. It was easy to get annoyed with Becky’s ridiculous notions about what made a ‘real Krieger’, but then all you had to do was look at 6-year old Seamus’ adorable little face and all of that bullshit fell away. Katie was an active 3-year old who kept everybody hopping and
little Liam had just turned one at the end of October. Josie was ecstatic to have two more little minions to boss around in Katie and Liam, but she was even more eager to try and join the tight relationship of Madeline and Mandy who were both a year older than she was. Seamus was a spastic addition to whatever trouble Dodge and Maddox were up to and Lily bounced easily back and forth between the two groups. And Madeline, Mandy and Josie were all fascinated by the amazing 17-year old in their midst. All the young moms could practically see the wheels turning in their little girls’ heads as they watched the teenager like hawks. Luckily, Little Allie – whom nobody called Little Allie anymore unless Big Ali was in the same room, was a pretty good kid. She wasn’t as good as Meg was and she had gone through a fairly tumultuous junior year of high school already, with the second half of the year still to go, but she was basically a good kid. Ashlyn wished more than ever that Meg had joined them for Christmas that year.

The person who seemed the happiest of all of the New Hampshire Kriegers was Uncle Scott. Ken had confessed to Vicki that Scott was a new man now that Becky wasn’t so awful all the time. Nobody in the family except Ken had understood what a toll living with such a negative person for all those years had taken on his older brother. All in all it was a wonderful day and everybody got along pretty well. The only real rough spot had been when the littlest NH Kriegers had tried, and failed, to nap in the unfamiliar house full of strange sights, sounds and smells.

“I sure don’t miss that” Ken chuckled as he and Ali waved from the driveway at the two packed mini-vans that were heading back to New Hampshire early that evening.

“What? The crying toddlers? Or being trapped in a car with Aunt Becky for two hours?” Ali giggled as she leaned into her father trying to stay warm.

“Ha, both” he laughed and turned them around once the minivans were both out of sight. “It’s so much easier now that none of them nap anymore.”

“I miss having naptime to get things done” Ali explained as they stepped into the garage, the big overhead door lowering behind them and blocking out most of the cold. “But it’s so much easier to schedule things without having to worry about the kids turning into small mutant beasts in the middle of every damned day” she laughed. “God, Liam’s a cutie though, isn’t he?”

“He looks just like Jon did at that age” Ken smiled.

They walked towards the rear right corner of the garage where the door into the kitchen was located, and just as Ali started to walk up the three steps her father stopped her.

“Hey,” he said, pausing and waiting for the brunette to turn around and look at him. “Can I tell you something, princess?”

“Sure Daddy” Ali replied with a smile, using her old name for her father that she hardly ever used. It sometimes slipped out when they were alone and always surprised her when it happened. “What’s up?”

“Nothing really” he smiled back and reached for her hand as she stood on the first step which brought her height up to his. “I just want to say that you’re doing a great job with everything. I mean...there’s a lot going on these days and some of it’s really hard and I...” he looked down quickly, but lifted his eyes back up for the important part. “I want to make sure you know that it’s not your responsibility to look out for everybody all the time and make sure everybody’s ok.”

Ali cocked her head and felt herself start to get defensive, even though she was trying hard not to react that way. What the hell was her father trying to say? Ken saw the change on her face and hurried to speak again, hoping to explain himself better or faster.
“No, it’s nothing bad. It’s just that you always do that and you’re doing it now and I’m telling you that it’s not your job to do that all the time.”

“Do what, exactly?” her eyebrow quirked, seemingly of its own accord.

“Axel, calm down. I’m not criticizing you…”

“It sure sounds like you are.”

“I don’t mean to. But…you can’t take care of Mike” he shrugged his shoulders as he felt his daughter’s tension transfer to his own body through the hand he held in his own. “That’s your mom’s job and maybe Lori’s a little bit. But it’s not yours. And…” he took a nervous breath when he saw her set her jaw in response. “And you don’t have to forgive Chris if you don’t want to, or if you’re not ready to. And if Ashlyn’s pressuring you to do that…”

“She’s not” Ali snapped back and pulled her hand out of her father’s as she tried to understand why he was attacking her this way. On Christmas, no less.

“Sweetheart” he tried to take her hand again but she wouldn’t let him. “Don’t get so upset. This is what I’m trying to tell you. You’re carrying a lot of weight on your shoulders right now and it’s not yours to carry. I don’t want you to have to worry so much about Mike or Chris. Especially not if it’s bothering you this much. That’s all I’m trying to say Axel. I’m on your side, always. No matter what. I’m just trying to look out for you…or maybe point out something that I can see from my perspective that you can’t see yet. That’s all.”

The brunette felt like an idiot who had been sitting in a dark room without knowing how to turn the light on. And her father had just flipped the switch for her and she could finally see. Ali knew she had been more stressed than usual, but it was a busy time of year and she had a lot going on at work and at home and she had just been trying to hold on for the slower pace of January. All of a sudden things made a lot more sense to her. She ran through a quick replay in her mind of five or six times she had wildly overreacted during the past two months. The easiest one to point to was when she had been so upset with Ashlyn for delivering the neighbor gifts without her. As she stood there processing, Ken reached out and took her hand again, happy that she allowed it this time. He didn’t say anything. He let her take her time but he wanted to make sure she knew he was still there with her. And there for her.

“God, I’m sorry Dad” she frowned and dropped her eyes, ashamed of the way she had just behaved when her father had only been trying to help.

“It’s ok princess” he smiled at her and lifted her chin up so their eyes met again. “I know how you are” he winked. “You’ll try to help everybody until you run yourself into the ground. And we all love you for it. But it’s my job, even now that we’re both getting older” he chuckled, “to make sure you don’t actually hurt yourself in the process.”

“Thanks” she smiled bashfully at him. “I can’t believe I didn’t see it myself.”

“It’s hard when it’s happening to you. That’s why you have people in your life to help you figure it out sometimes” he welcomed her warm hug. “And I’m worried about your mother too” he admitted softly after they pulled apart again. “But I’ve talked to her about it, I’m not trying to make you worry more…”

“No, I know. She’s struggling right now, that’s why I’ve been trying to help.”

“Exactly. If she was more herself right now she would have told you to back off a long time ago”
he laughed softly. “Where do you think you get all your independence from anyway?”

“Independence sounds so much nicer than stubbornness” the brunette giggled. “But that’s from you too” she quirked a playful eyebrow at her father this time.

“And listen, about Chris…”

“It’s ok Dad” she interrupted him with a nod. “Ash and I have talked about it. I’m nervous to see him tomorrow but I’m just going to do the best I can. She told me that’s more than enough for her and that she just wants me to be ok. Even if that means I can’t find a way to forgive him.”

“Well, that’s good to hear. I didn’t mean to accuse her…”

“No, I know” she smiled quickly, wanting to alleviate his guilt. “Syd said the same thing and I know where you’re both coming from. But Ashlyn’s been great about it. She’s never pressured me into anything, even though I know it kills her that we’re in this…spot.”

“It’s not her fault either. It seems to me you two are both trying to solve a problem that isn’t really yours to solve.” He pursed his lips as he contemplated the idea. “Maybe when you get down there and see him it’ll be easier to know what comes next. Just, promise me you’ll take care of yourself too instead of everybody else all the time, ok?”

“Ok Dad” she hugged him again, squeezing him hard and trying to show him how much she appreciated him always having her back – even when she didn’t realize she needed it. “I promise. I love you.”

“I love you too, Alex.”

Chapter End Notes

On a side note, I was crushed yesterday when Ali took 'USWNT' out of her Instagram bio. I knew it was coming, eventually, but I kept hoping against all hope that she would somehow get to her 100th cap. I believe in miracles and knew it would take one to make that happen. But damn, did it hurt my heart when she changed that bio. When they got Logan I thought that was a pretty good sign that Ali knew she wouldn't be travelling as much anymore. I was hoping I was wrong though. She sure looks and sounds happy for the season to start and happy with her club team and happy with her new puppy. So I'll be happy too. We all know she deserves better than the treatment she's received from US Soccer since the world cup. I was glad to read John Halloran's tweet about her not making the roster. I've followed him for a few years now and he's always pretty level-headed about all things woso. He usually covers the Red Stars but he was right on the money with his tweet about Ali not being beat out for her spot. It was great to finally have somebody stick up for her and say that out loud. There have been a couple of other articles over the past year or so that were sympathetic too. It will be interesting now that Christen Press seems to have found herself deeper in Jill's doghouse than ever before. Will the Christen Press fans still think all of us Ali Krieger fans are making a big deal out of nothing once Press officially gets the shaft too? I hate that it's happening at all. Ok. Enough negativity for tonight. Good luck to all the NWSL teams this weekend, just a little bit more luck to the Pride. ;)}
The Florida sunshine had a funny way of making everything better sometimes, especially while it was baking the stress and anxiety out of your pale, New England skin. It was Thursday, December 28th and it was the Kriegers’ third day of vacation in the sunshine state. They were staying at Tammye and Carol’s beach house, as usual, and the weather was a little cooler than normal for that time of year. It was only in the mid-70s that afternoon but there wasn’t much breeze so, if you laid still, the sun heated your skin up nicely. The kids didn’t care that it wasn’t in the 80’s, as it often was during their Christmas visits. They just wanted to be in the surf and water, no matter what. The ocean was definitely chilly and it was only because they stayed in the shallow, knee-deep surf that they were allowed to venture in. Everybody was there. Chris and Beth and Johnny and Lizzy were all down by the water, although the Harris kids, year-round Floridians, didn’t actually get more than their feet wet. It was easy to see how spoiled they had become by the beautiful weather and warm ocean temperatures. Ashlyn had been the exact same way before she moved to Gloucester, MA. This late-December sea was too cold for them, even though they didn’t want to admit it to their more intrepid, Northern, cousins. Several of Ashlyn’s cousins had come to the beach house for the day with their own young families and they were scattered around the beach as well. Sandcastles and forts were popular that afternoon and Meg and Josie were building another one together, as had become their custom. At one point Ashlyn had to go down and negotiate with her opinionated daughter so that she would allow other kids to help them with the structure. Josie, having learned the hard way over the years with her own siblings, had only one rule that she wouldn’t concede – nobody was allowed to knock down any part of the sandcastle at any point. That decision was up to she and Meg, without exception.

Tammye and Mike were both down there too, as was Mike’s girlfriend Lydia. Mike was in the water with Drew and Lily and Dodge, pushing them back and forth on a boogie board between Chris and himself. Lydia and Tammye had formed an amiable enough relationship over the years. Neither woman would call it a friendship, but they had made room for each other in gatherings like today. They stood side by side at the edge of the water, cheering on the Krieger kids as they each enjoyed different levels of success on the boogie board. 9-1/2 year old Drew could stand up on it if things didn’t get too wavy. He was really good on his knees but was trying to get better on his feet.
Both Harris men appreciated the boy’s desire to push himself and improve his skills. It reminded them of both of his mothers. Chris, in particular, thought of Ali and her almost 8-year quest to learn to surf. There were many things the brunette had done since falling in love with his sister, but the dedication and patience and resolve she had shown as she completed that sizable task had impressed him more than almost anything else. He couldn’t think of one other person who would have kept trying as hard and as long as she had. Dodge and his advanced physical abilities, in this case his leg strength and his balance, made the boogie board look almost easy. He was only 5-1/2 but he was already almost as good as Drew was on his knees. The daredevil wanted to try standing up but both his moms had nixed that idea earlier in the afternoon. Mike, the harrowing skateboarding and broken arm incident always on his mind, refused to waver and fought off persuasive arguments from both Dodge and Chris.

“No way kiddo” he shook his head. “If you want to stand up you’ve gotta get so good on your knees that both your moms will see that you’re ready for more. And that takes practice. If you want something in this life you’ve gotta work for it and practice hard, no matter how frustrated you get. Understand?” he asked with a gentle pat on Dodge’s butt and an encouraging smile.

It always surprised Mike at first when he looked into his youngest grandson’s eyes and saw his own sparkling blue eyes staring back at him. It was thrilling and unsettling all at the same time. The grandfather was used to seeing his mother’s and his daughter’s eyes when he looked into Lily’s dancing hazel eyes, but something about seeing his own eyes in Dodge always felt new to him. He had even asked Ashlyn about it once, to see if she felt the same thing when she looked into Lily’s eyes.

“Yeah, I get what you’re saying Pop. That must be a little weird” she had replied softly. “But all I see when I look at Lily’s eyes is Gram” she had smiled thoughtfully. “And that makes me happier than just about anything else in the world.”

Lily’s athleticism shouldn’t have surprised anybody, but it always did. Both Ashlyn and Ali were convinced that she would have been just as good as, if not better than, both Drew and Josie at any sport she played. But only if she felt like doing it at any given moment. There were times in the backyard where Lily would dribble around Josie with a fleet-footed flourish. But then it would be gone – that certain whatever it was that motivated the little girl. It was the most fickle thing in the world and neither of her moms had figured it out yet. The other kids had been easy to understand. Drew wanted to do well and succeed at things because he wanted to impress and please his moms. Josie excelled because she liked to win and finish first and be the best. Dodge had never really needed any motivation. The boy did things 1000% just because there was a challenge in front of him. There was no half-speed with him, even when the rest of his family sometimes wished there was. But Lily was different. She did things solely because she wanted to and did them just the way she wanted to and for as long as she wanted. Until she didn’t. The minute another idea entered her mind, she would go and pursue that instead of whatever she had just been right in the middle of. It could be unbelievably frustrating for anybody who was relying on her to complete whatever task, or game, or chore she had been doing in the first place. She liked to win but it didn’t drive her the way it did her other siblings. She liked to play games and have fun just as much as they did, she just wasn’t as invested in the outcome the same way they were. She was sort of like the living, breathing example of ‘it’s all about the journey, not the destination’. To that end, Lily knelt on the boogie board and enjoyed the ride back and forth between her Papa and her Unky Chris until something else caught her eye and she moved on to collecting shells and stones on the beach with Tammye.

Ashlyn, Carol and Ali were farther up the beach on the big blanket. The brunette was lying on her stomach with her face turned down towards the sea so she could open her eyes and watch the family fun when she wanted to. Ashlyn and Carol sat behind her in two beach chairs, talking about
the garden at the big old house and the repairs that had been made to the back of the garage of the beach house after one of the big storms last Fall. It was peaceful and still and wonderful. If she concentrated really hard, Ali could almost imagine she was back in Hawaii with Ashlyn on their delayed honeymoon, or on the beach in Costa Rica or Key West or Bermuda or any of the other places she had been lucky enough to vacation with her wife. The shrill kid voices from the water were just distant enough so they blended in nicely with the warm, soothing tones coming from the chairs behind her. Of course it helped that one of those voices was her favorite sound on the planet. Ali was relaxed - fully, completely relaxed, for the first time in a very very long time and it felt incredible. It had been a busy three days so far, but Tammye, Carol and Mike were so happy to see the Kriegers that Ali and Ashlyn had barely had to do any mothering to their children. The kids were just as excited to see the grandparents they had been missing most of the year too and it had been a wonderful three days.

Meg, who sometimes felt out of place and acted awkwardly when she first joined the Harris clan for a visit, had jumped right in as if she had just seen everybody the weekend before. She was three months shy of her 17th birthday and she was more mature than ever. And that was saying something because she had always been more mature than most of her friends. She was still self-conscious about her beautiful, buxom, new body though. Meg had Hannah’s beautiful body and large breasts. And she was a really good athlete so she had a musculature and physique that her mother had never had. It was almost like she was a combination of Hannah and Ashlyn, even though it was biologically impossible. Meg had Hannah’s curves and Ashlyn’s muscles all in the same tall, strong, beautiful body. She wore a bikini that Ashlyn thought was much too small – which it wasn’t, as Ali reminded her as gently as she could. But Meg kept a t-shirt on over it most of the time. Nobody bothered her about it, not among the family anyway, but both Ali and Ashlyn knew that Meg must be getting teased about her womanly shape by other kids at school. Other girls who hadn’t developed yet were probably teasing her out of jealousy or resentment. And both moms knew the boys would be teasing her for all sorts of different reasons. Meg was halfway through her junior year of high school and, so far, doing a good job of handling everything that entailed – the pressure to do well in school so she could get into a good college, the confusing hormones and emotions that flooded her system daily and made every decision about every single thing seem ten times harder than it really was, the desire to be a professional soccer player and all the demands that came with that, the excitement of young love and first kisses and boyfriends who could make you feel every emotion all at once with a single look or smile.

Ashlyn was happier those three days than she could remember being in months. She hadn’t been unhappy before, but life had gotten complicated that year, on a number of different fronts, and the happy moments that were still present had been accompanied by anger and frustration and confusion and resentment for the keeper. Not to mention exhaustion. Ashlyn was tired. She was bone tired and brain tired and weary in every way possible. She had been nervous and tense when they first arrived Tuesday afternoon. She still got aggravated and frustrated flying with the kids, so that hadn’t helped her attitude either. But Ali knew her so well. The brunette had sent her off with Chris, just the two of them, to go do whatever she needed to do to relax and get right so she could enjoy her time with her family. The only restriction was that the siblings had to be back for the gift exchange after dinner. The evening had gone well. The extended family blended together and picked up where they had left off after the last visit in July when Johnny, Lizzy, Tammye and Carol had travelled to Gloucester. Johnny was 11-1/2 and Lizzy would be turning 9 in a few weeks and they both seemed to be flourishing in their new life with their new dad and his new dreams and promises. That had been one thing Ashlyn didn’t have to worry about anymore. Her niece and nephew were ok. They had come through the tumult of their father’s fall from grace relatively unscathed. Lizzy had forgiven Chris almost instantly and Johnny was still working through some lingering anger at his dad, but they were both doing ok. The faith had been rebuilt in Chris’ family and Ashlyn marveled at the ability children had to trust again so quickly and so completely. Chris
had worked hard to earn that trust though. He had done everything he had promised, and then some. He truly was a new man, and a better one.

“So where did you guys run off to?” Ali asked that night, their first night of vacation, as they snuggled together in the basement bedroom they always shared. “The beach? Skatepark? Surf shop?..”

“We went to the cemetery” Ashlyn answered quietly, squeezing Ali’s shoulders as the brunette nestled into her left side as usual.

“Oh, babe...I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to joke...”

“No, it’s ok” the keeper leaned down and kissed Ali’s head. “It wasn’t like that. I mean, it was sad. But it was good.”

“Was it your idea or his?” the brunette stretched her leg over Ashlyn’s hips and hooked her heel on the side of her keeper’s thigh to pull her in even closer as she hugged her tight.

“His” Ashlyn replied simply. “He wanted to promise me something and he wanted to do it in front of Gram and Gramps” she gasped out as Ali squeezed even tighter. “Baby, I can’t breathe” she chuckled and patted her wife’s octopus arm across her chest.

“Jesus Ash, are you ok?” Ali loosened her grip, but hadn’t been referring to her hold on the blonde. “That’s a helluva trip to take the minute you got here..”

“Yeah, it was good” Ashlyn moved her left hand up to play with her wife’s soft hair as they talked. “I was surprised at first, but it was really important to him” she shrugged. “He’s been going there a lot I guess. He checks in with Gram and Gramps and then he goes to Malcolm’s grave.”

For the first time, there was a hitch in the keeper’s voice. Ali didn’t push though. Just as had always been the case with Ashlyn, Ali didn’t want to spook her into silence when she was already talking about tough things. Instead, the brunette tilted her head back and kissed Ashlyn softly on her jaw. She pressed one more kiss to her chin and then tucked her head back into Ashlyn’s neck again. They breathed quietly together for another few minutes and Ali thought maybe that was going to be the end of the conversation.

“Harvey’s going to let him come back and run the surf shop again” Ashlyn finally spoke again. Her voice was quiet and Ali could hear how tired she was. “Next week, after New Year’s. Just like he promised Chris. He’s so excited Al.”

“That’s great honey” Ali gave her girl another squeeze. “I’m really happy for him and for Beth and the kids” she added sincerely. “You knew he could do it. You never doubted him. That’s really awesome.”

“Oh I doubted him plenty” she laughed softly. “Just not about the surf shop” she sighed and yawned. “I’ve never seen him like this and I...I really feel like this time is completely different. He’s volunteering at the rehab clinic, he’s done everything he said he would to set up the afterschool program for kids. It’s all set to begin as soon as school starts again next week. Harvey’s even letting him use the surf shop as the meeting place, just like Chris knew he would.” She paused for a breath. “He’s been great with Beth and the kids. Mom says he’s back to the way he was when they were just babies. Remember how he used to rush right home after work and do everything he could for them before bedtime?”

“I do” Ali nodded.
“He’s like that again, except with their activities and sports and stuff. Beth says he’s either with the kids, or at the rehab center, or at an AA meeting. She never has to wonder where he is aside from those three places. Well, four places if you include the cemetery. I guess he goes there a lot. It’s part of what keeps him accountable he says” she shrugged again. “I don’t care” she chuckled. “It’s a little weird that he spends so much time at the cemetery now, but if that’s what it takes to keep him on the right path then I’m all the fuck for it.”

They were quiet again for a minute, both thinking and breathing and lazily holding each other.

“Meg told me he drove up to visit her one weekend in October. Watched her soccer game and took her and Hannah out to dinner afterwards. Did you know that?”


“Nope. He wanted to tell her, again, how sorry he was for letting her down and for being such an asshole. She said he was all excited about the surf shop and the afterschool program and he asked her a million questions about what high school kids wanted and needed from a program like that.”

“I could tell they’d been talking a lot just by the way she went right up to him and gave him that big hug this afternoon” Ali added as she thought back over their day together.

“He’s been doing that a lot, ever since he got out of rehab at the end of April. He’s making his amends like a man possessed” Ashlyn chuckled. “It’s not funny, not even a little bit. I don’t know why I just laughed like that.” She hesitated but then kept going. “I know I sound like a chump when I say he’s different this time. Like I’m an idiot who should know better than to trust anything a drunk like my brother says...”

“Hey, don’t say that. Cut it out” Ali’s voice was stern.

“Well it’s true.”

“It’s not true and you know it. We have to believe them when our gut tells us to. That’s all we have Ash, you know that. We can’t always believe our ears or even our eyes sometimes when it comes to the addicts we love. And that’s awful and so hard to learn how to live with. But you knew in your heart that he was different this time. And you’ve made your heart and your gut wait all this time for some kind of proof that he was telling you the truth. It sounds like you got it today, honey. And that’s amazing. Don’t start second guessing yourself now. Not after all this time. You got what you needed. You got your proof. Now you just need to let yourself believe it all the way.”

“It’s so scary though” Ashlyn admitted in a voice Ali could barely hear.

“I know, babe. I know it is” the brunette reached up and tenderly caressed her wife’s cheek with the back of her fingers. “But you can do it. I think you should go ahead and let yourself do it. It’s ok for you to believe in him again. It just shows how strong you really are.”

Ashlyn lay there for another minute, thinking about the strength it must have taken her wife to encourage her that way. Ali didn’t believe in Chris again, not yet anyway, but here she was doing her best to help Ashlyn take the final step to heal her relationship with him. That was love. That was real love like they write stories about right there.

“He promised me...the same thing he promised me when we had our private session back at the rehab clinic. The one where it was just me and him” the keeper swallowed and took a deep breath as she processed the memory of the day she and her brother talked about what had happened that dark, ugly Thanksgiving night when he had nearly killed her.
Ali pulled her head back so she could see her wife’s emotional face. The brunette was confused and worried and Ashlyn could read it all on her face.

“This afternoon at the cemetery. He made that same promise but in front of Gram and Gramps so I would know how serious he was about it” she took another deep breath and tried to steady her voice. “He promised to be a man I could be proud of. He promised that I would be proud to say he was my brother again. And I believe him.”

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Friday night was date night for Ali and Ashlyn and they had both been looking forward to it all week. Saturday morning was also the last morning they would have a chance at a relaxing start too. On Sunday, New Year’s Eve day, the Kriegers were driving their rented minivan down to Miami bright and early so they could do New Year’s Eve at the club with Deb and Mike again. Tammye and Carol and Mike were babysitting at the beach house Friday while the two moms got to spend some quality alone time together. The grandparents’ collective gift to the couple was a spa day and overnight stay at the fancy spa hotel down in Sebastian, Florida. Sebastian was a couple of towns south of Melbourne and only a half hour drive away. The oceanfront resort where Carol and Tammye had been married 2-1/2 years earlier was just down the street from the new, swanky spa hotel. It was supposed to be amazing and was incredibly popular and hard to get reservations for. Carol and her connections had come through again though and Ali and Ashlyn stood close together, holding hands, as they checked into one of the nicest suites in the hotel. The lobby was beautiful and busy, with several other people waiting to check-in and still others moving through the space in luxurious robes on their way to or from one of the spa treatment rooms.

“You’re all set for the ‘Anniversary Suite’” the elegant woman in her late 50s smiled at Ashlyn as she handed her the envelope with the room keys and then winked.

“There must be some mistake, Nancy” Ashlyn smiled back patiently at the woman Carol had told them to ask for when they checked in. “It’s not our anniversary. We don’t need the anniversary suite...”

“Oh, I’m sure it’s an anniversary of something, honey” the woman drawled with another warm smile. When Ashlyn stared back blankly at her, she tried again. “Let me put it this way” Nancy leaned over the check-in counter as both Ashlyn and Ali did the same, “when my good friend Carol Lanier tells me her girls need some TLC and a relaxing night away together, I make things happen” she winked one more time as she stood back in her original position.

Nancy was the manager of the chic hotel and as she stepped to the side to allow the regular concierge to resume her duties checking the next group of people in, Ashlyn stood there with her mouth still slightly agape. Nancy kept smiling at the keeper as Ali pulled her wife away from the counter to make room for the next guests.

“Thank you so much Nancy, for everything” the brunette beamed at the manager. “We’ll definitely enjoy our anniversary.”

“Oh, ummm, yeah” Ashlyn stammered, finally catching on. “Thank you. Thanks a lot” she nodded and blushed the slightest bit when she saw Nancy’s knowing, but still cordial, smile.

“You’re very welcome. Make sure to use my name when you’re scheduling your treatments now, you hear?” Nancy waved as they moved towards the elevator a few feet away.

“We will” Ali grinned. “Thanks again!”
The spa was like so many that they had visited together in the past, only newer and nicer. It was a combination of the sophisticated Beauport Hotel up in Gloucester – their close to home hideaway, and the Chatham Inn down on Cape Cod with the separate spa building for grown-ups who didn’t want to spend their vacation time with the sounds of children everywhere around them. This hotel, ‘The Fountainebleu Sebastian’ was modeled after and a part of the Fountainbleu Hotel and Resort in Miami Beach. This hotel was about half the size of the expansive and enormous landmark hotel in Miami Beach, but it was exclusively for adults. Adults-only resorts and hotels were a newer trend that was starting to become popular in the bigger resort towns along both coasts of the country.

“Why do I feel like everybody here knows we’re going to have sex tonight?” Ashlyn whispered uncomfortably once they were in the elevator with just one large carry-on suitcase for the two of them. “It’s like in the movies when the teenagers check into the sleazy hotel that rents rooms by the hour” she continued quietly, not wanting her voice to carry anywhere but her wife’s ears, even though they were alone in the elevator. “Everybody knows why they’re there and smirks at them like perverts.”

“Nice image babe. Thanks for that” Ali rolled her eyes and giggled as she kissed her keeper on the cheek. “I don’t care who knows what” she whispered hotly into Ashlyn’s ear, “I can’t wait to get my hands all over you.”

It had been a good four days so far. The kids had all gotten along pretty well, with the exception of Josie and Lizzy fighting over who was going to be in charge of the nursery they had set up in the girls’ bedroom in the basement. The three real girls had their baby dolls all arranged in their little doll beds with their little doll blankets and pillows and it was pretty freaking cute. Until they stopped being mommies to their babies and the game changed to a hospital and then to a full-fledged nursery where they took care of healthy babies instead of sick ones. Lizzy was a year older than Josie so she should have been the one in charge. But Josie had never seen things that way, not ever. Not even when they were both much younger. The only real struggles among the Krieger and Harris children had been between Lizzy and Josie. Like many kids Josie encountered, Lizzy was usually happy to let her have her way. If Lizzy ever felt like she wasn’t in the mood to be bossed around she just stopped playing whatever pretend game they were playing and went and did something else. Every once in a while though, the young Harris would insist on being the boss, even though she knew it would cause a fight sooner rather than later. Nobody blamed her. Ali and Ashlyn were the first to defend Lizzy whenever this happened. Beth felt bad about it but either Ashlyn or Ali would always defend Lizzy’s right to be the boss every once in a while. Secretly, they loved it when somebody put Josie in her place. They didn’t love the drama that ensued, but they loved it because Josie had to learn that she couldn’t always be the one to tell everybody else what to do. That just wasn’t how life worked. Even Ali in full boss mode at Knight-Harris had to do far more listening than ordering around. It was a difficult thing to teach their headstrong little girl but they welcomed every opportunity that came along to reinforce the ideas of compromise and the consequences that might happen if a stubborn little girl never learned how to play well with others.

The only other kid trouble had been Lily’s swimmer’s ear. Again. The poor thing always seemed to get an ear infection a couple of times a year. It frustrated Ali to no end because she did everything humanly possible to make sure that it didn’t happen. And it still happened at least twice a year. Dr. Comello had finally determined that Lily’s ears were just shaped a little bit differently on the inside. Nothing was wrong and it wouldn’t cause her any problems, other than perennial ear infections. Instead of relying on Lily tilting and shaking her head to try and get the excess water out of her ears, Ashlyn and Ali had started to stick super-absorbent cotton balls into Lily’s ears every time she came out of the water and it had helped. It only happened when she submerged her head so showers weren’t usually a problem, but swimming and baths were sure-fire ways to get an ear
infection. And now the poor thing had gone swimming for the first time in months and gotten an ear infection despite the cotton balls and her mothers’ best efforts.

But aside from that, the kids had fallen right into vacation mode and enjoyed their time at the beach house very much. They had done Christmas presents on Tuesday evening, the first day they arrived. Then they had made a day trip to Disney World the next day. Then a full day of doing nothing but hanging out at the beach with the extended Harris clan. Today the kids would play at the beach some more and then go to the movies with all three grandparents that night. Tomorrow, Saturday, would be their last day and they were going to go to Chris and Beth’s house for the afternoon and have a cookout and enjoy Gram’s flower garden and backyard. The backyard had been turned into a typical kids’ yard, and it just happened to have a lovely flower garden over on the one side. Ashlyn was relieved that the garden hadn’t totally gone to hell while Chris was ruining his life. She made a mental note to thank Carol for whatever she had done to keep the beloved flower garden alive. Ashlyn knew nobody else could have done it.

Meg got a little bit lost in the shuffle but was a good sport about it. Ashlyn or Ali always made sure they took her into consideration when they were planning things to do. But it wasn’t like they could take four, or six if the Harris kids were with them, little kids to everything the teenager wanted to do. But they made it work. Ashlyn and Meg took off for a couple of hours on their own when they were all at Disney World while the other adults wrangled the younger kids. Similarly, Ali would often play a game of cards or backgammon, or anything else Meg wanted to play, while everybody was hanging out at the beach. The teen also spent a lot of time on her phone with her social media and texting her friends. For movie night tonight, Chris was taking her to see a new action movie that was much too old for any of the other kids, much as Drew and Johnny tried their best to get in on. They had both really enjoyed their special time together. Of course, both Meg and Chris had wanted to die when the sex scene filled the large screen in front of them. Chris had finally muttered something about needing to use the bathroom as he ducked out of the theater to escape the awkward situation. Meg had just sat there frozen, mortified. It took Ali a lot of prying and questioning the next afternoon to figure out what had happened that had made the teenager blush when they were talking about the movie. Ashlyn teased her brother mercilessly about it for the entire rest of the day. She hadn’t seen him blush that deeply in years.

But Friday at the Fountainebleu Sebastian, Ali was rested and relaxed and ready to enjoy herself and enjoy her wife and she didn’t really care about anything else that afternoon. Ashlyn was just as eager to get her hands on her beautiful brunette and the rest of the elevator ride was filled with nuzzles, touches, and hot breath on soft skin. They stood close together and never let go of their hands as they tried to stay in control of themselves. They didn’t know who was going to get on if the elevator stopped and there was no way they were going to be caught in a compromising position in their first ten minutes in the swanky hotel.

“Damn baby” Ashlyn exhaled as she shut the hotel room door behind her and was then pushed hard up against it by her wife.

Ali had her lips on her keeper’s neck and their fronts pressed firmly together while she held Ashlyn’s hand in one hand and grabbed at the short hair at the back of her head with the other.

“We should...we should...” the keeper stammered, distracted by having Ali so close and so hot and so ready and willing. “We should book some treatments...” she whimpered as the brunette moved her lips to the sweet spot behind her ear, “before they’re all filled...up.”

“Mmmmmmm...” Ali hummed into her wife’s soft skin as she licked and sucked at it. “Treatment, yeah” she mumbled. “I’ve got a treatment that’ll fill you right up, All-star” she purred and then nibbled on Ashlyn’s earlobe.
“Jesus Al” Ashlyn felt her whole body respond to the sultry stimulation and even though she had been trying not to engage just yet, she became aware of her own hands grabbing the brunette’s ass and pulling her in even closer. “Fuck, you feel good” she moaned as Ali slid her leg between the blonde’s long legs and pressed her thigh up into her crotch. “But, wait...”

Ashlyn pushed her wife back with gentle but firm pressure on her shoulders as Ali’s eyes fluttered open to reveal a mixture of annoyance, confusion and hurt.

“Oh” the brunette dropped her eyes and took a half step backwards, separating their two bodies by about three inches. “I thought...never mind” she shook her head and turned to go into the rest of the large suite.

“No, baby, wait” Ashlyn let out a frustrated sigh and grabbed Ali’s wrist just before she moved out of reach. “Come here” she asked sweetly. “You thought right. Definitely” the keeper chuckled, low in her throat, as she tugged Ali closer to her again.

“But...you just said to wait?” the brunette frowned in confusion.

“No, well yes, but I just meant that if we want to book any spa treatments we should do that first because they’re booked pretty solid here and we might not have a lot of choices...”

“But we’ve got the ‘Nancy card’ to play” Ali giggled as she let her wife pull her into another embrace. “We can schedule anything we want, probably.”

“Oh, but is there something you wanted to do?” Ashlyn whimpered again as Ali put her lips back to work on the other side of her neck this time. “Like those hot stones or the seaweed scrub or...or...”

They were interrupted and frightened half to death by a knock on the door right behind Ashlyn’s back.

“Room Service.”

Ali and Ashlyn shared a confused look and then opened the door, making sure their clothes were still in place first.

“Happy Anniversary, compliments of the manager” the young man in the sharp uniform explained with a polished smile as he swept into the room with a room service cart. There was a big bottle of champagne already chilled in a bucket of ice, and a tray of fruit, also chilled, with a bowl of whipped cream in the center of it. He set the tray on the coffee table in the center of the living room area and turned back to them with another smile. “Can I get you anything else right now, ladies?”

“Umm, no, thank you” Ashlyn worked quickly to find some money to tip him with before he backed out of the room. “We’re all set.”

“For now” Ali added with a sly grin.

“Just call if you require any other assistance. Have a good afternoon and enjoy your stay at the Fountainebleu Sebastian.”

As soon as the door closed Ashlyn turned to her wife and laughed out loud.

“What, are you practicing for a porno or something?” she wrapped her arms around Ali’s waist and swung them both from side to side as she laughed some more. “‘That’s all for now’” the keeper mimicked her wife’s flirty reply to the room service guy. “And that look you gave him! Jesus Al”
she laughed again and Ali had no choice but to join her.

“What? I didn’t give him a look. You’re crazy” she playfully rolled her eyes and started to move the both of them towards the champagne.

“You totally gave him a look. I know that look” Ashlyn chuckled and pinched her favorite ass in the whole world.

“Ow! Stop” Ali giggled and smacked her wife’s arm. “You don’t know all my looks” she challenged, quirking her eyebrow at the blonde.

“I never said I did, but I know the look you gave him. That was your ‘I’m horny and we’re going to have a fun night together’ look” the keeper thrust her hips into her wife for emphasis. “But it wasn’t just your typical ‘I want to have sex’ look.”

“Oh, it wasn’t?” Ali giggled some more as they kept moving towards the coffee table and couch and champagne.

“Nope. You gave him the extra flirty, ‘I’m up to something naughty and I want to have sex’ look” Ashlyn tried to imitate the smoldering look but couldn’t get the silly, playful grin off of her face and totally botched it.

“Oh really?” the brunette laughed out loud. “Here, open this, you big storyteller” she shook her head as she handed the large champagne bottle to her keeper.

Ali picked up a strawberry from the tray of assorted fruit, dipped it into the whipped cream and took a big, tantalizing bite. She made sure she was in her wife’s line of sight as she made a show of chewing and enjoying the sweet fruit. Ashlyn kept working on releasing the cork from the bottle.

“Like right now” Ashlyn quirked her eyebrow at her flirty wife. “I know what you’re doing, but I’m not having sex with you until you tell me whether or not you want to schedule any spa treatments. And don’t pout at me” she caught Ali just as she had started to purse her lips into a big, juicy pout. “I don’t want it to all of a sudden be tomorrow and you have a fit because we didn’t get a massage or anything. Or worse, you freak out because you realize that Nancy will know we didn’t even leave the room.”

“Oh shit, I didn’t think about that” Ali’s mind moved quickly to solve the potential problem.

“Well, I’ve got news for you hot stuff” Ashlyn teased as the cork finally released with a loud pop that made Ali jump. “Carol and my mom know we’re going to fuck each other’s brains out in this room.”

“God, Ashlyn” the brunette blushed and shook her head, embarrassed by the rough, but true, words the keeper had used.

“Why do you think they gave us this as our Christmas gift? And why do you get so embarrassed about Carol and mom knowing we’re going to have sex but you don’t mind flirting with the room service guy about it?” Ashlyn giggled when she saw the quick succession of looks cross her flummoxed wife’s face. Embarrassment, outrage and then resigned acceptance and a final look of chagrin.

“First of all, I wasn’t flirting with the room service guy” she laughed as she finished chewing the strawberry and held out both flutes for Ashlyn to fill.

“Yes you were!” Ashlyn’s eyebrows both went up but she held the rest of her body very still as she
poured the champagne and then put the bottle back into the ice bucket to keep the rest of it cold. “You took one look at that whipped cream and your mind went right into the gutter and I love you for it” she laughed.

“Oh, so...maybe, just maybe” Ali exaggerated the second maybe, “I got a little excited about the whipped cream...” she laughed and blushed as Ashlyn held her glass up high between them in a toast.

“That’s my girl” she winked at her beautiful brunette. “Now here’s a toast to the love of my life. To our fake anniversary. To fucking our brains out in this incredible room” she wagged her eyebrows and made Ali roll her eyes back at her. “And to that bowl of whipped cream that’s making it all possible.”

They both laughed, clinked glasses and downed about half a flute each of delicious, expensive champagne.

“Ooooh, that’s the good stuff” Ali smiled approvingly and took another big drink, finishing the flute completely.

“Yeah it is” Ashlyn joined her and then refilled their glasses.

An hour later they were naked and breathless on the fancy couch in the middle of the room with the champagne bottle nearly empty. Ali had decided that it would be easier to bring the sheet from the bed over to the couch than it would have been to move the tray and the fruit and the bucket and the champagne and glasses up to the bed. Ashlyn hadn’t argued. She had just yanked the bedsheet off and covered the couch with it so they could get down to business. All the talk of whipped cream and fucking and flirting had definitely sped things along for them both. The potent champagne hadn’t hurt either. Round one was already complete and it was barely even 4:30 in the afternoon. They had fucked each other fast and furious, as usual, in case they were interrupted. It was such a force of habit by now that they weren’t sure they would ever be able to start off any other way ever again.

“You know” Ashlyn trailed her fingers down her wife’s side, following the black ink letters there that she loved so much, “today is the anniversary of something for us.”

“It is?” Ali furrowed her brow as she thought hard to come up with the answer. It was difficult to think with the blonde’s hand teasing her sensitive skin as she lay on her right side, draped across Ashlyn’s lap. “I can’t think...with you doing that” she turned her head to look up at her wife and gave her a nose-crinkling grin.

“Too bad, so sad” Ashlyn sing-songed back at her and then lowered her head down and brought their lips together in a slow, deep kiss.

“It’s been exactly one week since the MHI gala” Ali breathed out after the kiss, “and that’s the last time we had sex so this is our one-week anniversary of fucking” Ali chuckled and then laughed louder when she saw the look of shock on her wife’s face. “What? You think you’re the only one who knows her wife? You think you knew I got excited about the whipped cream but I don’t know how your brain works? Ha” she laughed again and then squealed when Ashlyn started tickling her bare skin.

“You were wild that night” the keeper mumbled into Ali’s breast as she started working her lips over it, incredibly turned on by the way it had just been bouncing around as she flailed from the tickling. “It’s hot when you get jealous, woman.”
“Yeah, well don’t get any ideas” Ali quirked an eyebrow at her wife and then moaned at the delightful sensation coming from her breast. “Fuck, babe...mmmmmmmm...”

“Happy Anniversary” Ashlyn whispered before sucking her wife’s nipple into her mouth hard and making the brunette gasp.

When round two was finished and they had taken a quick bathroom break to pee and clean off the whipped cream that was covering most of both of their delicious parts, Ashlyn sat back down on the sheet-covered couch with a sigh of complete satisfaction. She watched Ali walk back to join her and couldn’t believe how gorgeous the brunette still was. She was 44 years old and had given birth to two children and her body was in very good shape. They had both given up those v-cuts and defined muscles and torturous daily workouts that they didn’t have time in their busy lives for anymore. In truth, Ali had never gotten that hard-core about her workouts in the first place, only doing what she had to in order to keep things fit and tight. Instead, they did cardio workouts to keep their hearts and everything else in good working order, and then added in some weight training and yoga to keep their bodies trim and mobile. They had continued to eat as well as possible, even with four little kids who only liked a handful of foods each. Ali and Ashlyn decided it didn’t matter if they all ate the same food as long as they ate it together. They were both softer in the middle now but still lean and healthy. Ashlyn did extra arm work because she liked the way her tattoos looked when her arms had more muscles in them. And Ali kept up with her squats and lunges and leg lifts so her ass stayed in good shape. It had taken them both a while to find a good balance with their exercise routines. They had tried it all with varying levels of success before tailoring the workouts to their hectic schedules.

“You’re absolutely gorgeous” she proclaimed sincerely as Ali bent over the tray of fruit on the coffee table in front of her and then popped a big red grape into her mouth. Ashlyn reached out with her long leg and ran the top of her foot up the back of her wife’s calf and then thigh. She could feel that familiar old feeling of being overwhelmed by how perfect Ali was and how much she loved her starting to creep in. It didn’t happen as often anymore, but it was still powerful when it did. Ashlyn felt her emotions twisting around inside her. “Fucking magnificent” she breathed out in a reverent whisper.

“Aw, sweetheart” Ali cooed when she saw the passion and love on her wife’s emotion-filled face. “I love you too, babe. So fucking much” she grabbed a few grapes and then straddled Ashlyn’s lap as she sat on the couch. “And you are the most beautiful, incredible woman I’ve ever seen in my entire life” she leaned forward and spoke softly, her lips only an inch away from Ashlyn’s. She traced her finger along the keeper’s lips which were still quivering a bit as Ashlyn fought for control of her own emotions. Ali pushed a grape into her wife’s mouth and smiled softly at her. “Helen of Troy ain’t got nothing on you, babe.”

Ashlyn’s face erupted into a huge smile, her dimple popping out as she chewed the grape in her mouth and moved her hands all over Ali’s back and hips and sides and ass. The brunette smiled back happily, knowing she had hit home with her words, cheesy though they were.

“Did you really just try to dirty talk me with a reference to Greek mythology?” Ashlyn asked with a giggle after swallowing the grape and licking her lips.

“Dirty talk? Sweet talk?” Ali shrugged playfully. “It’s all the same after a certain point isn’t it?”

“No baby, it’s not” Ashlyn shook her head and smiled. “But you get extra points for working Helen of Troy in there” she chuckled.

“How many extra points?” the brunette giggled and kissed her wife’s lips.
“So many extra points” Ashlyn kissed her back, sliding her tongue into her mouth and letting it be bossed around by Ali’s tongue before they separated for air. “Mmmmm...those grapes are so good, aren’t they?”

“They are, although I’m not sure that’s what I want you to be focused on after I kiss you like that” Ali laughed. “But they’re delicious, nice and big and juicy and sweet.”

“Are there more?” Ashlyn tried to get a look at the fruit tray but Ali’s naked body was in her way. She moved her big hands around to the front of her wife’s torso and cupped both breasts, enjoying the hitch she heard in Ali’s breathing. She pulled the brunette closer with one hand on her sexy ass and then put her mouth to work on the breast she had left uncovered. “Mmmmm...so much sweeter than the grapes” she mumbled as she worked her tongue around Ali’s nipple in a tight circle.

Ali had a few grapes in her hand still from when she first sat on Ashlyn’s lap and she held one next to her nipple, near her wife’s mouth. The fruit in the big tray was still cool because there was a layer of ice beneath it just for that reason. Although Ali and Ashlyn had eaten most of the strawberries and cantaloupe cubes and pineapple chunks that had been on the tray, there were still quite a few grapes left, along with some honeydew melon which neither of them really liked very much. Ashlyn moved her lips to the side and took the grape into her mouth. She bit into it gently, just enough to hold it in place between her teeth. Then she moved the cool grape around Ali’s nipple and made the brunette gasp out loud when she felt the strange new sensation.

“Ooooh, damn, that feels so good...” Ali purred as she put another grape between her own teeth and bit down on it, letting the juice dribble down her chin before chewing it up.

Ashlyn felt the grape in her mouth start to get warm so she ate it and gave the dark nipple in front of her some more attention. She looked up and saw the juice on her wife’s chin as well as the lascivious look in her eye.

“Hmmm... what do we have here?” she murmured as she moved her tongue up to lick Ali’s chin clean. “So sweet...” she added as she brought their mouths together in a slow, passionate kiss that Ali deepened and made her own.

After several minutes of hardcore making out and groping with all four hands finding tender sensitive sweet spots, they both came up for air, panting and trying to catch their breath.

“How the hell do you do that?” Ali beamed at her wife again and shook her head in disbelief. “How do you look so fucking sexy and kiss me like that and make me want to devour you whole, and then say something so sweet and romantic like that?”
“It’s your fault” Ashlyn blinked back at her and shrugged innocently and sincerely. “You make me feel things Al...you make me say and do things. I can’t imagine feeling those things about anybody else.”

Ali felt her heart explode and all she could do was try to show the love of her life how she felt about her with her body instead of her words. She crashed their lips together, not caring that they had barely had a chance to catch their breath. The brunette pressed their bodies together, loving the way Ashlyn’s nipples felt as they poked into her own breasts and turning her on even more. She spread her arms around her wife’s back and pulled her in as close as humanly possible, glad that Ashlyn’s arms did the same to her. She could feel the top of the blonde’s coarse short hairs tickling the folds between her legs and it sent a series of powerful jolts up through her whole body. That was it. That was all Ali could take. She wanted to have her keeper in every part of her, right that instant, all at the same time.

“Jesus Ash...I fucking love you...so much baby...God, you drive me...crazy...”

Ali pulled back just far enough so she could work her mouth behind Ashlyn’s ear and down her neck. She slid her hands around to the front and kneaded her breasts, tugging on the pretty pink nipples and squeezing them between her thumbs and forefingers until they were stiff points. She started to feel a little dizzy from all of the lust flooding her system.

“Oh fuck” Ashlyn moaned, tilting her head back as she rested her torso against the back of the couch. “How do you always know just where I want to be touched?” she whimpered, keeping her hands on her wife’s hips with her long fingers roaming up and down her lower back and the top of that gorgeous ass.

“I love you Ashlyn” was all Ali could say, and it came out in an urgent, desperate voice as she dragged her mouth down the keeper’s neck to the sexy hollow at the base of her throat. She swirled her tongue around it and noticed that she had already started grinding against Ashlyn’s lap. There wasn’t anything hard enough there to satisfy her though so she brought her focus back to the breasts in her hands. Ali released one and immediately sucked it into her hot mouth, letting her tongue swirl around the hard nipple several times before grazing it with her teeth and making the keeper shiver.

“Shit, that’s good. Mmmmmm...” Ashlyn moaned again, leaning her head back against the couch with the rest of her body and starting to get lost in her wife’s ministrations.

Ali moved to the other breast and let her tongue and teeth do their work there too, moving her free hand down between her own legs to scratch at the top of her wife’s mound. She slid back on Ashlyn’s lap to give herself more room to work and was surprised to feel how wet she was herself already. She felt another wave of disorientation hit her as she fought against the overwhelming feeling of desire and want and love mixed into a powerful and uncontrollable brew. Ali sucked hard on the soft skin beneath Ashlyn’s breast as she struggled with her own mind, letting go only when she heard her keeper whine and then hiss in pain.

“I love you Ashlyn” she panted out, lips still against her breast as she sweetly licked the dark bruise she had just left there.

“Damn baby, you feel good” Ashlyn husked out, already so worked up she could barely think straight.

Ali let her fingers explore lower as she moved her body down to the floor. She spread her keeper’s legs out wide and knelt in front of her, bumping into the coffee table with her ass as she got into
position. She slid her fingers through Ashlyn’s slick folds, groaning when she felt all of the passion already collecting there. Ali teased her wife’s opening with her fingers while she worked her lips and tongue down her stomach, spending extra time, as she always did, on the spiderweb across her belly. She pulled the blonde forward with both hands on her hips so her wet and waiting pussy was hanging right over the edge of the couch. Ali got a waft of the keeper’s intoxicating scent when she moved her and seriously thought she might pass out from excitement and desire.

“I love you Ashlyn” she mumbled as she moved her mouth down to the top of her keeper’s mound, her hands back up at her breasts making sure they stayed ready and at attention.

“Fuck, yes, fuck yes...” Ashlyn rolled her head from one side to the other and back again as she brought her hands to the back of her wife’s brunette head.

Ali felt the blonde’s thigh twitch right next to her face and knew she was putty in her hands. She took a long, slow, broad lick up through Ashlyn’s folds, humming loudly and digging the fingertips of one hand into her keeper’s hip, while the other kept working at her breast. Ali carefully circled her clit with the tip of her tongue and willed herself to slow down and stay strong and steady. She backed up a bit more, bumping into the coffee table again and getting aggravated by it. She turned around quickly to push it out of the way and had an idea.

“No, don’t stop” Ashlyn begged, reaching out with her long arms to try and pull her wife back to her. She was relieved when she felt Ali’s warm hand on her knee and moving up towards her hip in another few seconds. “Don’t stop baby.”

Ali looked at the quivering lips just below her wife’s aching, swollen clit and swallowed hard. All she wanted was to bury her face there and never come up again. Instead, she kept caressing Ashlyn’s leg and pressed warm, open-mouthed kisses to the inside of her thigh as she inched closer and closer to where they both wanted her mouth to be. She took another long, broad stroke with her strong tongue and tapped Ashlyn’s clit a couple of times. The keeper tilted her hips up wildly and pulled at Ali’s shoulder and head to try and keep her in place.

“I love you Ashlyn” she purred against the sensitive nub and then kissed it before pulling her head back again.

“Baby, Al, please...”

The brunette reached behind her and grabbed three of the big, round, red grapes from the chilled tray. She never said a word. She kept kissing Ashlyn’s thigh, occasionally nipping at it just to keep her wife’s attention, and then she slowly pushed one of the grapes into her ready center with her thumb. She heard Ashlyn gasp loudly and then groan even louder and she pushed another cool grape the size of a walnut into her wife’s eager pussy.

“Oh my God...” Ashlyn whispered as she grabbed onto Ali’s upper arm for some sort of support. The cold sensation inside her burning core was incredible and weird and hot and sexy as fuck all at the same time. “What?...what the fuck are you doing to me?” she gasped again.

The brunette pushed the third grape through Ashlyn’s entrance and then let her fingers drag up and down through her folds a few times while the keeper panted and squirmed in front of her. Ali felt another tremor in her wife’s thigh and then a gush between her own legs as her own juices began to flow again.

“I love you Ashlyn” she gave her thigh one last kiss before bringing her watering mouth over to her keeper’s equally wet pussy. “I love you.”
Ali finally pushed her own tongue inside and was surprised that the third grape was still cool to the touch. Everything else inside Ashlyn’s pulsing center was hot and throbbing and soaking wet.

“Yes!!” Ashlyn yelled. “Please baby...please...fuck me...” her voice got softer and more distorted with each word as she brought a hand up to tug at her own breast while she kept the other one tangled up in the soft chocolate locks between her legs.

The brunette worked her strong tongue inside and around the three grapes. She twirled her tongue every way possible, feeling how Ashlyn’s walls began to push back and move the grapes around on their own. Ali held her wife’s hips down with one strong arm across them while she lazily teased her mound with her other hand. Every third pass she let her thumb move low enough to graze the top of her aching clit and made Ashlyn whine in response. Ali got her tongue under the third grape and pulled it towards her mouth, humming loudly at the sexy sensations from being inside her wife’s sweet walls. She pushed her mouth as far into Ashlyn’s pussy as she could and took the grape between her front teeth and bit down, letting the warm juice spurt out inside her wife.

“What the fuck?” Ashlyn’s voice was so low and hungry that it barely sounded like her at all. She kept trying to roll her hips as she writhed on the couch. “Jesus...so fucking good...”

Ali chewed the grape, moaning and humming into Ashlyn’s folds the whole time while the keeper squirmed and groaned in front of her. She repeated her steps with the second grape, enjoying the flavor of the sweet grape enhanced by the delectable taste of her gorgeous and sexy keeper. The first grape had been pushed too far for her tongue to reach, even with Ashlyn’s walls already starting to constrict and push back harder. Ali reached in with her finger and secured the first, and now last, grape, pinching it near Ashlyn’s entrance to let the juice out and cause her wife to shiver.

“God...Al...Jesus...fuck...yes...” Ashlyn began to chant in that low hungry voice again and Ali knew it was time to give her the release she so desperately needed.

The brunette popped the final grape into her mouth and savored it as she slowly inserted her two middle fingers inside her wife’s now desperate center. Ashlyn immediately growled her approval and desire and began rocking her hips up into Ali’s slow and steady rhythm.

“More...more...faster...my clit...” Ashlyn gasped out instructions and tried to get her own hand near her tender nub but Ali blocked her with the hand that was still trying to control her bucking hips.

Ali began pumping her fingers hard and fast inside her wife’s needy core. Each fast stroke was as deep as the brunette’s fingers could take her. It only took a minute before Ashlyn’s walls were so tight that she could barely move her fingers so she started to curl them up into the keeper’s g-spot instead.

“Unnnhhhh...unnnhhhh...yessss...oh fuck...unnnnnhhhh...” the keeper groaned as her whole body bounced along with the strong, fast thrusts.

“I love you Ashlyn” the brunette hummed into her clit as she finally brought her mouth to it and began sucking hard and making Ashlyn squeal with delight.

Ali curled her fingers inside Ashlyn and sucked and tugged on her clit until she felt like the keeper was a gooey mess just ready to come for her. Only then did the brunette put her strong tongue to work, flicking Ashlyn’s super-sensitive clit as fast and hard as she could and bringing her to a screaming orgasm in less than a minute.

“Oh my God...Oh my God...Yes!!!! Aliiiii!!!!!”
Ashlyn’s whole body went rigid for a few seconds and Ali moved her mouth away from her clit and slowed her fingers down inside her to a slow shallow pace. The orgasm crashed down through the keeper’s body and forced her to sit up straight and then flop back against the couch like a rag doll, her arms flailing around and her legs twitching and shaking as she came hard. Ali pressed her cheek into her wife’s thigh, holding it in place with her arm around it so she could be close to her while she rode out her sweet release. As soon as Ashlyn could control her arm she reached back out for her beautiful brunette, holding her hand near her thigh and squeezing it hard.

“Oh my fucking God baby” she panted as her body finally stilled. “I don’t...what the...holy shit” she exhaled loudly and tried to catch her breath.

When Ashlyn was finally able to focus her eyes she quickly found the whiskey-colored ones she loved so much. They shared a long, meaningful look that said so many things that words would never be able to. Their eyes and smiles and noses all spoke for them in those moments of rapture and release and recovery. The keeper tenderly ran her fingers through Ali’s silken hair, and the brunette gently caressed the top of Ashlyn’s mound, neither one taking their eyes off of each other for even a second.

In a year with so many struggles and long-term hurdles that kept getting harder for them to get past, this week had been a lovely respite from all of that. They had enjoyed fun and free time with the kids and their family and even sweet Meg. They had somehow come to the realization that it was ok for Ashlyn to move forward and forgive her brother, even though Ali wasn’t yet able to. And, likewise, it was alright for the brunette to need more time, maybe a lot more time, to try and find a way to forgive Chris. Taking the pressure of timing off of it had made the whole thing seem more manageable to Ali and she felt more optimistic about things than she had in a long time. They knew they were going to Miami to spend a couple of days with Deb and Mike so they could celebrate a new year full of health and happiness for everybody. With a little distance and perspective found this week, Ali knew that her mom would be ok. Somehow Deb would make her husband understand what she needed from him so she could be there for him. Ali had doubted it for a little while when she saw how tense her mother was in November. But after 6 weeks of some good, quality Grandma time that had helped Deb feel more like herself than ever, Ali knew she would be alright.

And between those two things, between the time in Satellite Beach and the trip to Miami, they had been given this day and night to themselves. And that might have been the most precious gift of all. Better than forgiveness or patience or even faith. Both women were proud of themselves for understanding how important it was to take that time off so they could tend to each other. They had done a pretty good job all year long of being mindful of each other and trying to be there for one another through all the ups and downs, but it was never easy. But they would never stop trying.

They would be each other’s horizon through everything life could throw at them. When you went out on a boat and you started to feel seasick from all the rocking on the waves, somebody who knew what they were talking about always told you to look at the horizon and focus on it because it never moved. It was easy to imagine Captain Leighton on one of his graceful but dangerous schooners barking out orders to his new crewmembers who had never been at sea before. Keep your eye on the horizon men! It was the only thing out there that never wavered. It was constant and it would steady you and restore your balance if you just focused on it no matter what else the sea hurled your way. If you kept your eye on the horizon through the storm, as the rest of the world tilted and howled and spun around you, you just might survive. If you kept your eye on the horizon, for as long as it took, you’d make it through, you’d be alright. Just focus on the horizon.

And that’s what Ali and Ashlyn were for each other. The horizon. The constant, true, life-saving horizon. That’s what they had always been to one another and, they knew, that’s what they would
always be. Forever. No matter what life tossed their way. The one constant in the middle of the tumultuous sea.

As they gazed at each other that evening in the fancy hotel room, Ashlyn blinked a wordless thank you for her incredible orgasm and so many other things. Ali blinked back slowly and spoke in a soft but clear and true voice.

“I love you Ashlyn.”

Chapter End Notes

I encourage anybody to keep in touch in between if you want. The Tumblr page is up and active and I’ll keep adding things to it as I can. The handle is beautyinthemoonlight1124
And my email address is ljol2@hotmail.com if anybody wants to chat soccer or anything else.
And if anybody is going to be in Orlando the last week of June HIT ME UP!!!! I'll be there for the two Pride games and I would love to meet anybody who wants to get together for a drink or a coffee or whatever.
p.s. still fuck you Jill Ellis

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