Out With The Old

by ChapstickLez

Summary

Gail Peck is not "just" a Peck, but getting to reinvent yourself beyond your family when you've been born into the Peck Dynasty is not a simple nor easy journey. She probably wouldn't have ever bothered to change, but then there was Holly.

It's messy, it's complicated, but sometimes you come out the end a better person, snark intact.

Notes

DISCLAIMER: Rookie Blue belongs to Global TV, ABC, and all of those people.

I’m a Gail/Holly OTP and I believe in happy endings. I also love drama. I started writing this for personal ‘therapy’ and it morphed from a simple ‘day in the life’ story with no plot, into a plan for how I’d like to see things go, with background crimes to get Gail there. Some plot points will be glossed over if they’re in the show, others will be seen from a new perspective, and much will be all new.

The 'Major Character Death' is neither Gail nor Holly, but it deserves a warning anyway.
Part One: No Going Back

We’re starting in season four, after Gail and Holly have met, but before the wedding. If you’re reading this on a device that doesn’t allow for italics, this will suck.

Pulling her boots on, Holly glanced over at the police. The platinum blonde head stood out, but she didn’t see it here today. Instead there was a man with brown hair, about Gail's age, and Detective Swarek. "Gentlemen," she smiled, absently, crossing into the crime scene.

"S'cuse me, ma'am, I need your ID." The uniformed officer held his hand up in front of her. He looked like a gentle puppy dog, how cute.

"Jesus, Diaz, that's Dr. Stewart from the lab," growled Swarek. Diaz startled and let her pass.

Shaking her head, Holly looked at Swarek, "That's two of your officers now, Detective."

Swarek smirked. "Sorry about Peck. She's a handful on a good day, and she doesn't have a lot of those." There was a weird look from Diaz at that, but he turned it into a frown.

"Actually, I like her macabre humor," mused Holly, squatting to look at the body on the asphalt. His head was taped into a plastic bag, but there was no vomit, making suicide unlikely. She gently moved one arm and blinked. "Stabbed with a scalpel. That's new." She sniffed and glanced at the dumpster, wheeled only a foot away before looking up at Swarek.

The detective caught her look and nodded. "Garbage men found him this morning. Badda boom, dead guy underneath."

With her assistants, Holly made sure the evidence was collected and got ready to head back to the lab, when her phone beeped. "I got this," assured Rodney, and Holly thanked him before pulling off her gloves.

Stupid question, but have you seen The Karate Kid?

Holly eyed the number a few times. It was local, but that hardly meant anything these days.

Who is this?

For a month, she’d been the recipient of texts from a young man in Barry, whose girlfriend's number was one off of hers. The boy had been sweet, but the sexting was gross.

Officer Peck.

Bubbling a laugh, Holly popped her trunk to changed her boots.

I won't ask how you got my number.
Exactly how you're thinking. Karate? Yes no?

Yes, all five of them.

There are FIVE?

Holly started to tap out a lengthy answer, explaining the four 'original' movies, though many people doubted the canonicity of the one with Hilary Swank, as well as the new one... Then she deleted it all and kept it short.

Why are you asking?

There was a lengthy delay before Gail's reply.

I need to be out of my apartment, and there's a showing tonight at this retro place.

Holly arched her eyebrows.

Which movie? Jaden Smith or Ralph Macchio?

Does it matter?

Yes.

Buckling in, Holly started the car and drove back to the lab. The phone did not beep again until she, and the body, were there.

Ralph.

Holly toyed with the answer. She'd seen Gail around before, and found the woman insanely attractive. When Gail had shown up in her lab, being with her had felt so natural, it was like finding the perfect friend you'd always wanted. Except Holly also had a knee-jerk reaction to get in her pants, and Gail was straight. Yes or no? Lisa kept telling her to try new things.

Sure. What time?

Gail replied with time and location, and that was that.

"How hard is it to break up with women?" Gail knew she was slightly tipsy, but it was so nice to hide in the back of a closet with Holly right now and avoid the wedding. The humor of the fact that she was in a closet with a lesbian was not lost on her.

Holly sipped from the bottle. She'd forgone glasses a while ago, though Gail kept hers. "Why? You want to help me break up with someone?"

"One, you're single. Two, I was thinking about my ex." Nick was with Andy tonight, working, which meant she didn't have to see them. "He was in love with someone else, so I cheated on him to make me feel better and him mad and give him an out so we could break up."

"Wow. That is ... Epically passive aggressive."

Gail frowned and reached for the champagne. " Shut up. He was in love with someone else."

"It's something a sixteen year-old would think was a good idea!" Holly was laughing.
"Never mind." Gail downed a drink and sighed. "Why are you single?"

That stopped the laughing, and Holly winced. "I date the wrong people. And coming home smelling like death is a turn off."

The smell hadn't bothered Gail, but her opinion didn't matter there. "Yeah, that's kind of why I've always dated cops."

"Does it help?"

"Nope!" They both giggled.

Holly took the champagne back and sipped. "Why do you hate weddings?"

"No, I told you about my ex and how we broke up. You have to tell me how you break up with a woman."

The bottle was handed back without prompting. "I've never done it myself," admitted Holly. "And a lot of, ah, relationships just fizzled. Or they're experimenting…” Holly filled up Gail's glass and then drank from the bottle. "Serious ones, though. First girlfriend moved to Vancouver, second one dumped me for a mutual friend. That hurt. Third one … She said it had all been a mistake."

So Holly had dated a straight chick, and possibly more than one. That had to be rough. She sighed and threw Holly a bone. "I hate weddings because I got dumped at the altar."

Blinking, Holly refilled Gail's glass again, "Well okay then. That wins."

"Gets better. He ran off and joined the military. Then he came back, joined the force and got posted to my division. He's dating a … friend of mine right now, and we all work together."

"Is he here?" Holly sounded incredulous.

"No, they're working. Together. Dov had 'em on the phone." She sipped the champagne.

Holly looked confused, perhaps trying to sort out Gail's ex with the guy who dumped her at the altar. It was confusing to Gail, and she'd lived through it. "Okay," said Holly at length.

They were too serious. So Gail tried to ask some stupid questions to make Holly laugh. "What's it like, getting dressed?" Instead, it ended with laughter (good!) and Holly kissing her (what!!), calling her insane (huh?), and leaving with the bottle to go dancing.

Gail stared after Holly for a while. "What the hell just happened?" she asked herself. Holly kissed her. It was a light kiss, barely a kiss. Just lips touching. But holy crap it was so nice. It wasn't a maternal kiss, what little Gail knew about those. It was a kiss that implied there should be more kissing. And Gail had wanted to kiss her back.

She was still sitting there, processing, when Traci walked in. "You okay, Gail?"

"I ... Have no idea."

Halfway to the club, Holly pulled into a Starbucks parking lot and yanked her phone out of her purse. When she saw the three texts were from her friend Rachel, she felt a rush of relief coupled with annoyance. Why wasn't Gail texting her?

Where are you, Dr. Death?
Holly sighed and replied.

I think I'm just going home.

Danger! Danger! Holly has done stupid things! Lisa wants to know what her name is.

Groaning, Holly remembered how hard this was with her friends sometimes. They knew her too well. Any time she blew them off this late, it was because of stupid things with dates.

Gail

Hitting send, Holly ran her thumb over the edge of her phone and sighed again. Damn it, this was really, really, phenomenally stupid. Why did she have to kiss her?

Lisa wants to know if she's hot. She's hot, right?

They sucked. Holly pondered not answering, but knew Rachel would just start calling her.

Yes, she's blonde and fit and totally hot in a dress.

Does she have short hair? If she has short hair, she'd be your thing.

The problem was she was already Holly's 'thing.'

She's straight.

Best to get to the meat of the problem, after all.

Ouch! You fell for a straight girl? What is this, the bajillionth time?

Both of you shut it.

You're only saying that because you totally have the hots for a straight chick. Again. Lisa says that's not stupid.

Holly hesitated. She could tell her friends now, or she could tell them later.

I kissed her.

WHAT? When?

Now. Like half an hour ago. In the coat closet.

Spill or I call you.

K, hang on.

Taking a deep breath, Holly tapped out the edited version of the night.

She needed an emergency plus one to a fancy party. We were dancing like friends and having fun. Then we stole a bottle of champagne and were talking in the back of the coat closet, and I wanted to kiss her. So I did and then I left.

There was no reply for a while, leaving Holly to remember the days before phones. Sadly it also gave her time to think about kissing Gail. It was brief, and while she hadn't exactly kissed back, she hadn't dodged away. And god her lips were soft.
Did she say ew?

That had to be Rachel.

No

Did she kiss you back?

Not really

Did she pull away?

No

Are you *sure* she's straight?

No...

Truth told, Gail could be bi, but the implication was that she was hetero as they come. She was done with men, after a pretty disastrous failed engagement, and now having to work with her ex. Holly could understand that one.

Come dance with us. Either she's going to freak out and never talk to you again or she won't.

That was marvelously deep. Holly sighed and replied with the letter K and drove to the club. Her friends were right. It was a little too late to get terrified about it now. She'd done it, and what would be would be. Holly made a face at herself. Quoting "Que Sera, Sera" was never the best start to an evening. Dancing was a better idea.

Letting Oliver drive was peaceful. He didn't try to talk about stuff, most of the time, but when he did, he had a reason and Gail didn't really mind. She'd known him for too long to actually care, and even though he treated her like every other rookie, she knew she was his favorite. That's why she listened when he finally spoke up.

"You have been weird since the wedding," Oliver said firmly. "I just figured it out."

"Slow, ain't ya? Good thing you're not a detective, Ollie."

"Hey, on the job, it's Officer Shaw, sir," he snapped, without any malice.

"No, I'm a woman, and I'm Officer Peck."

"Yes, ma'am." He laughed cheerfully. "What's with the deep thoughts? Did you hook up with someone?"

Gail glared at Oliver, "Ew. No." He smirked and she sighed. "I think I'm done dating men, they suck." She paused, "Present company excluded."

Nodding, Oliver stopped at the light. "Good. I know you guys always date in-house early on, since you're all you see, but... That's no good." He checked the street and drove on, "See, you think that because you're a cop, and he's a cop, you should be fine. You know what to expect, who to expect it with, what it's all going to be like, and it's easy to deal with the crazy stuff like shootings and bruises." Oliver glanced at her carefully. "But you picked idiots."

"Wow," grumbled Gail.
"I mean the guys you date. Chris, Nick... Nice guys. Good looking. Not good for Gail."

Gail sighed, "Oliver, please stop."

"No, no no. See, you dated pretty cops thinking it could be fun and casual, but they don't see Gail Peck. Maybe they see part of you, but you can't be anyone but who you are, and they can't take it. You need someone who gets the whole package."

"Oliver," she said warningly. "Do not make me show you the trick Noelle taught me with a baton."

Oliver smiled. "Okay! Okay. I'm done."

They rode in silence, Gail watching the street. She kept thinking about Holly, and it was distracting. The woman was funny, smart, and sexy, which was fine, but Gail was straight and you're not supposed to think like that about your friends. Or because you're straight.

By the time lunch rolled around, they got massive burritos and sat on the hood of the car by a park, Gail felt like she could talk to Oliver. It was Oliver, after all.

"My mother thinks I'm going to be a spinster."

"Your mother also thought I was the universe's worst rookie." That was news to Gail, who had only met Oliver when he was well past rookie stage. "I may have driven a car over those tire rippers? I was chasing a perp." He shrugged, highly amused.

Gail filed that away for later. "Your point?"

"My point... Is your mother is not infallible."

Huh. "She's setting me up in blind dates."

Oliver glanced at her, wincing sympathetically. "I wish I had a son your age. Then I'd set you up, and--"

"God, shut up." She shoved Oliver's shoulder, laughing. "You have Izzy, and she is over ten years young than I am." Oliver made a sour face, which Gail read as 'trouble with the ex' and sighed. "Anyway, the dates are okay. Boring."

On the other hand, going out with Holly hadn't been boring. She was fun and strange, and babbled occasionally. And she'd kissed Gail.

Oliver did not reply, and instead was staring down the street like a hunting dog. Sitting up, Gail followed his gaze. "No fucking way," she whispered.

"Bobby Zanaro." Oliver's voice was tight, excited. "It's him, right? Two Lakes? Issac Lapointe's right hand man?"

One of the drug czar's lieutenants, Bobby looked more seedy than Gail had ever seen. Four weeks ago, he'd been bumped to the top of the list to pick up and question, following the death of a high schooler on some of the drugs known to be sold by his crew. But Bobby was normally well dressed. Now he looked like he'd been sleeping in his suit.

Having worked with Oliver for so long, Gail had no second thoughts about what to do. She slid off the cruiser and started walking around the likely escape path. Meanwhile, Oliver waited until Bobby was near and called out to him, "Heeeeyyy Bobby!"
As expected, Bobby spun, stared at Oliver, and then turned to run right into the waiting Gail, who used his own momentum to spin him around and plant his face on the grass. Days like this, she loved her job more than anything.

The text message was amusing, if confusing.

_I'm on a date. Please tell me there's a dead body somewhere._

Gail hadn't ignored her since the wedding, which made Holly feel more confused. They'd bumped into each other at two crime scenes, as well as a coffee run that Holly may have planned, overhearing that 'Pecks' were getting coffee down the street. She'd been surprised to see two men, both with Peck on their shirts, and Gail getting donuts.

That led to Holly checking out just exactly who Gail Peck was, and it floored her. The Staff Superintendent's only daughter, Gail was actually well known to most cops because of her name. She also had a couple strange commendations on her name, including helping catch two serial killers. There were easy stats to find out (constable fourth rank, posted to 15, suspended once), and there were ones you had to infer (fears of a promotion due to her mother's name, something Holly hadn't really understood before when Gail mentioned it in passing).

And it all led to a horrible feeling of having a crush on a straight cop, who was related to more cops, and was the daughter of a super important cop. Well done, Holly. This was looking about as dumb as anything else in her life. No, it was definitely more stupid than the time she'd been what's-her-face's experiment. Go ahead and have a major crush on an unattainable beauty, whose parents could bury you if they wanted.

_Alas, I have no dead body today._

Humming 'We have no bananas' to herself, Holly went back to her novel.

_If I kill this guy, will you be my alibi?_

Gail must be really bored.

_No, I don't think so._

_I hate you. Plus ones forever didn't last long._

_Oh you need a rescue?_

_You're slow. How do you ever pick up chicks?_

Grinning, Holly put the book down.

_I've never rescued a damsel in distress before._

Gail replied with an address and one word. Please.

"Jesus, Holly, what the hell are you doing?" But Holly got up and went for her keys. She found the restaurant easily, and spotted Gail's blonde head through the window, sitting with a dull looking guy. The woman looked bored and homicidal, which was a cute mix. Now what? Holly hesitated and walked inside, right up to Gail's table. "Hey," she grinned brightly.

Gail turned towards her, surprised (or acting surprised...) and Holly watched it shift from bored to bright and happy. Her stomach flipped. "Holly, hi." Gail paused a moment and looked perplexed.
"Why are you... Oh god, did I forget? Is that today?"

For a split second Holly was lost and confused. What the hell was Gail on about? The slight widening in Gail's eyes dropped the clue. Oh! They were faking it. "What- yes! Yes you did, and, um..." Holly quested for a name and failed. "What's her face said you came here and... Well, how could you forget?"

Unlike Holly, Gail lied like a damn boss. She even managed to look sincere. "I am so sorry, I thought that was next week. Neil, I'm sorry, but I promised Holly and... This was fun."

The man, who looked incredibly dull, nodded. "Sure, sure, I totally understand! We can do this another time."

"No," replied Gail. "You're nice, but you know I'm busy with work, and this thing with Holly and, yeah, I don't think this would work out." Gail fished a bill out of her purse, "Thanks, though!"

Like lightning, Gail had Holly's arm in a hold that propelled her out the door. "Neil?" Holly was trying not to giggle.

"Hush, you're a terrible liar! That was your plan?" Gail got outside and turned to the parking lot. "Which car?"

"This one," giggled Holly, and Gail quickly walked over. "I didn't have a plan!"

"That was obvious, nerd!" For a second, Holly was angry, but in the flash of streetlight, she saw Gail's wicked smile.

"See if I rescue you again," huffed Holly, and they got in the car. "Now what?"

"Take me somewhere with alcohol. I'll buy."

They ended up in a small restaurant, not too far from where Gail said she lived, sharing a bottle of Prosecco and some insanely amazing Italian food. Gail explained the blind date situation and how Neil was a poet. After reciting one poem, Holly understood everything, except how Gail had memorized it. The blonde shrugged and said 'Peck,' as if that explained everything.

The food needed no explanation. "This is amazing," sighed Holly, swallowing another bite of her shrimp and pasta. "Do you want some?"

Gail leaned over and shook her head. "Can't." She had a creamy prosciutto concoction that looked deadly and delicious. "But if you want to try...?" She gestured at her plate.

Holly looked at her fork. "How allergic to shrimp are you?"

"I'm not," Gail said absently, but held over her salad fork. "I'm allergic to tomatoes."

Taking the fork, Holly ate the offering and melted a little. "Oh my god... That is mind blowing!"

Smirking, Gail continued to eat. "Listen," she grinned between bites. "Thanks for getting me out of that tree."

"Any time," grinned Holly. "Plus one forever!" They raised their glasses, clinked, and drank again. "You've got to stop going on those dates, though. I mean, really, they've all sounded awful."

Eyes were rolled. "I have another one on Thursday. I think I'm going to switch shifts on accident."
"Ooooom stop the dates?"

Gail sighed and poked at her pasta. "My mother," she explained. "She has decided I can't live my life as a spinster, and as I cannot bestir myself to my own future professionally, she will take charge of personally."

That sounded horrible. "Bestir? That's a quote, I take it."

"I can give you chapter and verse," Gail replied, morosely.

"No thanks." Holly contemplated her own food and then blinked. "Hang on, we had pizza after the movie!"

Gail blinked. "Huh?"

"Tomatoes!"

"Oh! Just uncooked ones. Raw and grilled give me a rash. Mashed up and cooked like sauce or ketchup is usually okay." She pointed at Holly's dish, "Those are fresh. I remember the menu." She paused and added, "My brother and I love this place."

Mollified, Holly leant back in her seat. "That's a food sensitivity," she chastised.


Now Holly rolled her eyes. "You're insane."

"You said that before."

There was a pause. Yes, Holly had said that before. After kissing Gail. She felt horrible awkward, and Gail just looked nonplussed. "I did," muttered Holly.

"You should try the blind date thing, Holly."

A thrill ran up Holly's spine, hearing Gail say her name, but was washed away when the words sank in. "Me?"

"You said you were trying new things. I mean, just because my experience is sub par may be unrelated to the general success of the method." Gail sipped her drink, "Just don't let my mother try it. I think I've seen the son of every possibly useful scion in the province by now."

Unwilling to delve into her current (two year) dry spell, Holly cleared her throat. "I thought she didn't want you to be a spinster."

"Hm," sighed Gail, skirting the topic. "Or maybe I should just take up something that would annoy her. Skydiving."

They spent the rest of the meal coming up with horrible, improbable ideas of new hobbies for Gail.
I liked the idea of failed blind dates with Gail. Her mother wants her to get out of her rut, but things clearly don't go the way Elaine was thinking. Who would have seen Holly coming?

"We're going out," announced Dov, through the door to Gail's room. Gail didn't reply and just stretched out on her bed, letting her head dangle off. Someone knocked on the door, probably Dov.

"I heard you," she replied. Gail looked at the phone on her nightstand, trying to decide what to do. Traci was right on many levels. But every single date she'd been on had been an absolute disaster. So instead of going out again, she'd canceled with the new guy and texted someone who'd been on her mind for days. Like, every single day since Frank and Noelle's wedding.

Why the hell did Holly have to kiss her? She could have cheerfully gone on with denial that there was any sort of attraction there without it! But now the lesbian had brought up the damn elephant in the room, and Gail had to think about it. It didn't feel like a chaste, sisterly, kiss. But then again, Gail didn't have sisters, she had Steve, and he was more inclined to noogie her than kiss her. They were also more than a few years apart.

Holly was older too, though not too much. Not that it bothered Gail at all. And the lesbian thing didn't bother her either. What bothered her was how she felt about the whole thing. That she was stuck thinking that the best person she'd found, in years. Someone who was a little anti-social, like she was, misanthropic, and who put up with her at her snarkiest. Hell, Holly even rescued her from horrible dates gone bad.

And so, instead of going on a date, she'd called Holly and asked what she was doing. But it involved sports and Gail didn't do sports, so she'd never-minded. Now she was regretting the choice.

She was in serious danger of slipping up to one of the Peck Rules: Always know who you are.

There was the sound of shuffling outside her door. "I mean, I'm going out with Chloe and Chris is going in on a call. So … you know, out out." Dov sounded concerned. Ugh.

"And I heard you!" God they were so annoying. Gail pulled a pillow over and covered her face to muffle a growl.

The door opened. "Please be wearing clothes," Dov said, pleadingly.

"Hey! The deal was you don't come in!" She whipped the pillow at him.

Catching the pillow, Dov protested, "I'm not in!" He tossed it back. "I just… Y'know you could come with me and Chloe."

Gail gagged. "I'd rather drink drain cleaner."

Dov laughed, "Seriously, you gonna be okay?"
That was a deeper question than it had to be and Gail sighed. She couldn't really remember the last time she'd felt 'okay' all told. She'd pretty much hid from having to deal with her own drama and trauma by hooking up with Nick again when he came back from undercover, and he'd been a nice distraction. But. He was an ass too and was now having marathon sex with Andy, who didn't even have the balls to tell her about it. People sucked.

When Gail didn't reply for a while, Dov came in and sat down on the floor by her head. "I said don't come in," she sighed.

"I know."

Gail huffed and looked at the wall. After a while, she noted, "You have a date."

"Yeah, you did too."

Oh right. She'd told him that before. "I canceled. One more date with the idiots my mom's picked, and I may vomit." She was perilously close to listening to 90s angsty girl music. She had a Tracey Chapman CD somewhere in her crap. Depressing lesbian music. Awesome.

With a deep breath, Dov spoke. "I'm gonna say this, and you can hit me okay?" Gail eyed Dov. "Okay, you're my friend."

When Dov said no more, Gail rolled over and smacked the side of his head. "That's it?"

Dov didn't flinch, "Well, yeah. I worry about you. Okay? I mean, no offense, the last two dates your mom set up did not make for happy Gail. Or as happy as you ever get."

As Dov babbled, Gail gave him her most annoyed stink eye. "Dov. Shut. Up."

"Shutting up."

Gail sighed and sat up. "Thank you, and if you tell anyone I said that, I'm going to turn your balls into a change purse."

"That's…. Vivid." But Dov didn't look offended. It was, admittedly, nice to have someone with whom she had absolutely no sexual tension, and simple friendship. Why did it have to be Dov?

And then her thoughts drifted back to what Traci had said earlier and Gail sighed reaching for her phone. She thumbed a contact who was becoming far too familiar for someone she'd only known a couple weeks, but to say that she could get her mind off of Holly would be lying. Gail tapped in the sentence and hesitated over the send button for a moment. It was agony. She pressed send.

Is it too late to change my mind?

Dov watched her, but said nothing. In a way, he was like Oliver. A rock she could lean on sometimes, though it was easier to let her guard down with Oliver. With Dov, she could just be as mean as she wanted, and he was okay with it.

Nope. Need the address?

Smiling, Gail replied she didn't and got up, "Go away, Dov, I'm going to hang out with a real friend."

"I'm hurt." He clambered to his feet and hesitated as if he wanted to hug her. Gail quickly shot him an angry glare and he bolted.
Holly tamped down her delight at the text, and fed another coin into the machine. When Gail had texted to ask what she was doing, Holly had hope. They'd hung out a couple times since 'the kiss' and never once talked about it, though they both clearly remembered it. What did any of that mean? Stupid Holly.

But today, after Gail said she didn't play sports, and maybe they'd hang out some other time, Holly felt crushed. Like when she was ten and bought her boyfriend flowers. That had ended wonderfully, and Holly wondered why her parents hadn't suggested dating girls earlier on. They'd certainly been entirely positive about her sexuality, when she did come out. Maybe they hadn't known, and just thought Holly was eccentric.

But then Holly got that other text. Not even an hour later. Something changed her mind and Gail wanted to come hang out with her, even though she didn't like sports. Gail wanted to hang out with her. This was progress! Of course, Gail wasn't kidding when she said she didn't sport, and resulted in what was possibly the most embarrassing softball related incident Holly had ever seen, including the time she'd played beer-league rules and the catcher puked stopping a slide.

At least Gail was willing to laugh at herself, and they went out to dinner instead. Gail insisted Holly pay, after making her play sports. "I can't believe you're that bad! You're a cop!"

"You don't swing a nightstick like that," whined Gail. "Give me a break."

"Oh so you're super awesome at nightsticks and guns and handcuffs?"

Gail stuck her tongue out at Holly. "If you tell me any of those things are a turn on, I'm going home."

"Hah, like this is even a date."

"Oh? You're in a fleece and flannel hat and we played softball. It's totally a date."

The quip caught Holly off guard. Did Gail think this was a date? Admittedly Gail had been going on a lot of horrible, failed, blind dates. "It's cold out. And why are you so fixated on a date?"

Abruptly Gail threw her hands up, shaking them out as if they were going to fly away. Holly had seen the nervous motion before. "Do you like Vietnamese food? This smells good." She turned to the restaurant and gestured.

"Uh yes, yes I love Vietnamese," replied Holly, though she couldn't remember the last time she'd ever eaten it.

Gail nodded and quickly acquired a table. "My mother," she explained, "has set me up on a date every night for the next week."

"That escalated quickly," Holly noted.

Nodding, Gail sighed and slumped a little bit. "After the last one, I couldn't deal with it anymore and called you."

Interesting. This was worse than just needing the rescue from boring Neil. This was giving up. The waiter showed up before they could go further. Holly ordered a Thai tea and something in a bun, while Gail got a coke and Pho. They split the pork egg rolls. "So am I going to keep being your emergency bail out?"

Looking skittish for a moment, Gail shrugged. "My roommates were out and I really didn't want to be home alone."
"Where mom might call you and demand to know where you were?" That sounded familiar.

But Gail looked a little odd, like she was lying about something. "Sure. That. My mother and I don't get along." That was evident, as Gail called her 'mother' and not 'mom.' She puffed out a breath.
"Plus one forever?"

This meal was going to be all kinds of awkward. "Have all the blind dates that bad? Neil was cute, in a male sort of way, but dull."

That set Gail off on a tirade about the last date. A fellow Toronto native, he'd gone to England for a couple years and come back with a pompous accent. Holly dissolved into giggles as Gail recapped and imitated the guy. The giggles became guffaws when Gail started doing the mannerisms.

The food came as a rescue, and they dug in and it was great. When Holly's surprise was evident, Gail pointed at her and laughed. "You didn't know! You totally don't eat this."

Holly felt embarrassed, "You caught me off guard." She knew she sounded petulant, but at least Gail found it amusing and fun.

"That's okay. I still came out ahead. Good food and hanging with the coolest chick ever." She lifted her coke in salute, which Holly matched. The tea was really good.

"Flattery will not finagle you my buns."

"Your buns do look awesome, Dr. Stewart," Gail said with a slight leer. Then it clicked, "Gail Peck, are you giving me shit?" Gail just grinned and Holly found herself laughing again. The only awkward part of the meal had been her all along. The tension was gone, and Holly found herself enjoying hanging out with her friend again.

A part of her was disappointed the kiss didn't come up again, but a surprisingly greater part was pleased they were still friends. Gail had shown the most 'whatever' reaction to Holly being gay and she still seemed to value her as a friend after all that. It wasn't perfect, Holly still had a massive crush on the woman, but she could live with it.

As soon as Gail opened the door, Dov scared the shit out of her. "Who was the hot chick hugging you?"

"Jesus!" She snarled at her roommate, "What the hell is wrong with you?" He knew she hated people jumping out at her. She hit his arm as hard she she could, causing Dov to jump back. "What are you talking about?"

Not sensing his own impending mortality, Dov barged on, rubbing his shoulder. "The brunette? I saw you guys outside the Indian place."

Gail tried not to blush. There was nothing to blush about right? Just friends. "That's my friend, Holly."

"Gail, I know you. I live with you. You're not a hugger. She was totally hugging you."

It took effort not to slam her coat on the hook. "You're an idiot."

"Come on, who is she? I swear I know her."

"I told you! She's my friend. She sat behind you at Frank and Noelle's wedding."
The itty bitty hamster wheel in Dov's head spun. "The coat check girl you were giggling with all night?"

Perhaps Gail would kill Holly. "Yes, the coat check girl." Awesome, Dov had noticed her being a goof with Holly all night. She'd kill Dov, that would work better.

Dov looked like everything clicked, "Oh! This is the friend you went out with the other night? I thought you were kidding!"

It was hard to say what was more annoying. Was it that Dov had been so worried about her being home alone that he'd nearly sacrificed a date, or was it that he was willing to let her just leave the house on a lie? "No, I actually have a real friend, all on my own, so you and Officer Posterboy can stop hovering."

"Sorry, I'm just... You know what, I'm going to shut up."

"The boy can learn!"

Dov rolled his eyes. "So you made friends with the coat check girl?" Pivoting to rail on him, Gail paused when she saw he was smirking. "That's the new forensics geek, right?"

"Nerd," Gail corrected. "Yes. Dr. Stewart to you."

"That's cool, you need a friend."

"Dov, I will hurt you."

"She hugged you. You'd punch me if I hugged you."

"Yeah, well she smells better." The snap remark made Gail's stomach flip. Crap. No good.

That did not seem to make Dov concerned and he flopped on to the couch. "It's cool, you having friends outside of work. Except she's not really outside work, is she?"

"Goodnight Dov." Gail rolled her eyes and went into her room.

Friends totally kiss each other, right, Peck? she asked herself.

Gail's regular therapist had pushed her a little on the topic, asking if it was a bad thing (similar to how the department shrink had poked at it). While Gail really didn't care about people being gay or straight, she thought she knew herself. It was a damn Peck rule, for crying out loud! And being better than everyone? Well that wasn't working out so great. Neither was not letting anyone get in her way.

Today's session had been helpful about Nick at least. She didn't want him. Not only that, she hadn't wanted him. He was just convenient, as had been Chris. Cute guy, wants to make her happy, can't deal with her behavior when push came to shove.

Gail knew she was hard to deal with. She had a lot of ex-Peck-tations to live up to, and she was always compared to Steve, or her cousins. Gail the Fail was what her cousin called her, until she hit him. She had to be tough, she had to be hard, and the only way to protect herself was to be cold.

So how come Holly made her feel so warm inside? She could trust Holly. They already talked about a lot, especially after the kiss and the stupid "Things Straight Girls Say" stupidity. Now they were friends in a way she'd never had before. And Holly didn't just tolerate her attitude, she smiled at it in that quirky, side smile way. She laughed honestly at Gail's dark and twisty jokes.
This was just what a best friend was, she had told the therapist. But she knew, she knew this was something else. She felt right with Holly, and being away from her was frustrating. Now what to do about it? Would Holly even be interested in someone changing teams? Maybe she’d worry that Gail as going to use her as an experiment? But weren’t all relationships experiments?

Gail fell on her bed and pushed her face into her pillow to scream.

Why was this so hard!?

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Why was it so hard to not swoop over and kiss Gail?

Holly had stood to the side, being blocked by Gail, as the man continued his tirade about the death behind Holly. Gail stood her ground, hand away from her gun, and let he rant, but then he'd taken a step closer and Gail raised her hand to stop him. "You need to step back, sir," she said grimly.

The tussle surprised Holly, mostly because she didn't expect tiny Gail, who had zero sports abilities, to be able to spin the man around that fast and cuff him with no effort. It was insanely hot, which reminded Holly about how she'd had a horrible crush on a woman in the navy once. Women in uniforms. If Gail had short hair, Holly would have cried.

Officer Cruz, Gail's partner that day, had been less than pleased at the situation, chastising Gail for the action, and the urge to kiss Gail started when the blonde quipped that the man was about to violate medical jurisprudence. Cruz's mouth dropped open as Gail went on to recite exactly what the man had been about to do to the evidence and why it was a problem, especially if he was the killer.

That freaked the man out, and as Gail hauled him to her cruiser, she winked at Holly.

Melting. Holly was melting inside.

When Gail came back rather quickly, she was smirking like a little devil. "You look very pleased, Officer Peck."

"Cruz called it in, guy was already a suspect. Nash thinks I'm psychic."

"No such thing."

"You have no sense of humor, Doc."

Always in the field, Gail called her 'Doc' or 'Dr. Stewart.' The use of 'Holly' was surprisingly rare, unless they were alone or far away from police things. "I've been told I have a fantastic sense of humor."

"Probably by the same people who think you're a good dancer." Gail screwed her face up in amusement. "Cruz and I are gonna stick around until Diaz gets here with whoever lost the bet this morning," she said, semi-cryptically. "Anything cool I can take back with me? Bonus points?"

"You already caught a suspect trying to tamper with the scene," noted Holly, amused at how adorable Gail was. "He was run over by something big and heavy. A van or a trailer."

Gail leaned over, "Tire treads are wide... Not a trailer, maybe a truck. Why heavy?"

"The way his stomach burst."

"Cool. Gross, but cool."
Too soon for Holly's taste, the replacement officers arrived and Gail took her suspect off to the station. When Holly was ready to go, she texted Gail, suggesting they could have dinner.

She was very, very, disappointed when Gail had to work.

When her phone beeped, Gail got excited, thinking maybe Holly had changed her mind about going to the hockey game, and would be free to hang out instead. It was a little disturbing, how much she cared about Holly right now, and wanted to spend time with her. The kiss thing aside, which frankly Gail hadn't really managed to put aside at all, Holly was an altogether awesome person.

*You canceled another date.*

That was her mother, and Gail groaned.

"What's wrong?" Chris looked up from his video game.

"Nothing," she lied and tapped a reply.

*I'm not going on them any more, so just cancel them.*

That probably wasn't going to help anything, but it was worth a try.

"Doesn't look like nothing," Chris remarked. "You look angry."

"Watching you absolutely fail at Mario Kart will do that for a girl."

"You can do better?" He held out a controller.

Gail snatched it, and sat down beside him, "It's my Wii, you moron."

Smirking, Chris restarted the game as a two player session. "I never see you play."

That was true. Gail only played in the middle of the night, when she couldn't sleep. It had started when she lived at her parents, long before Perik. There had always been nights when Gail didn't sleep, fears of the unknown. One Christmas she'd asked for a Nintendo. Then a Playstation. Now she had three gaming systems, a milk crate of games, and something to do at night when the dreams that were based on reality got to her.

As she proceeded to trounce Chris on every track, her phone buzzed a few more times. Chris asked, twice, if she was going to check the messages, but she noted they'd call if it was really important. Of course the phone rang next.

"I know that ringtone," blinked Chris, surprised and hitting pause. "You better take that."

"Watch me not," she snapped, and pressed the decline button on her mother. "I don't want to talk to her." She unpaused the game.

"Gail," Chris said waringly, hitting pause again. He had met her mother, once, for dinner. She'd called him Craig all night and didn't like him. "Why are you ignoring your mother?"

"You've met her," snapped Gail. "Do you want to play or what?"

They played another round before Chris' phone rang, "It's Denise." He went to his room.

Biting her tongue on the advice to ignore the lying bitch, Gail played a few tracks on her own. It
became evident that Chris wasn't coming back, and Gail shut down the Wii and flipped to a first person shooter, with headphones on. It was easy to get lost in the mindless carnage of make believe.

Her phone kept buzzing however, and Gail finally reached over to look at it. Fifteen from her mother, which she promptly deleted. Two from Holly. Gail felt her skin heat up in a blush.

*You're missing a great game!*

The second text was a selfie of Holly and two friends in hockey jerseys, hoisting beers. Gail laughed and startled when Chris spoke.

"That's not your mom."

"How would you know?" She scowled and tapped a reply, calling Holly a nerd.

"You look happy." He smiled at her, tiredly. "You never looked that happy with me. Or Nick."

Chris sat down on the couch. "So what's his name?"

"There's no..." Gail trailed off and felt herself startle. Oh crap. "It's not even that, god. We're just friends."

"If you say so."

The phone rang again. Her mother. Ugh. Gail answered. "I'm surprised you didn't send a uniform for a visit."

"Your father talked me out of it." The tone in her mother's voice made this a serious comment, not a joke. "I've canceled your dates."

What? Gail blinked and then grinned, "Good."

"I trust you understood their point."

"Yes, I do. And you should be happy to know I've been going out with a friend lately."

"Oh?"

"We went to a movie, and dinner, and batting cages."

Her mother was silent for a moment. Chris looked surprised as well. "Gail dear, you're terrible at sports."

"Thank you so much."

"I see. Is this serious?"

"Not at the moment, but I'm trying new things, which was your point."

"Hmm, well. I suppose." Her mother hesitated. "You're still seeing a therapist, I understand."

Ugh. That wasn't good. "Yes."

"Just make sure Sgt. Best doesn't know. Promotions are due up soon, and now that you've recovered from your suspension..." The rest went unsaid and Gail winced.

"Of course. I wouldn't want to shame the Peck name."
"That would be nice. Remember dinner is next week."

"How could I forget." They hung up with the customary lack of adorations and Gail flopped onto the floor. "Chris, what would it take for you to taze me next Thursday? Or spray me with pepper spray?"

"Leave your bras in the shower again?"

"You can't put them in the dryer, they get all bent and break too fast."

"TMI!" But he laughed. "She's not that bad, is she?"

"I promise you, I would rather be shot. Or abducted again."

The dark humor fell flat and Gail sighed. Just one more person she couldn't tell.
Have you ever spilled industrial strength drain cleaner on a polyester skirt? I went to Catholic school. We had to entertain ourselves somehow.

"Your phone keeps buzzing," Holly noted, pointing at Gail's purse.

"Yep." Gail popped the P loudly and drank more beer. "Herr Peck is after me."

Holly frowned, "Your father? Why?"

"My mother," corrected Gail.

"That would be Frau Peck." Holly gave her a grin and Gail squinted. Then she rattled off a sentence in what Holly presumed was German. "You memorize that?"

Snorting, Gail reached over and plucked a fry from the bowl on the table. "Are you one of those boring monolingual people?" There was a pitch to Gail's voice, a drawl that made her words a little more biting than normal. But she was grinning.

"I know French, and some Latin… Wait, you speak German?"

"Yep," grinned Gail. "Why is that a surprise?"

"I heard you speak Italian, and you're telling me you speak German too?" Holly was, she had to admit, impressed.

"And French." Gail smirked.

Holly waved her hands, "No, no, wait. You told me about a case where Dov was stuck with a woman who didn't speak any English!"

"The Italian woman? Yeah, that was a crazy day."

"And you didn't help?"

"Didn't speak it then."

Holly frowned, "You said that was four months ago."

"Yeah?"

"You were fluent at dinner!"

There was a sad expression on Gail's face that surprised Holly more than the language revelations. As if Gail had expected no one to believe her, or in her. "Well," she sighed. "Don't know what to tell you, Holly." And she ate another fry.

"That is so cool," Holly breathed, and Gail startled. "I know French. Barely. I can't imagine having
that many languages in your head! Do you dream in them?"

"Sometimes," Gail replied, confused. "I'm sorry, this is cool?"

"Totally! I don't know anyone who's fluent in multiple languages!" Holly bounced in her seat and startled the waitress. "Sorry," blushed Holly, and they put in their orders for entrees, Gail making it clear hers was not to have any tomatoes. "Okay, give, how many total?"

Gail was flustered. "Languages? Including English, six fluently. And I understand some of those morons from the east coast. Oh and Russian, but I'm not really fluent." Holly whistled, and grinned. "Is this a turn on or something?"

"No!" Liar. Yes. Totally. Absolutely. "I just think it's awesome! Did you take them in school or something? I mean, you picked up Italian in a month? That's crazy!"

"No, I just read the books." Gail had the grace to look sheepish. When Holly stared at her, she looked away, face closing.

Was Gail just not used to compliments? To being awesome? "Okay, maybe that's a turn on," Holly muttered. Gail blinked and arched her eyebrows. "You're funny and a genius? Why are men not falling all over you?"

Gail groaned. "I scare them away, Holly. And I'm ignoring my mother because I don't want to go on anymore dates." A pause. "Men suck."

"I am not qualified to remark on that," decided Holly.

Their food made an appearance and Gail dove into her fish after checking it for possible tomato contamination. "When?"

"When what?"

"When did you know you were a lesbian? Did you just wake up one morning and think that fleece and backpacks were the thing?"

Holly laughed, but realized that Gail remembered that entire night with freakish clarity. "I knew I liked girls when I was twelve," she explained. "I knew I was gay when I was sixteen."

"Back of a car?"

"A truck, and he got to first base." They lifted their beers and clinked to bad dates. "Do I get to ask random questions?"

"Sure," grinned Gail.

"Combat boots, skinny jeans, and baggy tops?" Looking perplexed, Gail arched an eyebrow. "Why the boots?"

"Comfortable ass kicking."

It was too late, Holly realized. She'd already fallen for her.

"Did that child hit your cat with her car?"

Gail tried to concentrate on the nurse, but the world was a little wobbly. Pulsing. God, she hated
Oxy. She loved it, but God it made conversations a bitch. "Who?"

"The cop you came in with."

"Oh. No. Just Nick." Andy was still there. Awesome. The day just kept getting better and better.

The nurse laughed softly. "We could call Nick," she suggested to Gail. Making a face, Gail shook her head and there was another laugh. Why was that funny? "You're lucky that didn't get on your clothes. You would have melted it right into you."

Words. Why were they saying words? Why did people have to say stupid words? "She slept with my ex-boyfriend," sighed Gail. "And now she's tanking my mellow. I like my mellow. The Oxy's nice." It was nice now. It would kick her ass. "When's the doctor coming? I want to go home."

The nurse glanced at the waiting room. Jesus was Andy still there? "Not with her I take it."

"Anyone else," groaned Gail, falling back onto the bed.

"Siblings? Parents?"

Gail sniffed and shook her head. She really didn't want to think about the fact that she didn't have anyone who she could deal with at the moment. Dov and Chris would fuss, Steve was busy on the case and would just dump her on her parents, and she really did not want to deal with Herr Peck while on drugs. She'd probably agree to something stupid. "Nope," she sighed, popping the P loudly. "Gail Peck flies solo." All she really wanted was to check into a hotel and enjoy being disconnected for a while. No wonder people did drugs.

The nurse kept on talking about how she couldn't go home alone, and needed someone to sit up with her. "Child, you can be as brave a cop as you wanna be, but we are not letting your pasty ass home alone."

Ugh. "Why are you being difficult?" she muttered. Alone was better. She was happier alone, except when she was with … Oh. "Plus One Forever. God, I'm going to owe her my life if she comes." Gail dug in her pocket for her phone.

"You're not calling anyone," the nurse informed her. She took the name and number and gave Gail some water.

Closing her eyes, Gail tried to recover that wonderful mellow place where she was relaxed and at ease and very much not think about Nick or blind dates or anything at all like that. She was sure Andy would want to know some damn thing like if Gail forgave them or gave them her blessing or whatever else the Girl Guide wanted.

She didn't care, but it did still hurt. Gail had let down those walls and Andy broke them. But as she thought about it, she didn't know how it could be magically made better. Maybe if Andy had told her before it became a thing, admitted she had feelings for Nick. Or maybe if Nick had fessed up that he grew to like Andy over their undercover work. Maybe. Maybe.

Gail sighed and stared at the drop tile ceiling. Maybe the doctor would give her something different for the pain and it would just knock her out to sleep. That would be really nice. Sleep and wake up and not have to care anymore.

For the first time in her life, Holly was infuriated by a medical professional. The doctor keep trying to explain what the burn was from, when Holly had run the damn tox screens in the first place. The
hospital had called in the middle of the Mass Spec running a sample, and asked if she could pick up Officer Peck that afternoon, because she should be able to be discharged by three.

Holly had said yes, as calmly as possible, but panicked. Gail was hurt? It hurt Holly in a surprising way, and she had momentarily found it hard to breath. She'd tried texting Gail more than once about it, but got no answer, and finally had to hunt down a detective to find out what had happened. The case she was working on was the one that had hurt Gail. Undiluted industrial strength drain cleaner. That stuff would eat through clothes.

"Look, I'm from the crime lab," she told the doctor. "I ran your screens. See there? Dr. Stewart?" She held up her work badge and was gratified to see him pale and then vanish.

As they brought Gail out, Holly was surprised to see the pained look with which Gail gave her partner. It wasn't an attack, it was just cutting and quiet and clearly gutted the other woman. Then Gail's eyes caught Holly's and there was a wash of relief from the police officer. Holly caught the words 'real friend' before Gail walked over and grabbed her arm. "Hey," exhaled Gail, her voice sounding like it was forced levity. "Let's get out of here."

"Hey, are you okay?" asked Holly. She didn't sound okay at all. She barely looked okay.

Stupid, stupid question. "Please just get me out of here." Gail's eyes were a little wild, and perilously close to tears.

That was not a problem. Holly took the handout and pills, and then led Gail to the car. "Are you hungry?" Holly helped Gail sit and realized she was going to have to buckle her too.

"McNally keeps harshing my vibe," sighed Gail, lifting her arm with a wince so she could be buckled in. "Sorry I had them call you. I'm a shitty plus one."

"It's okay." Though it did make Holly wonder how few trusted friends Gail had. Small wonder, with that armor and caustic nature. "Want me to take you home?"

Gail looked up at her, suddenly very small and vulnerable. Her voice was tiny, which Holly didn't even think Gail could do. "No one's home." Then, even smaller, "Can I stay with you tonight?"

Holly sighed and, making sure Gail's hands were in her lap, closed the door. There was something that made Gail not want to be alone, more than just being stoned out of her gourd would do. "Of course." Gail was clearly asking for help. Holly could keep her unfair feelings in check for one night when her friend needed her.

The drive to her house was quiet. Gail rested her head on the passenger window, eyes closed, and occasionally winced when she moved. She didn't even make a fuss when Holly got her inside and out of her jacket and shoes. The uniform belt was tricky, and Gail had to fight with it to get it off. Without any prompting, Gail sat on the couch and rested her head on the back, as if the drive had taken every last ounce of her energy.

She'd had a rather high dose of pain killers, so when Holly came back with water and Gail was sound asleep, sitting on the couch, there was no surprise. Wondering what Gail might look like without all those walls, Holly sighed. She nudged Gail to lie down and covered her with a blanket. The blonde's face was scrunched up and Holly gently brushed the hair away from her forehead to kiss the pale skin.

Nope, still in pain. Not like kisses had magical properties. Holly sighed and went about her usual evening, making a change to plug in Gail's phone which had a text from someone named Princess
saying "Andy told me you're with some brunette. Assuming it's your coat check friend Dov told me about. Tell me if you're dead." Holly toyed with the phone, wondering how to reply. Of course, she didn't know the passcode, and was about to put the phone down when a voice from the couch rose up asking who called.

"It was a text from Princess." Holly put the phone down and touched Gail's face with the back of her hand. No fever. "Feeling any better?" The pale, smooth, skin was cool to the touch.

"Pretty sure hands aren't how you're supposed to check for pain," grumbled Gail.

"Actually they do teach us how to check for a high temperature with our hands. Mostly for little kids." She handed Gail the bottle of water. "How's your pain?"

"Seven." She tried to open the bottle and winced. "Nine. Shit, shit, shit." The bottle fell to the floor and Gail cradled her burnt arm, tears sparking in her eyes. "I'm going to kill McNally. I wipe with this hand."

The simple absurdity of the statement made Holly smirk. "I don't know if our friendship is up for me helping you pee." She retrieved the bottle and handed it, open, for Gail to drink. "That said..."

Gail sighed. "I need to pee. Can I have more drugs?"

"After," decided Holly. "You're too heavy to haul upstairs."

"I'm not fat," groused Gail. "Did you get my bag from the hospital?"

"Yep. If you want to shower, we can work something out."

Gail looked like she desperately wanted a shower. "Lemme see how peeing goes." Glancing at her phone, Gail picked that up and read the text first. "shit..." Gail shoved it in her pocket without replying and made it up the steps without harm and shooed Holly out.

Leaving Gail alone, Holly went back to get Gail's bag, some more water bottles, and the pills. Her guest room was more of an office, but like all over workers, Holly had slept on the sofa bed enough times to know it was pretty damn comfortable. She made it up and then knocked on the bathroom door. "You fall in?"

"I can't button my pants," Gail sounded absolutely torn between the hilarity of the comment and frustration enough to make a grown woman cry.

Holly swallowed a laugh. "Do you have something in your bag? I can get you sweats."

The door opened. "I have sweats." Gail's face was damp, as was her hair. "Can you... God, I hate asking all this." Maybe some of the pain on Gail's face was embarrassment.

"It's okay. Plus one forever!" Holly raised her arm in salute and went to the guest room. Gail's bag had academy sweats shoved in, as if they were for running later. The sniff test showed they were alright, so Holly took them, the shirt, the underpants and socks, to the bathroom. "Knock knock."

"It's open."

Holly popped in and blinked at a shirtless Gail, holding a towel up to her front. "Hey. You got your shirt off!" And bra. Down girl.

"You are a shitty detective." It was that acerbic, angry Gail. Sweating too. Getting her shirt off must
"Dead body puzzles are more fun. Let me know if you need help, okay?" She placed the clothes on the radiator.

But Gail shooed her out again. This time Holly stayed by the door and heard the snarls and curses. "I'm fine!" Gail shouted once. There was running water, the sound of a damp cloth, and Holly felt her face burn. Gail was giving herself a wipe down.

Firmly ordering her brain to stop fantasizing about the mostly naked blonde beauty in her bathroom, Holly cleared her throat. "Everything okay?" Gail was her friend, and only her friend.

There was another curse and the door opened. "I can't get my hair back," she snarled.

Holly smiled, looking at her friend in sweatpants, a t-shirt, and an angry scowl. The socks were in the sink for some reason. "How about you eat a sandwich, take your drugs, and I'll brush your hair."

"I'm not hungry," grumbled Gail, walking to the hallway and stopping. A moment later she turned the right direction to the guest room. Holly was a little impressed. Still, she went downstairs to make a sandwich. Part of her brain remembered that Gail didn't eat raw tomatoes, and she ended up making tuna fish.

Back upstairs, Gail lay on her back, eyes squeezed shut. "I'm not giving you your meds until you eat." Holly set the plate on the nightstand and cajoled Gail into sitting up and eating.

"I hate you." There was no venom in her tone as Gail took a bite. Then she took another, until she inhaled half of the sandwich. In the brief quiet, Holly started to brush her hair. "You're good at that."

"Thank you. I don't get to brush other people's hair a lot."

"Date women with longer hair," advised Gail, reaching for the second half of the sandwich. "I don't feel as queasy."

"And that is why I wanted you to eat. Here." She handed over two more pills, which Gail popped immediately. Holly freed the blonde hair from it's braid, brushed out tangles and then asked, "Do you sleep with it down or in a braid or..."

"You can braid it?" She sounded interested, so Holly started to braid. "I usually just let it get all tangled. I braid it for work sometimes. I can't remember why I grew it out." She sighed. "I was probably trying to get my parents off my back."

Holly thought about that for a moment. "That sounds annoying." Holly could only imagine the stress of living up to that Peck name. They were a who's who of Toronto policing.

"Hah," snorted Gail. "Be better than everyone else, don't screw up, and remember who you are." At Holly's quizzical sound, Gail elaborated. "Don't forget you're a Peck and what that means. I represent policing in Toronto. It's my birthright. She sounded almost resigned. "I mean, if my mother knew I was high as a kite in the hospital, singing to lamps, I'd get a lecture."

Holly smiled and was grateful to be sitting behind Gail just then. "Singing?"

"I can see you in the mirror, nerd."

Looking up, Holly met Gail's gaze in the mirror and blushed. "Damn, you're supposed to be stoned right now!"
"I'm at the in-between stage where I have a brain." Gail closed her eyes and sighed. "That feels really nice."

Holly pursed her lips and tied off the braid. "Your hair needs some love, Officer. Split ends all the way up."

"Maybe I'll just cut it all off and freak out my father. He'll just give me the silent, disapproving look." Gail was staring to ramble. "He's great at that one. Whenever Steve or I screwed up, mostly me, he'd just frown and not say anything. Except I can get him to yell. Steve can't. Our mother never yells at us. She has this voice ..." Gail paused. "They're shitty parents."

"I'm sorry."

"I bet your parents are nice. You're nice, so they must be. I'm a jerk, just like my parents." Gail sniffed once. "Sorry, I'm dumping my life all over you. Did I tell you I got dumped at the alter once? And most of my exes tell me I'm a frigid bitch." Another sniffle. "This is why I hate people. Except you're not people."

She was starting to fall into the drug pit fast, which wasn't surprising when Holly thought about the day and the dosage. The second half of the sandwich was only partly eaten, and Holly wisely took it from Gail's hand. "Why don't you go back to sleep."

"Phone?" Holly handed it over and Gail thumbed a message with one hand. "Don't need my roommate's girlfriend calling SWAT on you." Holly wasn't sure if it was good or bad that Gail's roommates were so concerned. "I'm feeling stupid again."

"How's the pain?"

Gail squinted at her wrist. "Throbby, but like warm jello and not a trampoline." Then she paused, "I'm real dumb, Holly."

"You're doped up, Gail."

"I'm dumb about people." She sighed and looked at Holly with big eyes. "You're pretty. And nice. A really good friend, even if you're weird and awkward. You laugh at my jokes, give me shit when I deserve it. And your lips are really soft. I liked that."

Exhaling, Holly nudged Gail to lie down, "I take that back, you're stoned."

"Stoned out of my miiiind, but I don't care about men anymore. I don't think I'm gonna date them. They suck." Sighing again, Gail lay down and looked wistful. "Is it nicer, dating women?"

"That's … really subjective, Gail. Go to sleep."

Gail pouted a little, "Is it quiet here at night?"

Holly smiled. "Yes, it's very quiet." She took her laptop off the table and brandished it, "I'll be downstairs."

"Writing the next, great Canadian, journal article, I'm sure." Ah, there was the snarky Peck she'd grown fascinated with. "Thanks." And there was the vulnerable one that Holly was falling for.

"Just remember this when I get attacked by some dead body," joked Holly. Gail made a weak zombie joke, and looked a little off-colour, but curled up in the bed. Holly wondered what that was about, but went to the kitchen to try and finish the article about the Robbie Robbins case. The case
where they met.

It was dark when she decided to pack it in, quietly slipping back into the office/guest room to stow the laptop. Gail was out cold, with the lights on, and Holly smiled. The blonde's face was still slightly contorted in pain, but much less than before. She stood and watched Gail sleep for a while, before deciding she was being a creeper. As quietly as possible, Holly pulled the blankets up and turned off the light.

That turned out to be a bad idea.

Sometime after her shower but before she got tired of her trashy novel, Holly was startled by a scream, no ... By a yell from the guest room. Absolute terror. Quickly a thud and a clatter followed and she shouted, "Gail! I'll be right there." Holly all but fell out of her bed on a mad, barefoot dash to the guest room.

She arrived to find Gail, sitting on the floor holding the now-turned-on lamp, sweating and looking freaked out. "Holly," she said in a strangled voice. The room was mostly fine, if you ignored the bed sheets being pulled out and in a mess. Gail pushed some loose strands of hair away from her face. "Right." She exhaled a long, shaky, breath and leaned against the end table.

It was fairly common to have nightmares when in pain, and for some people, the painkillers only made them worse. If Holly hadn't been aware of Gail's expressions, she might have chalked that up to the medicine. But. Gail's face had a weary resignation about it that implied these sorts of things were regular.

Something very bad had happened once.

"Here, give me that," she asked Gail, softly, and put the lamp back on the end table. Kneeling by her, Holly felt Gail's cheeks and was not surprised to feel a cold sweat. She glanced at the bed again, and decided to change the sweat soaked sheets entirely.

Through the sheet changing, Gail barely moved. "You don't have to do this," she mumbled. "I'll be fine."

That was a damn lie, Holly thought, and ignored the suggestion. "Do you need help getting up?"

Gail shook her head and, after a moment of thought, got up to sit on the bed. "I'm sorry," she grumbled, putting up walls immediately.

Deciding the best action was not to make a fuss, Holly handed her the water bottle. "Do you want something colder?" Gail shook her head and downed half the bottle in one go. Carefully, Holly pressed the back of her hand to Gail's forehead. It was getting back to a normal temperature. "I'm fine."

"Uh huh." She sat on the bed and cupped Gail's face with both hands and studied her eyes clinically. Which was hard. "Pupils are fine and your eyes aren't glassy." While Gail muttered that she'd said she was fine, Holly stood up. "Do you want more painkillers?"

"No," Gail replied, wearily. "They made my head too thick. Couldn't think when I woke up."

It had been years since Holly's psych rotation, but that sounded more than a bit like PTSD and trauma induced nightmares from psychical pain. Gail should not be left alone right now, if possible. "I'm going to get my book."

It was a measure of her emotional temperature that Gail didn't argue. When Holly came back, with
book and her robe, Gail was curled up on her side, face at the light. So that being left on hadn't been due to exhaustion. "I'm a grown woman, and I sleep with a light on," she sighed.

Sensing that was as much admission to the issue as there would be, Holly stretched out on top of the covers. "I'll leave it on when I leave, then. I'm sorry, I turned it off earlier."

"S'okay. You knew I can't eat raw tomatoes." She yawned. "And I hate eggs."

Hesitating, Holly reached over and caressed Gail's head. "Feel better," she whispered, as Gail yawned again and seemed to sink into the bed. She really was like a cat.

After a long bout of silence, Gail spoke. "Holly?" Her voice was barely above a whisper.

"I'm still here."

"I'm sorry I scared you."

Holly lowered her book and rubbed Gail's back lightly. She didn't know what to say to that. "Try to sleep, okay? I'll be right here."

It was a while before Gail's breathing eased into the pattern of sleep. It was longer before Holly stopped watching her, but when she left, the light stayed on.
Fleece Pantsuits

Chapter Notes

We are obligated to be mean to the girl guide (Canada has Girl Guides, not Girl Scouts, check it out). Also schwarma is some of the most fantastic foods in the universe. There's a food truck I used to stalk that made the best, greasiest stuff. You should try it. BTW, I resurrected my blog and I'm also posting updates there, so it gets tweeted. Check https://chapsticklez.wordpress.com/ and feel free to pester me on Twitter, I'm @chapsticklez

She didn't get back to work for three days, and even then Frank kept her on desk duty. Gail had stayed only the one night at Holly's and after that Dov and Chris babysat her. Now the whole station was, which was annoying, and everyone was giving Andy a glare. That was alright, Gail felt. When Nick tried to talk to her though, Gail had enough and told him to screw himself.

Finally left alone, Gail pulled her phone out and tapped Holly's number to text her.

I'm going to kill someone.

It felt very natural to text Holly. And in this moment, Holly might be the only person she could confide in. Maybe Traci, but she was Andy's friend too, and that would be unfair. Was 'too' even the right word? Was McNally her friend any more? Ugh.

It may be better not to tell me that.

Har. You made plans for tonight?

Not exactly.

That was a little vague.

Can I buy you dinner?

There was no immediate reply and Gail put her phone down to answer the desk phone. Why she had to answer calls when she hurt her writing hand made no sense, but it was better than staying at home another day. While she took a call about a noise complaint (no, a delivery truck at noon didn't count), the phone buzzed a few more times. Finally she picked up her phone to read them.

Gail Peck. Are you asking me on a date?

The second was five minutes later.

I promise to wear flannel.

Another few minutes later.

Or I could wear fleece. I bet I can find a sexy fleece pantsuit.

And as Gail considered her reply, a fourth and fifth came in.
I'm sorry, I was trying to be funny.

No more date jokes. That was really bad taste.

Gail smirked.

I was on the phone, you idiot.

She flexed her hand a few times and jumped when Oliver walked up and cheerfully asked, "How's my girl, Peck?" If it was anyone else, Gail might have insulted him, but Oliver was Oliver. She flipped him off. "That's my Peck. You eat?"

"I swear to god, Oliver..." Gail trailed off as her phone buzzed and Oliver held up a bag from her favorite middle eastern restaurant. "Did you buy me schwarma?" She practically salivated.

"And dessert." He pointed back at McNally, who was sheepishly holding a box of donuts. As Gail scowled, Oliver added, "She said she's not eating with us." Her cellphone buzzed again, this time ringing. "Answer that. Me and schwarma will wait in the break room."

Gail glanced at her phone and smiled to see it was Holly. "Don't eat my lunch!" She shouted as she thumbed the phone to answer.

"Really? You asked me out," replied Holly on the phone. Gail could hear Holly's lip quirk into that side smile.

"Oliver brought me lunch. Dinner? Yes or no or are you going to send me six more texts?"

"Shut up! I sent you ... Fine, I sent you six! But you were all radio silence for twenty minutes."

"Hey, I have a very important job, taking in noise complaints and filing papers." Internally, Gail thought how it was Canada's tax dollars at work.

"My tax dollars at work." Holly echoed Gail's thought. "I'm actually busy tonight," sighed Holly. "Not for dinner, I mean, but I won't be free till late."

"I can eat out late." The moment the words left her mouth, Gail blushed. Holly laughed. "Oh shut up, you know what I mean."

"I really don't think I do." Before Gail replied, Holly went on. "Nine PM late."

"Oh that's not late. Besides, I'm just on phones till at least next week."

Holly's voice got softer, "How is your hand?"

Damn it, why did that make her feel warm? "Better. I can flip people off." The bright laughter delighted Gail. "So nine. Should I meet you at your place?"

"Oh you know where I live?"

"Idiot, I spent the night there. I remember. Cop."

"I'll allow it. Okay, pick me up at nine and take me somewhere nice."

"Wear your best flannel," joked Gail and she hung up to Holly laughing. She could feel the smile on her face and turned only to see McNally standing there like a hurt puppy, holding the box of donuts. "What is with you?" She snapped at McNally.
The other cop shuffled. "I just wanted to say I'm sorry-

Gail cut her off, "Don't okay. Just don't." This wasn't the time or the place. She took the donuts. "I don't want to talk to you about it, I don't want to hear shitty excuses. Okay? You screwed up. Take him, deal with it, I actually don't even care anymore." The words came out of her mouth, and Gail was shocked to realize how true it was. As McNally stepped forward, Gail held up her burnt wrist. "No. Do not hug me."

McNally's eyes locked on the wrist. "Okay. I just... I don't know what to do," she whispered.

It was mean, but Gail smiled thinly. "Well. That's your problem, McNally."

At least Oliver just wanted to talk about shopping for weapons.

Holly was ignoring her friends. It wasn't that they were annoying, it was that she'd finally pegged that she had more than a crush on Gail Peck, and was stuck in a rut. So the fact that she was at dinner with two of her oldest, best, friends, who were practically family, wasn't enough of a distraction from the memory of that beautiful, pained, face, sleeping in her guest bed.

So much of Holly just wanted to kiss it and make it better. But she knew that would never be enough to chase the demons out of Gail's head. They'd spent a couple other nights at Holly's since then, all sober and undrugged, but each night Gail had left a light on in the guest room. Holly knew the six-pack of nightlights in her purse wouldn't fix it, but she'd grabbed them anyway. Would Gail appreciate it or be defensive about it? Impossible to tell. Maybe she'd make one of those dark jokes about it, the ones that made Holly laugh deeply.

"Earth to Holly," Rachel said loudly.

"Sorry, I was thinking about ... work." Partly true. Gail was at her work, right?

"So the date?"

Holly's mind was blank. The only date she could think of was Gail's disaster series of blind dates, which she'd ditched to hang out with the coolest chick ever. Her words. "Sure?" she replied, hesitantly.

"Great, she can meet you at the bar by the station!"

Danger! Danger! What had Holly just agreed to? "Uh, wait, what?"

"You, blind date, next Tuesday. Get your head out of the cadaver, Holls!"

Holly stared at Rachel, frowning a little, "Right! That's fine. Tuesday is good."

Dinner went on, and Holly found herself feeling entirely uncomfortable. She used to enjoy blind dates, meeting new people was fun. But she couldn't remember the last time she'd had a date at all that wasn't with Gail.

This meant a blind date was a good thing. Get back out into the dating pool. So why did it feel like she was about to be cheating on Gail?

When Gail had figured out that Nick and McNally were getting it on, she'd been mad. Not that they'd done it. Hell, she thought they'd done it while undercover. No, she'd been angry at them for
lying and hiding, but in a way somewhat grateful. Now she didn't have to ditch Nick when he got too close. But for the first time she could ever remember, Gail felt jealous.

What the hell was Holly doing on a date!?

They'd texted that morning, Gail inviting Holly to play trivia crap with her friends, or not, and Holly simply said she was busy. Gail had assumed, stupidly, that meant work. But no, no, it meant a date with a kind of hot chick. For unknown reasons, it made Gail irrationally jealous! And why the Black Penny?

She finally gave up staring death glares at them, right around the time Dov wrapped up the game. When he and Chloe started kissing between disgustingly tender replies, she snapped. "I'm going outside."

As she stormed out, she caught a weird, guilty, look from Holly. Really? Now you're having second thoughts? With a snarl, Gail yanked her coat on and let the blast of cool air calm her a little.

"I didn't know you were such a bad loser at trivia," remarked Chris, shivering as he got his jacket on.

"You think I really give a damn about Dov's stupid game?" Gail dug her hands into her jacket, letting the oversized bulk hide her from Chris. In as far as exes went, he was the least objectionable. Simple, unaffecting, and straightforward, he was easy to get along with, but not someone Gail had connected with on any deep level. It was always been, to her at least, a relationship doomed towards brevity.

Looking at him now, she felt nothing. No pang of loss, or regret for cutting ties that quickly. That said, he had also evolved into the role of friend. Chris offered up a sad smile, and Gail was reminded of his recent loss of fatherhood. "I never thanked you and Dov."

She blinked. "For the totally lame cheer-you-up party?"

"It really helps, you know? Having people who care."

That sent a pang into Gail's heart and her eyes drifted back to the Penny. She could see Holly, and was strangely gratified to find her looking less happy. "I did it for the booze, Chris." Gail stomped her feet, "If Epstein is making out with that fluff head, I'm going to be pissed."

Chris looked in, "No, he's talking to Andy. Hi, Chloe."

Blinking, Gail was presented with the happy, perky, puppy: Chloe. "Hi, Chris. I'm headed home."

She raised herself on her toes and kissed his cheek. Then she hesitated.

"Don't," warned Gail.

Chloe rocked on her heels. "You looked unhappy."

"Trivia's boring." She turned on her heel and started walking to home. Dimly she heard Chris asking her to stop.

Yes, she was unhappy. The one person in the world she really, truly, liked was on a date. If Holly liked that chick, she'd stop seeing Gail as much, and that would be back to what it was. But as much as Gail wanted to pretend it was about that, she knew it wasn't just friendship anymore. Gail stopped at the corner and watched the light change.

Crap, she thought to herself. What if these were actual feelings for someone? They were weird and
new, but Gail recognized them as more than what she felt for Nick or Chris. She rubbed her face and heard footsteps behind her.

"Hey, Gail wait up." Dov. He was huffing as he fell into step beside her. Chris came up on the other side, but Dov just seemed content to walk with them.

Less attuned to the situation, Chris asked, "You okay?" Before she could answer, he ran on, "Stupid question, right."

She sulked. Gail knew she was being petulant, but for some reason Holly on a date-date bothered her. Really bothered her. She didn't talk to the boys at all, save to claim first shower, and holed up in her room. Normally around now, she or Holly would text each other. Either it would be a complaint about the day, or a check-in to see if the other made it home okay.

Gail tapped in a message asking about the date, and then deleted it. Twice. The third time she just asked if they could have dinner tomorrow, but she deleted that as well. Finally she gave up, turned on her closet light, and went to bed. There wasn't a way she way in love with Holly, it was just friendship. Because more than that was terrifying.

The kiss stunned her. Not because Gail was good at it, but because of how it made her feel. Holly was rooted to the spot, terrified and thrilled at the same time. Here was this woman she'd been crushing on for months, kissing her. It was totally Gail's idea too! All Holly had wanted was to make sure Gail was okay, but then she found out Gail had been shot at! Her Gail was shot at! Someone wanted to kill cops, and she could lose someone she cared about.

How did people live in that world? Gail took it as a matter of fact, that her job was to run into danger and save people. People like Holly. Which just made her feel horrible about that stupid, stupid, blind date. And then the babble went on overdrive. Holly knew she babbled when she was scared or nervous, and yet no one had ever stopped her with a kiss before.

It was nothing like when Holly kissed her, too. This was a real, get-into-your-pants kind of kiss. No peck (hah!) on the lips but a real, almost hungry, kiss. The way Holly had always dreamed about being kissed. "I'm sorry," whispered Gail, her face was still right there. Their foreheads were almost touching, and her hands still on Holly's face. "You just- you just had to stop talking."

It was the softest she'd ever heard Gail's voice. Tender. It made Holly want to kiss Gail more, something she really hadn't thought was possible. "I won't say another word," she whispered back and leaned in slightly, wishing with all her heart Gail was on the same page.

They kissed again and Holly's nerdtacular inner self cheered. It was like Gail had been starving herself from kissing Holly, but now it was free and oh god, it was everything Holly had dreamed about. Gail didn't stop touching her, too, her soft hands cupping Holly's face. Holly lost total track of time, but when Gail leaned away, it felt too soon, and Holly clutched Gail's shoulders. "You really shouldn't be here, Holly," Gail sighed, resting her forehead against Holly. Before Holly could really decide if she wanted to be upset, Gail added, "If someone's shooting at cops, this is the least safe place."

Oh. That made sense. "I'm sorry."

"No, no," Gail kissed her, lightly, again. "Don't be sorry, please." She sighed. "I need to go. Oliver will be looking for me."

Holly nodded, "I don't want you to get shot at."
That made Gail huff a laugh. "It's my job." She caressed Holly's face. "I'll call you after, okay?"
Sniffling back the fear, Holly pulled Gail in to hug. "Hey, hey, it's okay. I'll be okay."

If she held on to Gail, them she wouldn't be able to be shot at. She never wanted to let her go. "You have to go..." Her voice was barely over a whisper.

"Yeah, I have to go," Gail stroked her hair. "I'll be safe."

"Please be safe." It took monumental effort, but Holly let go.

Gail nodded slightly and then leaned in to kiss her again, "I'll be safe." Another kiss. A deep kiss. A great kiss.

Oh that was bad. Holly didn't want to stop kissing. It took all her willpower to step back. "I'm going to, um, wait. A minute. You go, and ..." Gail nodded, looking a little blitzed, and took a deep breath before stepping out.

Holly covered her face. Oh this was so, so bad. She was totally falling for Gail. Completely and utterly, she was past crush and into that place where all she wanted to do was touch her and hold her. Hell, they didn't even need to have sex, just getting to be able to be with Gail, when both of them knew what they wanted, was going to be satisfying for days. No... No, she wanted more of the kissing and touching.

Right. Go back to work. Holly fixed her glasses. Catching a glimpse of herself in the glass, she saw she was way too happy. Bad Holly. Taking a breath, Holly pulled her shit together and walked out... Right into a cop talking to Gail. Damn.

"Hey!" He smiled brightly at her.

"Hi," smiled Holly, and she turned to leave. Behind her she heard the man identify her as Gail's friend from forensics.

Then Gail's voice, forced and too loud, bounced down the hallway. "The courier was sick, Oliver! If you really must know."

At least Holly wasn't the only one having trouble keeping cool.
Kiss-Kiss, Bang-Bang

Chapter Notes

This is the shortest chapter in the whole work, and it's 100% Gail. There is some deviation here from the show, with regards primarily to the rescue of Oliver. I love him dearly. In the non-romantic way, Oliver and Gail are an OTP as well. Oliver is my second favorite character on the whole show.

What the hell was Holly doing here? Gail's brain pinwheeled out of ops prep and into a confusing world where she'd been making out with her friend. Bad timing, she cursed. By the time she got Holly to go, Gail's heart was pounding, and she was sure Holly was pissed at her.

But it was Oliver. And he was kidnapped. And Jerry was dead, and the absolute worst place to be was going to be the damned police station. After she was out of earshot from the floor, she turned on Chris. "Hey," she grabbed Chris' arm, "Who the hell let her in?"

Chris looked blank. "Her? Your friend? Gail, she's forensics! She's supposed to be here!"

"Not till we stop people shooting at us!"

Crap. Her agitation was showing. "Hey, it's okay." Chris gripped her upper arms. "You don't have to do this. We can get him back without you, he'd understand."

Gail stared at him, mind boggled. "Yes, I do." She took a deep breath. "Everyone is coming home, Chris. And I'm going to be there."

She turned went to the bathroom. The alternative was pissing herself when they raided the church. In the women's room, Gail fixed her vest again, needlessly. This was so much less terrifying than many other things she did, but it was still scary. "You can do this, Peck. Oliver needs you, he just doesn't know it." She closed her eyes, but the first image that popped in was of what a car's trunk looked like.

Oliver would know what that looked like now.

Slowly, Gail pulled her phone out of her pocket.

Please promise me you'll stay in your lab until it's safe.

She hovered over the send button for a moment, and then swallowed. Send. Delivered. Gail turned the phone ringer off, as well as vibrate mode. The phone went into a pocket where it would not give her away with light or sound and Gail nodded at her reflection. "Okay, Peck. Get Oliver back."

Frank led them perfectly. He knew where to send everyone and when. He said every one of them would go home. He was the perfect sergeant, but Gail knew this was his last time as her sergeant. She could feel it in her bones and it hurt. You didn't grow up Peck and not see these things. With ETF, Gail did her first rush of a building. She knew this was nothing she wanted to ever have to do again, crossing another job off her list, but the rush when she saw Oliver's face was everything.

"But there's a gun," he repeated as they pulled him outside. Gail refused to leave Oliver, and after a
momentary scowl, Frank didn't object. He knew.

"He's not there, Oliver," Gail replied, worried about that too. And Oliver dumped his conversation on her and Frank. Shit. Shit shit shit. He was going to the station. Gail and Frank shared a look and she nodded.

"Peck, stay with him." It was an order she wasn't going to break and checked her gun.

Oliver was sweating suddenly. "He's going to the station, isn't he?"

"And you're not, Oliver." The EMT came over with a blanket, now that the area was clean, and Oliver started shaking. "Ollie, what's Celery's number?"

His eyes were wild. "No! No no nonono! You can't call her yet. She'll freak out."

"She already knows, Oliver," soothed Gail, pitching her voice like she did for children. "She's why we found you. Okay?" He was shaking his head rapidly, and the EMT told Gail off for agitating him. That didn't stop her from getting into the ambulance with Oliver, and Gail pulled her phone out after radioing Dispatch to tell Celery what was going on.

She stared at the text on her phone.

*Please tell me you're okay.*

Holly. Holly was worried about her still.

*I'm okay. I'm taking Oliver to the ER. Stay in your lab. Please.*

She left the phone on her knee and took one of Oliver's hands. "When does it hit you?" He looked at her, like a lost child.

Her phone lit up and Gail glanced at the one word reply of 'Okay.' Good, she needed to not try and think about why she kissed Holly for this. Oliver needed her now.

"I think it already did, Oliver," she sighed. He looked away, tears in his eyes. Ignoring the look from the EMT, Gail kept talking. "It's stupid, right? You think that you know what you're doing because you're a cop. You're smart and safe." The hand in hers twitched. "And then this happens. This thing that happens to everyone else. Not us. Cops don't get abducted, right? We get shot at, punched, stabbed... Spit on."

"Spat." Oliver puffed a laugh, probably remembering the first time he pulled an angry Gail off a citizen.

"He hocked a loogey on me, Oliver," smiled Gail. "But that's normal, right? For us that's what happens. Not *this*.

And Oliver started to cry. "How bad's it gonna be?"

"You have Celery, Ollie." It sounded absolutely idiotic to say out loud, the woman needed a proper name. "She's been through stuff. She'll be here." A pause. "I'm here."

They said nothing more until they got to the ER, and Gail stayed with Oliver the whole time. Then the second punch came. Sam was shot. They'd already doped Oliver up, but Gail took the hit like she'd been shot. Jesus, first Jerry and now Sam? She checked to make sure Oliver was asleep before replying that she'd tell him.
The nurse, a familiar one, touched her arm. "Officer, are you okay?"

"Physically," Gail sighed, wearily. "There's another cop coming in, Swarek. Please get your best ... Thoracic surgeon here." While the nurse agreed to do so, Gail pulled out her phone and called a cousin. "Hey. Can you push the hospital? One of my guys was shot at the station." If you couldn't use your Peck powers for nepotistic things, what the hell was the point. She then explained what she needed and how fast.

"You're nice," sighed Oliver, who had woken up during her argument with her cousin.

"You're high." She tucked the phone away again.

"You're mean and angry but you're nice. You don't like Sammy."

She smiled and walked to the bed. "True." Jerry had been her favorite detective of that lot.

"You like me." He reached up and Gail took his hand.

"I do. But you're not going to tell anyone."

Oliver sighed and closed his eyes again. "What happened to Sammy?" His voice was a whisper. "Is he gonna die?

She sighed. "Oliver, Sam's going to be okay. Frank promised we all go home." When Oliver nodded Gail smiled at him and squeezed the hand. "Swarek got shot, Oliver. Ford was at the station." Oliver cringed and the machines by him started to beep. "Hey, calm down, okay? He's going to be fine. Everyone goes home, remember?"

"I don't want to lose Sammy," he whispered. "We're the only ones left. Frank's leaving me too."

The grip on Gail's hand tightened, and she swallowed down the fear and pain of the memory of Jerry. "Don't leave me."

"I won't," promised Gail. "Any time you need me, I'm here." She squeezed his hand and sat down. "I'm going to sit here, and you're going to sleep until Celery gets here." Mumbling an okay, Oliver quieted down.

Once he was out, Gail pinged dispatch, who said Celery was on her way. Then she pulled out her phone again. There were no new texts from Holly, so she sent a simple one instead.

It's okay now

She didn't trust herself with anything else to say to Holly. Beside her, Oliver stirred. "I'm so sorry you're in the club, Oliver," she said softly. "If anyone doesn't deserve this shit, it's you."

She looked at her phone, somewhat sad there was no reply from Holly. There was nothing to say, except maybe that she loved Holly, and Gail wasn't real sure she knew what love was. Had she been in love with Nick? Probably not. God, Andy was totally dumping Nick right now too. Served her right, in a way. Him too.

The door opened and a nurse motioned for Gail. Celery was standing at the end of the hall, looking terrified, listening to Chris. Yeah, he was fucking this up. "Would you get her? I don't want Oliver to be alone."

The nurse nodded and brought Celery over. Gail made a hand motion at Chris, ordering him to stay. "How is he?" Celery's voice was a whisper.
"Banged up. He's on Haldol and some painkillers, but mostly they want to calm him down." Gail looked at the sleeping Oliver and guided Celery to a seat by the door. "I want to talk to you, before you go in there."

Her eyes were wide, but Celery nodded. "Okay."

Gail knew she wasn't going to tell this woman about her own history, but she had to make her understand. "He's going to freak out," she explained. "He kind of did a little, but tonight or tomorrow or a month from now, he's going to get weird. Like maybe he won't be able to walk into church, or... Or minivans will freak him out. Or he looks like he's having a panic attack when he opens the trunk of a car." Gail huffed, "Or he can't sleep in the dark."

"I... Understand," Celery said slowly, and Gail, who never believed witnesses, believed her.

"You need to be there for him. Okay? You have to sit with him and not let him be alone and be there for him. And... If you can't, then you need to just go now, because if you do this to him later-"

"I'm not leaving him." Her voice was firm.

"This is an out, Celery. After this, it changes forever."

"I know what fear is," said Celery coolly. "I can do this. I will do this. I love him."

Gail exhaled, feeling pressure on her shoulders evaporate. "Okay. Come on, you can take over babysitting."

She started to stand, but Celery caught her hand, "What happened? To you?" Tension rose and Gail shook her head, tightly. "If... You need to talk..."

"I," Gail paused. No. She couldn't say it. Even thinking about saying it, her throat tightened. She shook her head, dismissing the question. "If Oliver needs... I mean, he's Oliver and..." She stopped and took a deep breath. "If he needs me, call. Any time. Anywhere."

And damn it, Celery hugged her. Why did people have to do that. Gail felt bruised as she went down the hall. Chris was waiting. "What was that?"

"It's a club thing, Chris." The abductee cop club. He was not welcome, and Gail prayed he never would be. "How's Swarek?"

Chris hesitated, but didn't try to hug her. "In surgery. They got the best heart and vein guy in the city!"

"Thoracic surgeon," sighed Gail. She'd owe her cousin a favor, but she couldn't deal with Oliver losing Sam too. In the waiting room was... Everyone. Traci had Andy, Nick was lurking, and Steve caught her arm as she walked by.

"You okay?"

Gail was insanely weary. Not tired. Weary. She shook her bother's hand off and stood to the side. "Celery's with Oliver," she replied, not answering his question, but making everyone else relax. Gail closed her eyes for a moment. "I'm okay," she said quietly, and felt him standing beside her, while everyone else had left. It was odd how she knew Steve just by his presence.

"Something happened. You and Dr. Stewart." His voice was barely audible. They'd always talked
this way at home, when they didn't want Superintendent Mom to hear.

Gail opened her eyes and signed at her brother. *Shut up.* The odds of anyone else eavesdropping on ASL was slim.

He smiled and signed back. *She worried.*

*I kissed her,* replied Gail. Steve stared at her hands and then her face. His hands stumbled a couple times, trying to form a sentence. He was always crap at languages. *I like her,* she added, bailing him out.

Steve exhaled loudly. *She's smart.*

*Beautiful. Funny.* Gail smiled and looked at her own hands. *I want her safe.*

The reply surprised her. *She's here.* Steve jerked his chin over Gail's shoulder and she dropped her hands. Holly was here?

"Hey, I came as soon as I heard." The breathless voice was Holly. She knew the tears were falling down her face but couldn't stop them. Suddenly Gail understood why people hugged each other. This was comfort. "Hey," she whispered into Holly's ear.

"Hey," replied Holly, breathlessly.

"I'm glad you're here. Okay?" She let go and studied Holly's face for a moment. Then she led her over to where her brother, and now Chris, were now standing. "Steve, this is Holly. Chris, this is Holly."
Nightmares

Chapter Notes

The show probably meant for us to think they had sex after that shower bit, but really I wouldn't sleep with Gail after that kind of day. Gail has issues, and they will be touched on. Season three was bad for her. This day is still bad.

Pulling into her garage, Holly wondered if Gail would be there soon or later. She'd pressed her front door key into Gail's hand when they left the ER, Gail saying she needed to put her gun back and change. But Holly watched her slip up the stairs of the hospital one last time. No matter how much Gail reiterated that no one wanted to cry on her shoulder, Holly had the distinct impression that something mattered to her a great deal.

"Now what?" Holly looked around her home and decided to clean up and change. It was something small she could do. Small things. Like dinner. They hadn't eaten, well, Holly hadn't. Gail probably ate something unhealthy and gross. A salad would not be enough and Holly stared at her fridge. She needed something more substantial.

Resting her head on the fridge door, Holly groaned. What was she doing? Gail was straight. Even if she'd kissed her in the interrogation room, the girl was straight. "You're doing it all over again," whinged Holly, and she tried to ignore the butterflies and the ache in her heart to just hold Gail again. "She blew you off and hugged you and introduced you to her brother. Girl runs hot and cold." Holly caught her reflection in the stove. "You're falling for a crazy straight chick, Holly Stewart."

But Gail had kissed her. Really kissed her. The kind of kiss she'd always wanted from someone and never quite found. Hungry, passionate, and overwhelming. Jesus, Gail knew how to kiss. They'd held hands, in front of everyone, at the ER, and if anyone noticed, besides Gail's brother, they didn't say anything.

"Dishes," decided Holly, and she started washing them by hand to try to calm herself, ground herself.

The front door opened and Gail walked right in, not taking off her boots, jacket, or scarf. "Hey, you hungry?"

"Nope, only want alcohol." And true to her word, Gail started rummaging through the shelves.

"It's up there," and Holly pointed over the oven, which was probably a bad place to store it. "But. Why don't you eat something first."

Gail's hand latched on to the Jim Bean. "Yeah, okay, if it's got alcohol in it." She proceeded to remind Holly that no one needed her shoulder to cry on, that the only use she might be is as the 'big gay distraction,' likened her brother's gossiping to herpes, and stomped upstairs announcing, "No going back now, girlfriend!"

Holly grimaced. Awesome. It was three fifteen in the morning, and she had a probably experimenting straight girl drinking upstairs. Hadn't she promised herself not to fall for people who didn't know they were gay, or at least bi, anymore? The sound of music startled her, and Holly
realized Gail was in her bathroom. In college, she remembered her roommate locking herself in the bathroom to hide the sound of her crying. "Right." Holly sighed and looked up the stairs. Something besides just her friends being shot and kidnapped was going on here.

After giving Gail half an hour, Holly went upstairs. Where there was no answer to her knocks or questions, Holly let herself in and blinked at Gail, short hair, holding her ponytail, announcing it was just hair. "So. This is happening." She turned the music down to buy processing time.

She let Gail explain, such as it was, and have a meltdown on the bathroom floor. The inches of her hair seemed both mundane and horrific and there was something weird in how Gail said 'that part's where Jerry died.' As if Jerry dying was not the reason her voice became a near whisper. "I'm freaking out a little bit, aren't I?"

"Yeah," sighed Holly. Gail's lips curled up into a sneer/smirk and she exhaled loudly. She pulled herself back into a semblance of control far too fast for Holly's taste. People were allowed to have meltdowns in her world. "Can I have the bourbon?" The bottle was passed over and Holly sipped from it, just as Gail had. "Do you want to just stay here and get drunk?"

Sighing, Gail looked at Holly with less desperation. "No. I want..." She grabbed the irregular end of her hair, "I want to calm down." She closed her eyes and rested her head on the cabinet. Remarkably she was calming her breathing and the slight panic attack just ... Stopped. That couldn't be healthy.

"Do you want to talk?"

"Not yet," sighed Gail. She touched her hair again, "Holly, it's not about that."

Holly blinked. "What?"

"The kiss. Kissing. I'm not having a gay kissing freak out." She held a hand out and Holly passed the bourbon back, after taking another sip. "I have a lot of issues, Holly."

"Okay," replied Holly slowly, watching Gail's face get more maudlin, though she looked at Holly with a pensive sort of fondness.

"My parents, my job, shit that happens..." She took a swig of the bourbon, "The hair is not an emergency."

"Is this another tree metaphor?"

"No. No. I want to kiss you again." Pausing Gail touched her hair again. "God, I must look like ass."

Smiling, Holly reached over for the bottle and caressed Gail's face. There was no deer in the headlights look from the blonde, just a sad, tired, drunk, smile. "Maybe I can help, honey." She took another sip and got up to find the scissors and the clippers.

"You have buzz clippers? I could go all Sinead."

"Ew, no, please don't." Holly grimaced and Gail laughed. "Sit in the tub, I don't want little blonde hairs all over my bathroom." Gail muttered that Holly was bossy, but took off her boots and got into the tub with the bottle.

Holly took off her sweater and studied Gail's face. With a tired smile, Gail asked, "You have two degrees and you're gonna tell me you can cut hair?"

"I have many skills," smiled Holly. "Can I fix this?"
Gail laughed, "I don't know!" She touched the back of her head. "Short. Make it short."

"I can hardly make it longer," teased Holly, but she nodded. "I'm going to start in back, okay?"

"Okay. Can I have the bourbon back?"

"Don't drink it all," smiled Holly. She unplugged the clippers and started work on Gail's hair. By the time she had something good going, the bottle was nearly empty and the sun was starting to rise. "Hey, Gail do you have to work today?"

"Nope. 22's covering for us until they clear the scene fully." Holly shuddered and told Gail to turn around so she could address her bangs. The cowlick was adorable, if possibly beyond Holly's skills to fix. "Probably be back tomorrow. No rest for the wicked."

Gail lamented about life, which Holly likened to the cowlick, and then complained she had no hair. "Still kind of beautiful," noted Holly, taking a good look at her handiwork. She'd not fixed short hair like that in years, but she was insanely proud of it just then.

"Oh really?" Gail scoffed and Holly smiled, oozing into the tub to sit face to face with Gail. She watched Gail's expression change, the sarcasm and defensive antagonism slipping away into a softer look.

It wasn't a vulnerable look. Holly had seen that before, when Gail had a nightmare in her guest room. This was a different softness. One that begged to be kissed. Holly forgot her worries about Gail's sexuality and cupped her pale face in both hands. She leaned in slowly, giving Gail an out, brushing her lips with a thumb. Holly was not surprised when they met halfway. This was a softer kiss, not backed by panic or fear. A kiss of equals.

Holly realized she was going to lose herself in the kisses, and end up somewhere way too fast. "Come on, let's wash this down the drain." She stood up, but Gail's expression didn't waver. They fell into another kiss, this one prompted by Gail, and Holly knew she had to slow things. Reaching down, she turned on the water, cold, and let it blast Gail. And that didn't stop how either of them felt, kissing again... Again...

Gail's brain had stopped. She didn't care about the water, her hair, the fact that she'd outing herself to her brother and her ex/roommate. She didn't care about anything at all. Her mind was blissfully blank, and all she could be aware of was Holly, kissing her. It didn't matter they were standing in Holly's claw-foot shower, or that the shower was indeed on. It didn't even matter that the water had been cold.

This kind of kissing was exactly what had been missing with Nick, Chris, and everyone else. This softness and the curves and the kissing. Holy god. Everything should be this way. Gail was able to forget about the pressure and fear and just exist in a bubble of Holly.

When Holly broke away, sighing, Gail felt like a floundering fish. "Okay, you shower off the hairs, I'll get you some clothes." With one last, quick, kiss, Holly stepped out of the tub.

Gail stood under the water, confused, for a while. The whole day had been confusing. From the shootings to kissing Holly in the interview room, to ignoring her at work, to hugging her and introducing her to her brother. "Oh God..." Gail slowly reached up to touch her hair. Her father was going to give her hell. He had some weirdly rigid views. "No going back now, Peck," she reminded herself. But really, she didn't want to go anywhere but forward. Gail turned to the shower and let it blast her face for a moment.
The bathroom door opened, cutting the train of thought off short. "Gail, honey, a shower works better when you take your clothes off."

Pivoting, Gail nearly fell. "Yes, yes it does." She stared at Holly, making no move to undress. The doctor had already changed into comfortable clothes and tied her wet hair up, but Gail's eyes locked on the water trickling down Holly's neck.

Holly raised her eyebrows. "Just leave your clothes on the floor, okay?" She put sweats on the sink counter and, after a moment of hesitation, picked up the whiskey bottle.

"Hey!"

"You can have it back when you're clean!" The door clicked closed.

Gail groaned and wriggled out of her clothes, letting them slap onto the floor. Grabbing the shampoo, she lathered up and inhaled. She was going to smell like Holly. There were worse fates. The soap, the shampoo, the conditioner, and the towels all felt of Holly. It prevented Gail from having to process the night. Instead of wrapping her hair in a monument of towel, Gail rough dried her hair. The clothes were sweats and a dark shirt, and underpants. Her own clothes. Had she left clothes here before?

Gail sighed, "I should have taken a cold shower after all." Her libido was entirely out of control. After spending a few, futile, moments trying to style her new haircut, she gave up and left the bathroom. "Okay, I'm out. Can I have the bottle back?" Instead, Holly handed her a mug of tea. "Seriously?"

"Don't look at me like that. It's whiskey tea." Holly smiled and sat on the sofa, sipping her own. After a moment of glowering, Gail tried the tea and blinked. That was really good, and really strong. "See? All better. Soothing and drinking."

Carefully sitting on the other end of the couch, Gail pulled a pillow into her lap for armor. "Thank you." She drank the tea again and let it warm her insides, before touching her hair and trying to smooth it down.

"I'm no hairstylist," Holly noted. "But you still look beautiful."

Gail was about to laugh, disparagingly, when she realized Holly was still looking at her with a serious expression. "Thank you," she repeated. Why was it still confusing? She wanted to kiss Holly again. It was amazing, kissing her, and now she was hanging out with an insanely amazing, cool, person who was into her. Gail groaned, "God, what are we doing?"

"I? Am drinking tea after a stressful day, where I thought you were going to die. You are having a mini-meltdown after being shot at and having a friend nearly die. We are trying to relax." Holly put her mug on the coffee table and leaned across the couch to smooth Gail's hair back away from her eyes. "I'm glad you're alright."

The touch sent shivers down Gail's spine and she closed her eyes. "I'm very not alright, Holly." She thought about Oliver for a moment. Then the hand on her hair ran down her cheek and Gail jerked back reflexively, her body remembering that time when someone had caressed her face in a basement... No, no. Bad brain. Bad body. This was Holly! Holly was safe. "I'm really, really not alright. I don't know what I'm doing." She opened her eyes and looked, worriedly, at Holly. "I want to be here, with you."

"You're not up a tree all alone, Gail." Carefully, Holly took the mug out of Gail's hands and wrapped
them in her own. This time there was no twitching and Gail wormed her fingers in-between Holly's.

"I know." The amount of messed up in Gail's head was unmeasurable. She knew, logically, none of this was her fault. At the same time, she knew flashbacks were going to be a bitch. You couldn't not remember the last time everyone was at the hospital together, not when you were the reason why. Not when you'd just helped Oliver, and would have to keep helping Oliver. But even Oliver said it... Jerry was gone.

When Gail said nothing more, Holly asked, "Did you blow me off at the office because it was work or because it was me?"

That brought Gail back into the now. "What?" It took her brain a moment to remember the time between kissing Holly in interrogation and then hugging in the ER. "You mean when we were getting ready to go out and rescue Oliver?" Gail felt incredulous.

Holly nodded. "Was I a ... an embarrassment or inconvenience or what? Because you just looked upset I was even there, and I'm not really used to worrying like this over someone. That you might get shot, or worse and then you hugged me in the ER and held my hand -"

Why was she talking? "Why are you talking?" Gail pulled Holly closer and kissed her. Maybe this would be a thing, Holly babbling and Gail kissing her to shut her up. "I was about to go on a raid, Holly. I needed to concentrate." She sighed and rested her forehead against Holly's. She hadn't even thought about how that might have looked, and while Gail was partly concerned about being a big gay distraction, she also didn't want to get everyone's head in the right place. "I don't care who knows I'm with you, Holly, but breaking that to them right before we go shoot at people? Way too dangerous." She lightly kissed Holly again, "I wanted to do that."

"Oh. That makes sense." Holly didn't move away and they kissed again, gently, carefully.

"I've never really ... Had anyone be worried about me like that. Even when I dated ... if we had a work thing like that, it was just work." Gail sighed, wondering if that was true, and thinking about how Nick and Chris had been when she was abducted. She felt the tension in her neck and pushed the memory away, looking at Holly. "I forgot you don't speak cop."

Holly smiled and kissed Gail, "Forgiven."

"Sorry." They kissed again and the question that was burning in Gail came up again. "Why did you stop kissing me in the shower?"

Now Holly sighed. "Because I was going to do more than kiss you, Gail. And you're kind of drunk, freaking out, and you cut your hair off after a really shitty day." Squeezing Gail's hands, Holly started to lean back.

"I want to do more than kiss you, too."

Holly bit her lip, as if self-restraint was being lost, "Gail, it's been a long day. I don't want us to regret anything." Holly's hand twitched, as if she was holding back from touching Gail more.

Part of Gail wanted to point out that with every man she'd dated, they'd have had sex by now. It did not seem like a good idea to bring that up. She squeezed Holly's hands and the woman blushed. That was when it dawned on her that Holly was purposefully trying not to throw herself on Gail, that she was holding back to make sure Gail knew this wasn't an impulsive act. It was flattering and exceptionally relieving to have confirmation that Holly wanted this too.
That said, it was only going to be harder on Holly if she stuck around, since they both wanted each other, but Holly was very, very, right in now not being the best time. Gail had made enough mistakes her in past. "I should go home then," stated Gail. Holly started to protest, "Because you're right." Sex with someone for the first time shouldn't be to distract you from the crappy day but to celebrate being alive with them... Oh god. *Peck, are you falling in love!?* If that was the case, then she'd never actually loved Nick.

"You can stay in the guest room..." Holly stopped and looked embarrassed.

Gail smiled, "No I can't." They both knew that being in a different room would change nothing.

"You're not driving home," Holly said firmly. "You have had way too much to drink, and so have I." Hesitating a moment, Holly said four words that sobered Gail right up. "I'll call a cab."

History was a bitch. "No!" The word was out of Gail's mouth before she could actually think about it. But it was too late. Memory had her.

She remembered the look on Traci's face. *Traci.* She remembered Oliver holding her arms, stopping her from breaking something, raging in the hospital after they told her about Jerry. She remembered not wanting to touch Nick, or have him touch her. She remembered Dov covering her with a blanket on his couch, trying to pretend she wasn't awake, trying not to cry. She remembered Sam not looking at her for days after she got back to work. She remembered her mother telling her to be a Peck. And she remembered a small, dark, place. Rough carpet on her face, which hurt. Everything hurt. The air was too hot, and she was freezing in that stupid dress.

And not knowing anything about it, Holly simply looked a little annoyed, "Gail. I know it's been a long, weird, day, but don't be unreasonable-

"I'm not being unreasonable," Gail snapped and jumped to her feet. It was hard enough not to hyperventilate. The rising panic attack had a hold on her and she swallowed, trying to force it down. *Not a cab."

"Gail—"

Her hands were shaking. Awesome. It was going to be one of *those* flashbacks. She could try locking herself in Holly's bathroom again, but that hadn't exactly worked out so well. Except for the kissing part. "You know what," she replied, forcing her voice to be light and trying not to wince when it came out high pitched and freaky. "I'm totally sober now. So yeah, I'm going to go." Gail moved to her purse, trying not to let the shaking show, trying not to hyperventilate, trying to push it away.

"I think I just set off a bomb," Holly muttered and got up. "Honey, I don't know what I just said but you are not zooming off, okay? No taxi, no Uber, no driving, you're staying here." She touched Gail's arm.

They both froze. Gail knew Holly could feel her trembling. She closed her eyes, unable to stop from crying. There she was, Garbage Pail Gail the Fail again. She self-sabotaged herself, she'd never be able to be the cop her family wanted, she'd never have the relationship she wanted. No one wanted to be with someone who was cold and broken. "Holly," she replied, in a strangled voice, "Please just let go."

"Oh, Gail," breathed Holly, and she did the opposite of letting go. She wrapped her arms around Gail, holding her close. The shaking didn't stop though, neither did the hug cease the crying. It wasn't the worst flashback she'd had, but it was the first in ages in front of anyone besides her
therapist. Gail hiccuped and rubbed her face, as it that would erase everything. And yet, without asking a thing, Holly held on to her.

"Sorry," gasped Gail, unable to stop shaking or crying. She let Holly turn her around and hold her. Her arms wrapped around Holly, fists pressed to her back, face in her shoulder.

Saying little words, encouraging words, Holly led her back to the couch. "You don't have to say anything," she whispered, and held Gail close, stroking her hair. It took a while for the tremors to pass, for the tears to dry, and for her breathing to get to normal. The whole time, Holly just held her in her arms. Finally, Gail started to mumble she was sorry into Holly's shoulder, and in return was just shushed and petted. "You really are a cat," sighed Holly.

"I'm sorry," repeated Gail, and Holly shushed her again. Gail wracked her brain, but could never remember anyone holding her like Holly was. The closest was Oliver, when she'd been in the hospital, but even that wasn't the same (and had more to do with Gail throwing an empty bedpan at Callaghan). It was the hug of someone who had never lived this life being welcoming and comforting and calming. Her hands wormed to Holly's back and stayed there, tight fists holding her in place while she breathed in the smell of Holly.

"I'm serious. I know we talk about stuff, but you don't have to make yourself talk about this. Okay?" Gail nodded and sniffled the snot back up her nose. Real romantic, Peck. "Good." Holly cupped Gail's chin and kissed her forehead. "I think we're okay tonight."

The cryptic statement confused Gail until Holly tugged her up and led her upstairs. Oh. They probably were. Any thought of romance was dead and buried tonight. Instead of the guest room, Holly brought Gail into her bedroom. "Um. Which, which side?"

Holly blinked and pointed to the right side, with the clock. "I kind of sleep in the middle." She looked embarrassed to admit that.

Wiping her face with her shoulder, Gail confessed, "I steal blankets."

At that, Holly smiled. "Of course you do."

Holly had trouble sleeping, like she knew she would. But it had nothing to do with the night light being on. While Gail was washing her face before bed, Holly had plugged it in, trying not to feel silly. Then they'd settled in bed, and the moment Holly turned off the lights, Gail had stiffened. Holly told her to look at the doorway, the fear and tension fell away as the nightlight was on, and Gail mumbled a thank you. She would eventually, tell Holly about the dark and cabs. Or not.

It was with Gail actually in her bed, sleeping like an angel, that made it so hard to get to sleep. The pain of the day, and the weird terror about taxis, was erased from Gail's face, and she was so strikingly lovely. The last time she'd watched Gail sleep, her face had never fully lost the agony of her burn or the nightmare. You've got it bad, Holly told herself, and brushed the wisps of hair away from Gail's forehead.

The soft sigh and smile from Gail made Holly's heart pound. "Go to sleep, Holly," whispered Gail, startling her. While Gail's eyes didn't open, she reached over and touched Holly's arm.

It wasn't helping. "Sorry. I'm keeping you up." Gail just made a soft hm noise so Holly tried to settle down. Once she did, Gail scooted over and rested her head against the outside of Holly's shoulder. "Oh. We're doing this..."

"You keep looking at me," noted Gail, not sounding very much awake. "And you smell nice. Safe."
A hand rested on Holly's arm, and Gail sighed again, exceptionally contented.

Surprisingly, having Gail touching her was far more relaxing than just being near her. Gail's breathing slipped into a steady rhythm, and Holly felt her own eyes getting heavy. Maybe this was going to be fine. There was more than enough time to learn why Gail had nightmares or hated taxis.

For the first time in her adult life, Holly fell asleep with a nightlight on.

Gail did not sleep much at all, and it had nothing to do with the beautiful woman who was holding her. That felt right and perfect.

She listened to Holly breath and stayed absolutely still. She closed her eyes and tried to relax, but every time she dozed off, there was his face. And she would jerk awake, scared, heart pounding, and stare at Holly's arm.

It was never really going to go away entirely. She'd figured that out ages ago. No. She'd known that pretty much since it happened. Gail touched her neck, then her hair. Part of her had hoped that without the hair, maybe she'd cut the bad dreams off. Part of her knew this would always be inside her.

Holly made a soft sound in her sleep. A happy, contented, sound. And Gail pressed her head against Holly's arm, inhaling the smell that ignored thought and made her feel happy in the pit of her stomach. Safe.

"I'm at Holly's," she whispered to herself. "I'm safe. We're safe."

And Gail tried, again, to sleep.
Reclassifying Awkward

Chapter Notes

Why is coming up with chapter titles so hard and so fun? This chapter's a little lighter than the last one.

It was a relief that Andy wasn't her partner today, though Chris wasn't a whole hell of a lot better. When they pulled back into the station for lunch, Gail started to make an excuse, but simply said, "Chris, go away."

It worked. The Peck Shell was useful for a lot of things. Taking her sandwich, Gail sat in the hallway and contemplated calling Holly. They'd spent the morning in a nice little cocoon, kissing and touching each other like they had all the time in the world, and no one was dying. When Gail finally left to get her things from home, Holly said she'd call.

That hadn't happened yet, but work was a mess. Even Gail had been a little overwhelmed by the crazy at the station. Dov had a mini meltdown on her, demanding to know where she'd been that night and did she know Chloe had died? It took a while for him to unpack that Chloe was not dead but her heart had stopped. Chris had told him to lay off, though.

Her phone pinged and Gail quickly pulled it out to look. It was Holly. Warm fuzzies, which Pecks never got, ran down her spine.

Guess who caught a double?

Gail groaned.

Need me to feed you?

I have a salad.

Rabbit food.

What noise do rabbits make?

Probably the same ones you make in your sleep.

There was no immediate reply, so Gail sent a follow up.

I thought it was cute.

Holly replied with a blushing emoticon.

"What are you grinning at, Gail?" Nash, a tired and cranky Nash, was eying her curiously. When Gail looked up, Traci did a double take. "Woah." She touched her own head and asked, "When?"

Call me if it changes? I'm going to the Penny with the gang.

Up until now, everyone had been so wrapped up in the shooting that not a single person had remarked on her hair. "I may have gone crazy last night," sighed Gail.
Traci sat down beside her. "You look ... Good. It looks great. Where did you find time to go to a salon?"

"Holly did it in her bathtub." Gail touched her own hair and sighed. It had freaked her out in the morning, but at the same time, Holly had been toying with it with such interest, Gail was sure it was a turn on. Holly probably gave her the haircut she found sexiest. Nerd.

Tossing the name around a little, Traci asked, "Holly who?"

"Dr. Holly Stewart? The forensic pathologist." She watched the wheels turn in Traci's head. "Oh come on, detective!"

It clicked. "No shit?" Traci was a little impressed and Gail nodded. "How long has that been going on?"

What a loaded question. "Since yesterday."

"Wow, I guess the U-Haul joke is real." Gail gave Traci her best side-eye glare. "So you're serious? Changing teams?"

"We haven't gotten that far!" Not that Gail didn't want to. Hell, she'd thought about it for hours now. And she still had no idea why she'd kissed Holly in interrogation. Not because kissing was wrong, oh god no. At the moment, it had seemed right and then, when she did it, it felt so wonderful. Someone caring about her like that, and attracted to her? Had that ever happened? But at work? Stupid Gail!

Traci put her hand on Gail's knee. "You okay?"

"No," confessed Gail. "I didn't sleep much." Traci did not leer at her, thankfully. "You?"

"No, not really."

They both carried Jerry's death close. It had to be hurting Traci too. "Steve likes you. A lot."

Traci smiled. "Does that bother you?"

"Nah, you're the second hottest person in the division. Especially after my haircut." That brought a laugh.

"Hottest available woman," declared Traci.

"He's the dumbest Captain of the Universe, but he means well."

Traci's face lit up in a smile. "You will tell me that story later." Gail shrugged. "Holly, huh. Really." She didn't sound too surprised. "Need to girl talk?"

"No," smiled Gail.

Now Traci gave her a look. "You like her." With a sigh, Gail nodded. "So what's wrong?"

Gail glowered and pointed at herself with her thumbs, "Straight."

"Holly," replied Traci with a smirk. "Reclassify."

"Fine, but... It's like... When you were in school, did you ever make out with an older guy who'd already been around?"
"Sure. Dex." Traci paused, "Bad example."

"Little bit, yeah."

"I see the problem, though." Traci leaned back and looked thoughtful. "How ... Gay is she?"

"Totally." Gail realized with a start just how much they know about each others past relationships.

"And she knows that you're new at girls, right?" Gail nodded. "And ... Kissing?"

"I *may* have, um, made out with her in interrogation..." Gail still felt embarrassed. "God, I can't believe I did that at work!"

Traci laughed, "Glad you're horrified about the Peck things." Silence. "Oh, that's gonna suck."

"Yeaaaah," drawled Gail. She had no idea. "Plus side, you and Stevie won't be a blip on the radar. God, he owes me one. You both do."

"If you'd done this on *purpose*, I might agree," teased Traci. "So? Kissing?"

"Traci! Yes. There's been kissing, okay. And I stayed with her last night."

Traci looked surprised. "And you didn't jump her? I've seen her, she's hot."

"God, why are we talking about this?" Gail groaned.

"You want to jump her." Fixing Traci with her best 'you are stupid' look, Gail nodded. "Okay. keep kissing her."

"That's it? That's your advice?"

Shaking her head, Traci pointed out, "I said you deserved happiness too, Gail. If it's with her, same thing. But can I be there when you tell Steve?"

"Too late for that!" Though Gail wondered why her brother hadn't told anyone.

That night at the Penny, Gail sat with friends and none of them remarked on her hair until Oliver showed up. He was physically fine, and delighted about the new look, but complained that it wasn't fair she had better short hair than he did, and then everyone caught on. Dov she forgave, not that she'd tell him that, ever, since he'd had to cope with his girlfriend being shot and married. That was filed away for later ammunition though.

When totally drunk McNally went back to the hospital, Gail, Dov and Chris departed for their lair.


"Oh Christ," groaned Gail.

Dov, who had missed all the excitement of the Big Gay Distraction, was lost. "Holly what? Holly who? Are you finally over-"

"Holly the forensic pathologist. I'm dating her." There. She said it. Kissing meant dating, right? Gail hunched inside her coat, walking a little faster. The boys were quiet, and Gail peered over her shoulder to see them looking at Chris's phone. "What the hell?" She grabbed the phone and was startled to see a fuzzy shot of her and Holly, holding hands in the hospital.
"She's gonna kill you," Dov remarked to Chris, but regarded the photo again. "Coat Check Dr. Stewart. Wow."

"Hey, she introduced Holly to me!" Chris was smiling.

Gail wasn't really mad but she threw the phone back at Chris, "I thought Steve was going to be the gossip queen about this."

Softly, Chris replied, "I'm not telling anyone." And then, "I like your haircut too."

Gail grumbled, "They're not related." The trio walked in silence for a little while, until Dov nudged Gail with his shoulder. "What?" she demanded, peevishly.

"Nothing." But he was smiling.

"You both need to shut up. We're not talking about this."

In defense, Chris held his hands up. "Just let us know when you won't be home," asked Dov, grinning. "Or if you have a guest over."

"Stop talking."

Locked in her room, Gail twiddled with her phone. Either Holly would text her, or she'd be working all night. So Gail tapped in a message.

*I'm not drunk enough to deal with my roommates being supportive.*

She turned off the lights and tried not to get tense listening to the noises in the house. It was normal for her to fuss about it. Her therapist swore eventually she'd get past it, be able to sleep in the dark, but right now that didn't seem likely. With a sigh, Gail turned her closet light on and curled back up. Holly had a nightlight. She remembered from the nightmare Gail had the night she was on Oxy. Eyes wide open, Gail tried to think about happy, relaxing thoughts, and immediately went to daydreaming about the kiss. Kisses. That wasn't really relaxing, but it sure made her less tense... Or tense in a different way.

Abruptly her phone lit up. Gail rolled over and grabbed it, hoping it wasn't going to be her parents.

*Coincidentally, I'm not drunk enough to be at work.*

Definitely not mom and dad. Gail grinned.

*I'm pretty sure you lose your license, drinking at work.*

*Which is another reason I'm sober. Your friends ok?*

*Everyone lived. Oliver's getting promoted, Chloe's out of the woods, so Dov is making my life hell telling me you're cute. He is sooooo wrong.*

*I'm not cute?*

*Cute is not the word I would use, no.*

*This is much more interesting than work. What word would you use?*

*Cool. Smart. Sexy.*
Holly didn't reply for a longer time and Gail bit her lip. Finally the phone beeped a reply.

Sexy.

_Duh. Totally awesome and sexy._

_Well, you would know._

_What's THAT supposed to mean?_

_It means I think you're sexy too, silly._

_Not usually the word people use for me._

_Well they're stupid-heads._

Gail laughed and then covered her mouth so she didn't wake up the boys.

_Very scientific._

_Sexy Dr. Stewart says go to sleep, Officer Crankypants._

_K_

She paused and sent a second message.

_Can I see you tomorrow?_

_After work?_

_I'm on second shift, I'll text you when I'm done?_

_Sounds good, honey. Sleep._

_Night_

Gail smiled, feeling her skin blush. There was something about Holly calling her that ... She sighed and curled up with one hand on her phone, wishing it was Holly's hand.

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Two days. Two days ago, Gail was asleep in her bed. Two days ago, she was cutting her hair and kissing her. Two days had passed with phone calls and texts and schedules that were enough to drive anyone insane. Or maybe just one pathologist with a rampant libido. Ugh. It was not fair to fall for unavailable people. Not that Gail was unavailable by choice at the moment, if the brief make out session before she'd gone home that first day was any indication.

The first cancelation of seeing each other was on Holly, stuck working overtime. The second was Gail, who ended up calling her from the patrol car. That was how Holly was introduced to Dov. He confiscated the phone and informed Holly that Gail was driving while talking on her cell phone.

The names Gail called Dov were enlightening and hilarious. Also descriptive and anatomically impossible.

However Gail did come over that night, in the end, fairly late, knocking on Holly's door at eleven.

"Gail?" Holly wasn't quite awake, having dozed off on the couch.
"Hey, sorry, did I wake you up?" Gail looked ready to step back and leave, so Holly grabbed her hand. "I saw the lights on."

"No," she lied. "Okay, yes, but I was on the couch. Why didn't you let yourself in?"

With a smirk, Gail let go of Holly's hand to hang up her coat. "I gave you your key back, nerd. I could pick the lock, but your neighbors already think I'm weird."

Perplexed, Holly locked her door. "I don't even know my neighbors, how do you know them?"

"Super cop powers." Gail stepped out of her boots, making Holly wonder if she ever tied them, and smiled softly. "Sorry, I know you have to be up early."

That soft smile melted Holly's heart. How could someone so stuck up and stubborn look that tenderly at her? "It's okay." This was a truth. "I wanted to see you." Holly informed her brain to stop acting like a teenager, telling the first girl she liked that she liked her like her. That had gone badly.

Gail didn't say anything to that, and just invaded Holly's personal space to kiss her again. Quietly filing away her worries about Gail being straight, Holly pulled her close. Kissing Gail was rapidly becoming one of her favorite things about the woman, though Holly managed to ruin the moment by yawning. "That's really encouraging," laughed Gail, clearly not offended.

"Sorry, I didn't sleep enough." Holly sighed, hiding her embarrassment by burying her face in the crook of Gail's neck.

Gentle fingers brushed at her hair, and Gail whispered, "We don't have to do anything, Holly."

Holly laughed and let go of Gail to look at her better. "I'm pretty sure that's supposed to be my line."

"Eh," she smiled. "I just wanted to be with you... Is that okay?" A touch of shyness grew on Gail's face.

"Very much okay." They went upstairs to the master bedroom, Gail borrowing the same sweats and shirt she'd worn two nights ago, and curled up under the sheets. Holly did not miss a brief moment of tension when the lights went off, fading as the light from the nightlight cast the room in a faint glow. How did you ask someone if they were afraid of the dark as an adult?

This time, Gail curled against Holly's side, an arm wrapped around her waist. "Thank you. For the light."

Holly turned her head and let her eyes adjust to the dimness. "Sure," she said softly, watching Gail's face quietly compose itself into relaxation.

One blue eye opened to look at her and Gail smiled. "You're going to watch me sleep." It wasn't a question, just a statement of fact. When Holly didn't answer, not having a real answer that wasn't a little embarrassing, Gail propped herself up on one arm. "I like you, Holly. A lot." The arm on her waist moved and Gail rested her hand on Holly's hip.

Right away, Holly's mouth went dry. "I like you too." It seemed so silly to say that, when Gail was looking down at her with a face that said she wanted to kiss her.

And Gail did lean in to kiss her again. Holly closed her eyes, concentrating on the feeling of Gail, hovering over her, kissing her in her bed. Her hand found Gail's arm and squeezed it, wanting so much to feel her weight, her skin. But before the kiss got too far, Gail pulled away for a moment. A second, very soft kiss, without any pressure to take things further, followed. Why was Gail so clearly
in charge in this moment? Holly sighed when the kiss stopped and Gail returned to cuddling with her. "Good. Because otherwise that would have been really awkward."

Holly laughed louder than she meant to and covered her mouth. "You're terrible."

"I'm the most awesome person in the universe," corrected Gail.

It was impossible not to smile. "I'm rolling over." As she did, Holly was aware that Gail simply scooted around with her, taking the 'little spoon' spot as if it was hers all along.

Lacing their fingers together, Gail sighed, comfortably, her body relaxing into the mattress. "Night, Holly."

The strident voice of Elaine Peck cut in the moment Gail said her name into her phone to the number she half-recognized as being from another station. "What are you doing on Thursday, Gail?" Of course Elaine knew the minute Gail was off shift. She probably had her schedule, and Steve's, laminated to the damn wall.

Gail eyed her phone. "Tomorrow? I… why?" It wasn't time for the monthly Peck Dinner, which Gail made a mental note to figure out how to ditch this time. Maybe Oliver would put her on a stakeout.

"The McDonald boy asked about you—"

"Oh. No. No, I am not free for a date, Mother. And not with Trip." Gail made a face and hung up her gun belt. "We went over that."

"I know we'd agreed to stop setting you up, Gail," remarked Elaine, her tone clear that this was not ex-Peck-ted behavior. Gail grinned at her mental pun. "And while I understand your reservations with Winston—"

"Forest Hill, Mother. He was from Forest Hill and was the most pretentious ass—"

"His father neglected to mention the accent—"

"You didn't even talk to him first!" It was somewhat normal for her and her mother to cut each other off mid-sentence, and Gail was surprised she got a second one in. "Anyway, I have a date."

There was a pause on the line, as well as a sound behind her. Gail glanced and saw another officer quickly look away. At least it wasn't Andy. Or Chloe. "Oh. A date. With whom?"

"Someone I met, but just be happy, okay? I won't be some dried up spinster Peck."

"Do I know him?"

Oh good god. "I have no idea, and I don't actually care." She paused. "It's not…" Shit.

"It's not…? What? You're seeing a police officer? It's not Nicholas?" Elaine's voice dripped with venom. Wow.

"God, no. Nick and I are over, and by the way, thank you for telling all my dates that I was on the rebound." Gail carefully hung up her uniform and thought about what to say. Most of the time, in public, Elaine was sickeningly sweet and undercutting. On the phone, when no one could hear them, it was different. That meant different answers and replies. "She's not a cop."
And with that, it was said. The word was out there and Gail waited. "She?"

Being a cop's child meant your parents regularly picked up on any careless words. This had not been that. "Yes. She. I'm going on a date with a woman." Gail was not quite certain she wanted to re-identify herself as a lesbian, but this much could be worked with.

"I see. Is this your … first date with her?"

Gail smiled and touched her hair, thankful her mother could not see her face. Weren't phone's wonderful? "No." Well… yes. Maybe. Did the other times count? She'd have to ask Holly. "This is who I told you about before. Why I was done with blind dates."

There was another, long, silence from Elaine. "Shall I buy you plaid for your birthday, then?"

"November's a long time away, Mother," Gail replied, snidely.

"I suppose this would be better than your goth phase," sighed Elaine.

An evil grin crossed Gail's face. "I cut my hair, too. It's all short now. I'll send you a picture."

She could hear her mother's wince. "Short hair is easier to clean," she muttered. "Dear, are you sure you understand what you're doing?"

Gail closed her eyes. She didn't understand everything, but she did understand one important thing. She liked Holly. Holly made her feel loved and beautiful, even when she was having a crazy freakout in the bathroom, or a nightmare. Holly didn't judge or try to fix, she was just there. "Tell Trip MacDonald no thanks."

"Alright." A pause. "If this proves to be something substantial, I'd like to meet her. I don't think I've met any of your boyfriends since Craig."

"Chris, his name was Chris." And Elaine would meet Holly when pigs fly. "Dinner, fine." Gail dismissed the proposal in her mind. She'd just make sure to 'have' to miss the family dinner. "Can I go?"

"Of course. I'll tell your father." Her mother hung up without a farewell or an I-love-you. Of course, Gail couldn't remember a single sincere 'I love you' from her mother, so that was nothing new.

She sighed and took a selfie to send to her mother. And then she texted Holly. Because that was infinitely better.
Finally there can be sex. Note there is no rating change. I don't publish smut.

The text made Holly's face burn. It was silly how the sentence was making her feel warm and cuddly inside. And horny, definitely horny.

I've decided I really like it when you call me 'honey'

"What's this? Puppy love?" teased Lisa.

"Yes, exactly," replied Holly, tapping in a quick reply.

I like when you call me lunchbox.

Lisa, one of Holly's oldest and dearest friends, made a disgruntled sound. "How long have you been going out with her anyway?"

Warning bells went off. Lisa was always weird about the women Holly dated. She likely had a crush on Holly, which was fine, but not something to throw Gail into. Gail would probably bite. "Not that long," deferred Holly. Three months or three days, depending on your point of view.

"This is why you blew off that date I set up, isn't it? You flipped your straight chick."

Oh god, it was going to be one of those days. Her phone pinged again.

You're such a nerd.

Holly tried not to smile. "Yes, yes it is exactly why. I totally flipped for a straight chick, she kissed me, and unlike you, I can't juggle more than one woman and a career." It was a mean comment, but then again, Lisa's nickname in med school had been Slutty BitchTits.

I'm your nerd. When are you off shift?

Lisa snorted. "I want to meet her."

"Pushy, aren't we? I'll talk to her."

Another snort. "I bet she hasn't introduced you to her friends."

For a moment, Holly contemplated explaining that Gail didn't really do 'friends' very well, but she'd met her brother and her roommates. "Actually, she has," smiled Holly, sweetly. "They're nice. I just don't want ..." What she didn't want was to introduce Gail to her own friends before they'd had sex.

Depends. What's the best way to stop you from IDing a body?

Holly eyed her phone. That was not an answer.

"You don't want to scare her off? Come on, if she can't take us, she doesn't deserve you."
Glancing at her friend, Holly thumbed a fast reply, "You can be a lot to take in at first, Lisa."

Whom you killing now?

The reply was an angry emoticon.

Lisa sighed, "I won't bite her."

No, but Gail might. They would either like each other or hate each other, depending on if Lisa understood what 'Peck' meant in cop-speak. Even Holly knew Superintendent Peck. That those Pecks were the same as her Peck had freaked her out. Gail, of course, was Gail about it.

Dov has the day off, and it was McNally or Nick. Shoot me.

"I'll talk to her," repeated Holly.

"You're texting her now."

Holly stuck her tongue out at Lisa. "I'm asking when she's off work." It was not the time to explain Gail was a cop either. Lisa would be classist. Rachel would be worse. Lisa she might have to ask Gail to shoot.

Come to my place after you kill your partner, I'll feed you.

Hopefully it wasn't too forward. The last few days had been rough, with Sam and Chloe still in intensive care. The whole division was overworked. Still, Holly just wanted to see Gail, and knew she wasn't going to get anywhere laying hints.

Lisa exhaled, "I don't want your heart broken, again." Whatever else Lisa was going to say was, mercifully, cut off by her own phone.

While Lisa took an emergency boob job call, Holly watched her phone for a reply text. Finally it came with one word.

K

"Really?" Sometimes Gail was too much. Pocking the phone, Holly paid for the coffees and hugged Lisa goodbye. She would have to find out the best way to handle her strange cat.

Around seven, she got another text from Gail.

Finished reports, home to change, yours all night.

Holly was glad to be home alone, and knew she was blushing. The implications of that sentence were ones that gave Holly tingles.

"Oh shit. Gail's coming here!" In a mild panic, Holly ordered takeout and rushed through her house putting things in order. She even changed the sheets and made the bed, and squeezed in a shower. Because... Hope lies eternal. Or as her father said, chance favors the prepared mind.

She had just pulled on jeans and a clean top when the doorbell rang. Doorbell meant food, though Gail had left the key with Holly. "Coming!" Was it too soon to give Gail her own key? She rushed down the stairs only to find Gail tipping the delivery man. "Hey! I said I'd feed you."

Gail kissed her cheek as she came in, "I thought maybe you'd cook." She was far more relaxed than she had been the other night. Routines did that to people.
Locking the door, lest the police officer scold her again (it was thus far the only time Gail had gotten mad at her), Holly went for the dishes. "I said I'd feed you. I'm really a better breakfast cook."

It was then Holly noted Gail had an overnight bag. Not that it meant anything. She may not have gone home after work. "I don't really do breakfast. I hate eggs and tomatoes, which seem to make up everyone's ideas of a good breakfast."

The sentence made Holly wonder about meanings. The first time Gail spent the night, she'd been doped up and complained about all food. The next two times there had been coffee and kisses, but no time for food. "I'll keep that in mind. Drinks?" Gail obliged with coke and water. "No alcohol this time?"

"Not for me," smiled Gail, and she pulled her boots off. The enigmatic Peck was at it again. As their paths crossed in the kitchen, Gail caught her arm, "Hi." Her smile was inviting and soft, begging to be kissed.

It was too easy to be distracted by Gail's smile. When they first met, it was so rare. Holly sighed, succumbed to temptation, and stepped in to kiss Gail. "Hi," she replied, before leaning her head in. Kissing Gail was still so new and fascinating. Everyone told her that Gail Peck was cold and aloof. Holly didn't see that. She saw a pressured, smart, antagonistic porcupine. Just pet her the right way and you were fine. More than fine. Holly could get lost in her kisses. "Hi," smiled Gail again, at a pause between kisses.

"You said that before." Holly felt a little light headed, and sighed.

Gail made a noncommittal noise, "You'd cover for me, right?" She let go of Holly and took the plates to the table.

"Oh god, you did kill someone."

"Hah, hardly. I was stuck with Nicholas today and McNally dumped him for Swarek. I'm letting him stew. I mean, Nick went to her right after we broke up... Which was the point."

That was when everything about this Nick guy made sense. He'd been the fiancé who left Gail at the altar. He was the ex-solider whom Gail had dated recently. He was the guy she cheated on, to give him an out so he could, guilt-free, date her friend, and ruin that friendship too. Holly remembered the haircut, when Gail had pointed at a bit of hair, calling it 'round two with Nicholas.' Nick. Nicholas. "Sorry, what?"

"Didn't I say? Last summer, when he and McNally went undercover, they pretend hooked up but he fell in love with her. While he was supposed to be dating me, or they did shortly after. They're both really vague about it. I gave him the out..." Gail shook her head. "It's all messed up. God, I'm glad to be out of that shit." Sitting down, Gail glanced back at Holly.

There it was. Holly was a rebound. Her face tightened. "No, you didn't mention that."

Gail frowned, "Hey, Holly..."

"You somehow neglected to mention the details."

This did not make Gail get up. "Nick was ... Convenient." She looked a little tense to explain it. "There was other stuff going on, and it was way less about him, trust me. I didn't care that McNally fell for him, I cared that they both lied about it." She frowned a little. "Remember when you picked me up at the hospital? The burn?"
Holly's train of thought derailed. "Yes..." What did the burn have to do with it?

"That's when McNally finally told me. McNally who I thought was my friend lied to me about how she felt about him." Gail looked more thoughtful, and more pained. "This is why I don't like people. They lie and they hurt you and you can be friends but they still do it."

There was something odd about the brutal honesty in Gail's words. "I don't know what to think about this," sighed Holly and she sat down. It certainly made that night make a lot more sense, and the attitude towards her coworker in the hospital.

Gail shrugged and reached over to squeeze Holly's hand. "It's a long, stupid, story. And involves another stupid hair moment." At Holly's arched eyebrow, Gail sighed. "Goth. After Nick left me at the alter, I was a goth for a while. Then I went to Europe, backpacking, for the summer. And then I became a cop." Gail served them both Kung-pao chicken. "And then shit happened."

Holly frowned. One day Gail would tell her the rest of the shit. She had a feeling that getting back with Nick was related to the problems with cabs, and the nightmares. And her trust issues. And yet she trusted Holly with all this. There were a lot of contradictions in Gail, and they were fascinating. "You are impossible to figure out sometimes," smiled Holly.

"Thank you?" Gail laughed a little. "You confuse me too, though mostly about myself. I mean, who knew the whole sexy librarian thing was my thing?"

Touching her glasses, Holly smiled more. "And you like it when I call you 'honey' too." There was a slight flush to Gail's pale skin. "Goth, huh? You'd have been striking with that skin."

The blush didn't fade, "I looked terrible. It was my rebellious phase. What about you? Horrible perm stories? Secret stash of flannel?"

Holly pursed her lips, "Do you have photos of Goth Gail?" At the nod, Holly got up and took her high school photo album off her shelf. "Senior year, high school." Gail flipped through until she found the right page, which was self evident.

"Oh, Lumberjack Lunchbox!" Covering her mouth, Gail's eyes twinkled. "You are the cutest little butch ever! I swear this is what my mother thinks will happen."

Heart stopped. "Your mom?"

Nonchalantly, and cheerfully looking at more photos, Gail said, "I wanted to get it over with before Steve did, so I told her I was dating a woman." She paused and looked at Holly seriously. "That sounds so weird, doesn't it? A woman. But 'girl' felt wrong. You're not a girl at all." Gail looked Holly up and down, then at the pictures again. "This is girl Holly, and she's adorable. I like woman Holly."

Holly tried to place her feelings on Superintendent Peck knowing about her. Was this going to change her job? Oh sure, now let's worry about that. No wonder Gail was a little slow to introduce her around, this actually did have an impact on her career. Would the Superintendent come down and try to talk to her? What about the Commissioner? God, there were a lot of Pecks to worry about! But what came out of her mouth was, "We haven't even had sex yet, Gail!"

Naturally Gail's reply was filled with the snide bite she loved to use. "I had noticed that."

"Seriously! You told your mother about me before we had sex? Who does that?"

"Uh no, I told my mother I was dating a woman." Gail was careful to emphasize the word.
Holly paused. "Not me?"

With a shrug, Gail closed the photo album. "Not like she couldn't figure out in an hour, but she promised not to invade my privacy. We have a deal." Gail looked at Holly thoughtfully, "Wow, I thought I was the only one having a meltdown."

Holly sighed, explosively. "A mini freak out."

"Which is why you cleaned the house. That or it's your seduction plan, and I gotta tell you, I'm a slob, so it doesn't impress me much. Not a lot to compare it to."

"And this is why you don't invite me over." There was something about Gail's caustic nature that was soothing.

"That and my stinky boy roommates." Gail smiled. "Your house is way nicer. No roommates at all." She reached across the table to touch the back of Holly's hand, tracing a circle in a way that tingled.

Oh. They were on the same page. "You know what sucks about being a lesbian?"

"Fleece and flannel are hot in the summer?"

"When I tell a girl she's cute, she doesn't always get the homo-intended vibe."

Gail stroked the back of Holly's hand again, "I can see that being a problem sometimes." She turned Holly's hand over. "I understand how you feel," she told Holly.

Certain Gail was wrong, Holly attempted to be calm. "Oh? How's that?"

"Well. Here's this misanthropic cop, straight, who you kind of like, and worry about. And when you try to tell her without saying that, she kisses you. So is she straight? Will this be more than a kiss? Will it be like when you kissed her, and you both pretended nothing happened? Or maybe it's like the shower... What if you do sleep with her and she thinks it's a big mistake?"

Meeting Gail's eyes, Holly was a little surprised. "That... Isn't all wrong." This wasn't the first time she'd heard Gail talk about feelings and emotions candidly, but it was still odd. It was clearly something she thought about, but rarely said.

With a soft smile, Gail stroked the palm of Holly's hand with her thumb. "And then I tell you I've been thinking about kissing you for months." Holly sucked in her breath a little. "Now... This is the part where you tell me we don't have to do this." Holly shivered as Gail traced lines on her palm and inner wrist. Her voice got softer. "And I tell you I know, so you tell me we can go slow." Gail didn't stop caressing Holly's hand. "Then I tell you I'm not scared. You get to have a freak out again because this is my first time with a woman, and it's a big deal because maybe it wasn't special enough for your first time. So you-"

Holly leaned in and kissed her. If Gail was startled, it didn't show and she welcomed the kiss. Holly oozed out of her chair and into Gail's lap, winding her fingers through the short hair that was so, so beautiful. Women with sexy short hair were totally her thing, and Holly knew it. She shivered again when Gail's hands slipped up the back of her shirt. "Sorry," she whispered. "You just needed to stop talking."

"I can shut up," smiled Gail. The kissing, like the time in the shower, started getting a little eager. It was good to know that sober, adjusted-to-short-hair Gail was kissing her the same way. It made Holly ache with a need to be touched. But this was not the place. Reluctantly, Holly stood up, eliciting a half moan, half groan out of Gail. "No more cold showers, please."
"No," agreed Holly, running her hands from Gail's head down her arms and finally to clasp her hands. "No shower." She tugged once and Gail immediately stood up. Leading Gail by the hand, Holly went upstairs to her bedroom. There was no hesitation from Gail as they stepped inside. She paused, looking at the bed, "We really don't have to do this, honey."

Gail let go of her hand, and as Holly turned, expecting to see some hesitancy in Gail's face, she caught Gail pulling off her own shirt. Oh. No mistakes about it, Gail knew what she wanted and went after it. Holly was frozen in place, admiring Gail's build. For someone who couldn't swing a bat, she was incredibly athletic. She walked passed Holly and sat on the bed, eyebrows raised in a silent question. Why are you still standing there? Holly could hear Gail's voice in her head and smiled.

Why indeed?

Afterwards, they lay in a sweaty, loose tangle of limbs. "Yeah, that's going to happen again," decided Gail, toying with the ends of Holly's hair. After what had become round one, Gail declared that Holly was right, and men sucked. And then she'd stepped up to demonstrate her appreciation to Holly in a way that showed she'd been paying attention or had done some research. Or Gail was just a fast learner. Either way, Holly never wanted to move again.

"Yeah," agreed Holly. Her limbs felt pleasantly heavy and she had no intention to move any time soon. Not even to shower. "After a nap."

Gail gently kissed her bare shoulder. "That was ... Amazing."

Holly finally opened her eyes and looked up to see Gail smiling, almost shyly, at her. "That was unexpected." She smiled back and closed her eyes again.

"Liar."

Opening her eyes again, Holly frowned, "What?"

"You changed the sheets." Gail looked amused and Holly rolled her eyes. "The sheets still have creases. I'm a cop."

"You're far too awake," grumbled Holly. "You didn't warn me you were chatty after sex."

Gail pulled the blankets up over them and settled down. "I'm usually not." Her weight dipped the mattress and she exhaled, clearly getting comfortable. "Sleep now," she yawned.

Smiling, Holly stopped fighting sleep, and her last conscious thought was that Gail didn't really do breakfast.

"When you said to meet you at the range, I thought somewhere else," Holly noted.

"That's your excuse for staring at my ass for the last ten minutes?" Gail handed Holly the old target and hung a new one on the line.

When Holly had called her after work, Gail was torn between running off to be with her new girlfriend and finally getting in some practice. Thankfully, when she suggested Holly meet her at the range not at the station and then they could go out to dinner, this was met with interest.

Anything was bound to be better than the shit she was getting at work for the haircut. Her brother grabbed her at lunch to warn her their father was on the warpath. Apparently, while Superintendent
Mom was relatively alright about Gail's dating a woman (though the remark of it being a phase stung). Inspector Dad was less so. She'd spent the day dodging his calls until, finally, he caught her at the end of shift. The argument had been brief, centering mostly around Gail screwing up her chance to make detective and look at that Nash girl, already there.

That Gail didn't really want to be a detective didn't matter. She was a Peck, and Pecks did what was expected. She told her father it didn't have any impact at all, and to mind his own business. In that moment, Gail expected an explosion, but her father just fumed and said they'd talk at home. Which meant Gail was avoiding her parents' place for the time being. Nothing new there.

But none of that mattered at the moment, especially when she knew she was doing just fine at work and she had Holly. Even Gail deserved some happiness, as Traci had noted. So had her therapist the night before.

"It's just you said you didn't do sports." Just hearing that amused voice lowered Gail's blood pressure. This woman knew her at her snarkiest and still not only wanted to be her friend, but wanted her for exactly who she was.

Gail snorted, "This isn't a sport." She wiped off her ear protectors and checked to make sure Holly had the right kind. "It's just target shooting."

"There's an Olympic event for it."

"That's not a selling point."

"Seriously, you don't just shoot your work gun at ... Work?" Holly looked impressed as she studied the target. "Wow. Do you score that or something?"

Gail looked at the target for a moment, "Not during practice, and I haven't done competition shoots in years. I'm just trying to have a nice cluster." She put the ear protectors on her head, though not her ears. "I don't do sports, I just like shooting things." Shopping and weapons. Did that make her butch or femme? Did it matter?

Huffing, Holly rolled up the target. "By yourself. In the middle of the night. At a public range in the middle of nowhere."

"It's six, and Marc's right there." She waved at Marc who was still hanging his own target. He liked to record his scores, along with his thoughts, right away. Most people were annoyed by it, but Gail found it calming. "At least I'm not at the outdoor range."

Holly shuddered and pulled her coat tighter, "It's a colder than normal winter. Spring's going to be a bitch."

"Too many dead bodies under the thaw," quipped Gail, putting another clip on the counter and stretching. If Holly was going to reply, it was lost when she watched Gail. "Perv." Gail smiled and kissed Holly tenderly.

Making an appreciative noise, Holly sat on the bench behind Gail. "I'm trying to reconcile the most girliest shriek I've ever heard with the badass cop."

"I'm a contradiction," grinned Gail. "Put on the headgear, okay?" Holly nodded and Gail called down to Marc, "Range is hot." He repeated it back and she picked up her gun, slapping the new magazine into place. Gail had worried that having Holly there would distract her, but she found it easier to center herself, and easily shot the target.
After retrieving that target and shooting another, Gail eyed Holly, who was smiling. "What?" asked Holly, suddenly defensive.

"You're looking extra nerdy there, Lunchbox." When Holly just blushed, Gail laughed. "Oh you can't even say you were thinking about physics and crap, can you?"

"You look ... amazingly graceful, Gail." Holly fidgeted in a way that assured Gail the doctor had gone to a dirty place.

She grinned. They had only had sex the once, but Gail too found herself going to a dirty, dirty, sexy place in her mind all the time. That morning, waking up in her own bed alone, all Gail had been able to think about was Holly. "You want to try shooting? I've got a smaller caliber."

Holly startled but shook her head. "How long do you think you'll be shooting for?"

Gail pulled out her phone and checked the time. "Half hour. Forty-five max."

Nodding, Holly moved to the bench and sat. "I'm going to sit here and stare at your ass then." Gail rolled her eyes, but finished up her practice. As she started to take apart her gun, Holly noted, "Thirty-eight minutes."

"Punctual Peck. That's me."

They walked back to the cars holding hands, and while Holly floated the idea of take out, Gail noted they wouldn't get much eating done that way. The doctor blushed again, and suggested an Italian place that was walkable from her house. That was a better idea, and Gail took a moment to kiss Holly before they drove their respective cars to her place.

Gail was there first, and texted Dov.

Don't wait up.

In the not too recent past, Gail wouldn't have worried about such things, but since her attack and Chloe's shooting, Gail felt obligated to do so. Besides, Chris and Dov had been very attentive, making sure she was never alone since Perik.

Say hi to Holly.

Dov was a surprisingly good friend. Thank god they'd never slept together.

Say hi to Chloe.

The lights from Holly's car light up the area and Gail rolled down her window as Dov replied.

That's not Gail. Holly has the phone.

She smirked and tapped a fast reply.

Don't be an asshole.

Holly opened her garage, "I think you can squeeze yours in, honey."

Gail rolled up her window and eased her car into the second spot in Holly's rather messy garage. Her phone buzzed again as she got out.

That's my Gail. See you tomorrow.
"Work or family?" wondered Holly.

"Roommate."

Shut up.

And wisely he did not text again. Gail looped her arm through Holly's and sighed, "They worry if I don't show up."

"That's sweet, and creepy." Holly leaned into Gail, leading her down the road.

Was it too soon to bring things up? "I suck at relationship Jenga, Holly." Holly gave her a quizzical look. "When you said I didn't have to go back out there, with the madman, and I said it was my job, I realized I was more Peck than I thought."

Holly was, apparently, getting used to Gail's non-sequiturs. "I was scared. I've never been worried like that about someone before, and it ... Scared me." For a moment, Gail thought about not continuing what she was trying to say. Holly worried about her so much that she had to see her. Had anyone cared like that about her before? Gail squeezed Holly's arm. "Jenga? Is this about getting up trees?"

Jenga, right. "No. It's ... I'm afraid of dark small spaces, Holly. I'm afraid of being alone in the apartment at night, and I'm really, really, afraid of taxis. Nightmare, talk to my therapist afraid." She felt herself tensing up a little. She'd stopped going to a therapist regularly, but after the department shrink gave her the look about a lesbian kiss, Gail caved to common sense and called her old one up. The therapist had been unsurprised to hear about the cheating on Nick, though somewhat shocked about the kiss with Holly. They were back to monthly sessions.

At first, Gail insisted she wasn't gay, or switching teams, but her therapist had pointed out it didn't matter, and let's talk about being happy. It was a nice change from talking about being afraid all the time.

"You don't have to talk about it, Gail," Holly said quietly, slowing her steps.

She tried to get the rest of the words out a few more times, and finally, as they got to the restaurant, Gail asked, "Is it really okay?"

Holly kissed her cheek. "Only if you promise to spend the night next time you drink with me."

It was wrong for Gail to buy into the distraction, but they were just starting to play Jenga, and there were already enough blocks puller out on Gail's side. Don't yank out all the blocks at once and go run up a tree, she told herself, and let Holly whisk the night away with a story about a drunken adventure, school stories, and a life Gail hadn't really thought about. Gail was sure her therapist would yell at her, as much as a therapist ever did, and tell her not to use Holly (or anyone, man or woman) the way she did, as an escape.

But this was not an escape. As terrifying as it was, Gail was falling in love with someone for the first time, for the first real time. She wanted to be invested and close in more ways than just physically. She wanted the long talks and the support and the sharing, and most importantly, she wanted it all from Holly. Gail was up a different tree, and she wanted to build a tree house with Holly up there.

"Earth to Officer Cranky Pants. Where's your head at?"

"Tree houses," replied Gail, reflexively. Holly's laugh was warm like a summer rain. "Sorry, I was thinking about you."
The laughter changed a little, shifting into a softer tone. "So no dessert?"

Gail wanted to say yes. She had seen the words 'chocolate cake meltdown' on the menu and Gail loved sweet foods. But for the first time in her life, Gail didn't want the dessert. Or at least not that dessert. Holly's shirt had the top two buttons undone and suddenly Gail's mind was locked on target. Holy hell, that's why men liked to look at boobs. "Only if we can take it to go," she decided.
Since Rookie Blue claims season 5 was 'four months' that means Gail and Holly had at least two months together before being stupid. Based on clothes and snow on the ground, its impossible to actually place a timeframe, so just … winter. End of winter. Spring is at the end of season 5.

"Wow, you're never here," announced Dov, staring at Gail in the kitchen of their apartment.

"I'm always here. There's coffee here." She sniffed the coffee in the pot, verifying it's freshness, before pouring a cup. "Is Chloe here or did you finally learn how to make coffee?"

Dov stared at her, "She's at her parents. Why are you here?"

"I live here, Dov. I even pay rent." Gail dropped into a chair and sipped the dark brew. Holly had an espresso maker, which was nice, but overkill. "Why is Chloe at her parents?"

"The whole dead thing... Seriously, Gail. Why are you here for breakfast?"

Gail eyed her roommate. Truthfully, the last two weeks she'd barely been home except to shower and change. She and Holly had been a little joined at the hip. Thinking about that, she smiled a little. "You're a shitty cop, didn't even hear me come in."

"You know what... Why aren't you at Holly's?" Then Dov's eyes widened and he looked at Gail's bedroom door. "Is she here?!"

Throwing a dish towel at Dov, Gail snarled, "No, she's at home. I don't have to spend every waking hour there."

"I was thinking more about the sleeping ones."

"Stop. Just ... Stop thinking about me and Holly."

Dov looked embarrassed and sat down. "But-"

"Oh my god, Dov, really? I'm allowed to sleep where I pay rent, and I do pay. God, we're going out tonight, which is more than I can say for you and Chloe."

"She's on bed rest!" Dov protested, but smiled.

"See? This is why I don't hang out with you anymore, you're all perverted." Gail finished her coffee and went into her room to change for work.

She'd wanted to spend the night at Holly's, but getting finished with her own work so late on the night before Holly had a court date made staying over seemed like a bad idea. They'd just be up all night if Gail stayed over, so it had been a quiet phone call where they talked about nothing important. She'd woken up to a too cute text, wishing her a good morning. Not willing to really get up, Gail had demanded pictures of Holly's court outfit. Holly obliged with a photo of the suit on her bed. When
Gail asked for photos of Holly, she got one of Holly's foot.

It was actually one of the more hilariously happy ways she'd woken up in a year.

Gail's day was spent in anticipation of dinner, and she kept tabs on the court case by simply asking her brother how it was going. His former partner was the arresting detective, so he had all the scoop. Thus she was prepared when she finally got a call from Holly near the end of the day.

"I am so, so sorry. This is going on forever."

"Hi to you too," smiled Gail, stepping into a quiet corner. The new rookie, Gerald, looked at her expectantly. "Go. Away." She shot him a glare and he ran off.

"Wow... Was that to me or-"

"Oh god, no. The rookie, he's an annoying puppy and I think McNally wants to kill him. Of course, he's the commissioner's step-son so ..." Gail knew that pressure all too well. Of course, her godfather had remarried when she was in the academy, so she really had no idea who the kid was, or if he mattered. There hadn't even been an informative text from Superintendent Mom. "Stuck in court hell?"

"We're on an hour recess, then I finally get to take the stand."

"Ouch!" Steve had told her it was delayed, but that was plain late.

"No kidding." Holly huffed, annoyed. "I hate lawyers. They're so picky and snippy. Science is so much better, don't you think? Just straight forward and there we go, answers."

She was rambling and Gail knew what that meant. "Did you eat?"

"Did I ... Eat?"

"Yeah, the thing where you put food in your face?" Silence. "Baby, go get something." There was a little more silence and then a chuckle. "I'm hanging up now," sighed Gail. As she did, she heard Holly laugh.

The rest of the day went by slowly. Dov went to see Chloe, Chris had some date, and Holly wound up in the apartment alone. Not generally a good thing. After doing laundry and actually cleaning, Gail gave in to a whim and drove over to Holly's. The lights were on, so she pulled out her phone.

Did you make it home ok?

The reply was pretty prompt. It was a grumpy emoticon.

Open the garage?

A long moment passed and the garage door rose. Inside, a robed, un-spectacled, Holly stood, looking confused, "How long have you been there?" Her eyes were all slitty and she looked miserable

"Two texts." Gail eased her car into the empty space and ushered Holly back inside. "You look beat to hell."

"Thank you so much," grumbled Holly, and she wandered back to the couch. Gail made sure the house was locked up before hanging up her coat and joining her. "I need brain candy or I won't sleep," complained Holly.
Gail settled in on the couch and draped an arm over the back. Raising an inviting eyebrow, she asked, "So what are we watching?"

"Sports. You'll hate it." Holly wrapped her arms around herself and looked grumpy. Without really thinking about it, Gail leaned over and turned Holly's shoulders. "What are you doing?" She sounded annoyed and like she'd rather be alone. Oh, Gail knew that one.

"Lean back."

Holly eyed her, but did, allowing Gail to be her pillow. They sat there, stiffly, for a while, and then Holly pulled her legs up underneath herself and relaxed against Gail, her head on Gail's arm. Through the first hour of the game, Holly's body became more and more limp, until finally she slid down so her head was in Gail's lap, and she was snoring softly.

"Yep," smiled Gail, and she gently stroked Holly's hair. This was better than alright. This was perfect. Holly felt perfect against her.

It was amusing to watch Gail, absolutely filthy and annoyed, as she stood guard in the falling sleet, mud splattered up past her knees. Holly was pretty sure she wasn't supposed to find it cute, but the look of disdain aimed at the people trying to drive through the crime scene was absolutely hilarious and sexy.

It was inappropriate, but Holly's spot by the body, collecting evidence, afforded her an unobstructed view of Gail's ass. And the best part was that Gail seemed to have no idea that she was that nearby. True, Holly was working, and making sure all the evidence was bagged (and it was weird evidence, medical trash that made no sense given the rest of the scene), but she enjoyed the free show when Gail leaned over into the car at the tape right then.

"Sir, I'm sorry our crime scene is making your pizza delivery late, but trespassing violates medical jurisprudence, so unless you want to be arrested, you can just call Dominos and tell them to meet you at the corner." Glancing over her shoulder, Gail shot Holly a smirk and then directed the car away. Caugh, Holly adjusted her hood to hide the smirk on her face and went back to monitoring evidence collection.

"Peck, anything new?" The voice was a grumpy, older, male officer Holly had met a couple times. Holly couldn't make out his nametag.

" Weird medical trash. That's my coffee, right?" Holly glanced over in time to see Gail taking a cup of coffee from the much drier officer.

"Oh yeah, nerd patrol tell you that?"

Disdainfully, Gail replied, "Forensics. No, but they're bagging it and I don't see any more except around the body."

Blinking, Holly looked around and realized Gail was right. So did the other officer, apparently, who muttered 'huh' and sipped his own cup. "Killer doctor?"

There was a chilling silence from Gail, and a tone of forced levity (or sarcasm) in her reply, "No. A clown, Andrews." She looked vaguely deadpan, but Holly got the inkling of a feeling that there was more to Gail's comment. The other officer, apparently Andrews, looked guilty.

So she spoke up. "Or nurse. Or our victim's in the medical profession. Or coincidence. At this point
anything's possible, which is the point of why we're collecting evidence. If we find trace that's on the
evidence that matches the body, then maybe we have more than just coincidence. Of course, it's also
possible it's just cross contamination, depending on how long the bodies' been here and for that we'll
need to do more intensive tests."

"God," muttered Andrews. "Are they all like this?"

"Nope," replied Gail, popping the P in the word and smirking. "Still weird. Not a place I'd look for
drinkers."

"Junkies?" Andrews looked around. "They don't use nice parks?"

"Not this close Zanaro's territory. This used to be Bobby Zanaro's world. Ollie and I nabbed him 2
months ago."

"Used to be," pointed out Officer Andrews. "Could be a new group or an internal fight or a total
random."

"Yeah, which means drugs and gangs needs in. You want to call it in?"

"Nah, you look like you could use some time to dry out. Car keys were exchanged and Gail
vanished into the cruiser to call in the situation. Andrews lingered closer to Holly than the tape,
though at this point Gail had rather effectively chased off everyone. His radio crackled into life and
Gail's voice came through, unintelligible but recognizable. "Copy, Peck."

A moment later the cruiser pulled out and Holly was left with just the strange man she didn't really
know. And her fellow lab rats. "We'll be done soon," assured Holly, watching the body finally drive
off.

"They get mad if we leave you guys without protection. Killers like to come back."

"He could have died accidentally."

"Sure, but just in case." Officer Andrews patted his gun. "Peck'll be back before you guys roll out
anyway. So will other Peck."

Holly blinked. "Other Peck?"

"Her brother. She probably tossed the case to him, fraternal freebie."

"Sororal sympathy," suggested Holly, smiling. She glanced up at Andrews' face and saw confusion.
"Sororal means sister, and she's his sister..." Holly sighed and went back to her work. Gail probably
would have made a joke.

While the rain let up, the crime scene for more officer mostly ignored Holly and crew and said
nothing, until Gail pulled back up with the cruiser. "Peck, they said you were a fast driver."

"If you want cheese all on one side, sure." Gail popped open the car and pulled out five boxes.

"What the hell? You said pizza." Officer Andrews tramped over and took a box.

"Nerds eat too." Gail smiled and jerked her chin at Holly. "Whaddaya say, Dr. Stewart? Care and
feeding of forensics?"

Andrews looked grumpy, which was normal based on today, "When I called them nerds, you gave
me crap."
"I did," agreed Gail, though she seemed to be more watching Holly than her fellow officer. "So?"

The other lab workers looked at Holly pleadingly. "We're almost done..." Holly sighed and gestured at the pizza. Half her crew descended on Gail the moment they were out of tyvek, thanking her profusely, and eating it outside of the crime scene. The other half finished up under Holly's watch. Holly went for the pizza last, and was not horribly shocked to see there were no more boxes. "Whoops," she sighed, walking up to the cruiser.

"All that thinking makes 'em hungry."

"I did not think this through," sighed Holly, suddenly craving the pizza and not wanting to make her coworkers feel guilty about eating all of it.

Gail smirked and reached into the cruiser, "I did." She pulled out a smaller pizza box.

"No tomatoes?"

"Just the sauce."

It was an amusingly surreal moment, sharing a pizza at the crime scene, waiting for guns and gangs (and Gail's brother) to show up. Officer Andrews was more interested in flirting with one of the techs, so it was almost like they were parents supervising a kids play date.

Holly leaned into Gail's shoulder. "This is the weirdest date I've been on in a while." She kept her voice low.

"Well since I'm going to have to cancel tonight to work on the case, and I'm hungry, I figured..."

"You're always hungry." Holly smiled, finding she really wasn't too upset about the lack of a date night. There were these stolen moments with Gail that more than made up for it.

When Steve arrived, it was back to Professional Peck, and the siblings somehow even put aside their usual bantering to discuss the case. While Steve's partner was dismissive of Gail's theories, Steve seemed to be interested. It was probably aided by the fact that Gail saved them pizza.

"Run that by me again," asked Steve around the mouthful of pizza.

"Zanaro said he got ousted, and now this guy, with the same old school ink, is here dead. I say cover up."

"And the meds?"

"Not sure yet. Waiting on forensics." Gail gestured at Holly, not smiling but still looking more friendly. Work Gail was usually this kind of distant, which wasn't a bad thing. It was nice to have some delineation.

"Well then maybe you should stop feeding them pizza and let 'em get to work," joked Steve. "Okay, uni, you get to run with us today on this one. Start with-"

"Canvassing the area, did that." She handed over her log book. "Statements, such as they are. Lots of 'I ain't seen nuthin' around here. We should run the traffic light at the corner, though. I already asked the store about their security camera, but it's just for show."

As Steve's partner reviewed the log book, and started taking Gail more seriously, Holly caught a smirk from Steve. It hadn't been a shock that she was closer to Steve's age than Gail's, though both
Pecks were younger than Holly. Still, somehow Steve always felt more childish than Gail did. She was more immature, but she wore it like a shield, as if it protected her from having to be taken seriously. And then Gail was this brilliant, lazy, cop. And Holly found it enthralling.

Steve winked at Holly, clearly noticing. "Dr. Stewart," he grinned. "Mind if we come back with you to the lab? See what your minions uncover?"

"Not at all, Detective," she coughed. "Uh, Officers?"

"They're leaving the footwork to the experts," smirked Gail, looking just like her brother. "Come on, Andrews, you can ride shotgun."

"This is going to be awkward," sighed Nick, dropping into the driver's seat.

"Why?" Gail really wasn't paying attention to her partner at the moment. After working with her brother for a couple days, the drudge and boredom of a normal day was much welcome. Even if it was with Nick. Speaking of, he was being quiet, so Gail looked up at him and not at the text from Holly, asking her when she got off shift. "What?" Gail put on her best sneer.

And Nick exhaled, looking relieved. "Chloe said you were going soft."

"Oh, Nicholas, don't worry, you're my special punching bag." She gave him her best biting grin, and was pleased to see him cringe.

That let them ride in silence for quite a while. "Are you still mad at me?"

Boy, Luke wasn't wrong. People do just talk if you give them enough silence. "No," she sighed, and was surprised to feel how right that felt. Then she thought about what she'd said to Holly about it, and repeated the conclusion. "I'm sorry for being such a bitch, Nick. It was passive aggressive and ... Childish."

"I'm dreaming," muttered Nick. "I'm going to drive around the corner and there'll be a bear and my high school English teacher, tap dancing."

Gail sighed and reached over, pinching Nick's arm hard. He yelped. "Smart ass, I'm serious."

"I was worried you cut off all the bitch with the hair."

"Hardly. I just think short hair looks better on me. Maybe I'll try the motorcycle next." Without thinking, she laughed and said aloud, "She'd get a kick out of that."

The problem with dating cops was the same as being related to them. They latched on to things. "She?" Nick darted a glance over. "Your mother would blame me."

"I'm having sex with a woman."

It was delightful to watch Nick's double take. He whipped his head around and slammed on the brakes at the last second to avoid rear ending a van, and Gail laughed gales of laughter. The best moment she'd had in days, outside of ones with Holly. "What the hell, Gail!?" Nick was sweating. But Gail kept laughing. "I should have taken a video of your face, Nick. That was great."

"That's not funny," he growled.

"You were funny," she retorted.
"God, is there anything you won't say to get a rise out of me?" Nick eased the car back out into traffic.

Gail carefully aimed her phone at Nick and tapped the record button. "It's true though."

"What's true?" Nick was grouchy.

"I am having sex with a woman. It's great." The range of emotions on Nick's face were priceless. She was saving this video forever. "Seriously, I totally see why you're into it. I mean, wow. Soft and curves and she smells amazing. Did you know you guys smell totally different? It's like... I used to like turkey bacon, but then I had real bacon that first time, and I thought my parents had lied to me for years. Which isn't new."

In a strangled voice, Nick asked, "Are you comparing sex with women to bacon?"

"Good point. Men are more salty."

To her delight, Nick gibbered. "Jesus, Gail. What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I'm pretty sure I'm a lesbian now, Nick," she said firmly.

"This is a nightmare. I'm having a nightmare right now."

"Don't worry," caroled Gail. "I won't ask you for sex tips. It's a lot easier when you share the same parts."

Nick's face turned red. "You're still mad at me."

"Nope," Gail laughed, popping the P loudly. "We're good now." She turned off the video.

She let him live in silence for the rest of the shift, but wasn't surprised when, at the end, he asked, "You're serious about this? The lesbian thing?"

Gail leant on the car and thought it out. "Yeah, Nick. I am."

Her ex-fiancé looked confused but shook his head. "I gotta say, it makes a hell of a lot more sense."

"What's that supposed to mean?" But she saw his smile and, for the first time since he was back from undercover, answered it with an honest smile of her own. "You're an ass, Collins."

"You're a bitch, Peck."

But they were friends again.
First Impressions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Holly knew a honeymoon week couldn't last forever, but she was very happy when the second week of dating stayed in that awesome bubble. And the sex was awesome. Even when there wasn't sex, there was this sweet, vulnerable side of Gail that was warming up to things. Part of her worried Gail was going to be one of those project girlfriends, but when she nagged Holly to eat, or made sure she was sleeping, the doubts faded.

It made her feel special, too, when she got to watch Gail sleep. It wasn't the only time Gail was so peaceful and angelic, but it was the only time Holly could watch her without getting teased. That was Gail's armor. Sarcasm and bite to keep the world at bay, to keep it from hurting her. And asleep, the armor seemed to fade. Sometimes, when they kissed, Holly caught the same open look on Gail's face, where she surrendered to her feelings.

Turning off the lights, Holly let her eyes adjust to the darkness and focused on the nightlight. It was symbolic, in a way. Letting that light in brought Gail closer. She turned to the side and curled up, watching Gail's deep, even breathing. "You're beautiful," Holly whispered.

"I'm not asleep," replied Gail, startling the crap out of Holly.

"Jesus, how the hell can you breath like that and be awake!"

Gail opened one eye, "Really wanna know?" Holly nodded. "If I'm asleep on the couch, my parents don't talk to me." She closed her eye and added, "They had a doctor check me for narcolepsy when I was ten."

What a horrible reason to master that skill. "I'm sorry." She caressed Gail's face. "How come you're not asleep?" Instead of replying, Gail rolled over and snuggled up against Holly, using her as the big spoon. Holly smiled and draped her arm over Gail's waist, letting them hold hands.

"Because you keep staring at me. Go to sleep, Holly," instructed Gail, her breathing still slow and comforting.

Holly was asleep in moments, or so she presumed, since the next thing she knew, it was a quarter after two AM and the bed was empty. "Gail?" She rubbed her eyes and squinted around. There was some light in the hallway, and Holly got up and reached for her robe. Her favorite robe was missing and she frowned, taking the one Gail usually borrowed instead.

The light was from downstairs, and Holly poked her head down to see that Gail was curled on the couch with one small light on. Interesting. She was partway down the stairs when Gail spoke, "Sorry, I tried not to wake you up."

"You didn't." Holly sat down next to Gail. "That's my robe."

"Yeah, it smells like you," smiled Gail, not putting down the forensics journal.

Holly's brain wasn't running very fast. "Gail, it's two. Why are you awake?" When Gail didn't answer, Holly reached over and took hold of the magazine. "Gail."

The blonde sighed and dropped the magazine. "I couldn't sleep. It's not a big deal."
There was a lot of deflecting going on just then, "Honey. Is everything okay?"

For a second, a pained expression crossed Gail's face, but then with levity she remarked, "My schedule change messed up my circadian rhythm, that's all. I start night shift tomorrow."

Suspecting there was more to it, Holly frowned but asked, "Night shift for how long?"

"Five nights, just enough time to get used to it before screwing me up again." Gail reached over and pulled Holly onto her lap. "Five whole nights where I'm going to be working when you're in bed," she whispered, kissing Holly's collar bone.

Every time Gail did that, spontaneously touching her and kissing her, the fears Holly had about dating a 'straight girl' melted away. Gail wanted to touch her and be with her. "You're trying to distract me," sighed Holly.

"Is it working?" Gail started to worm one hand into Holly's robe.

"A little," admitted Holly. She kissed Gail softly. "When you're not on night shift, can we have drinks with my friends?" Gail murmured something that sounded like a yes, but her face was now pressed into Holly's neck. "Gail..."

"Drinks with Holly's friends," she repeated. "Tuesday?" The kissing was getting far harder to ignore.

"I'll check." Holly turned her neck, giving Gail more access. "Bed?"

Gail hmm'd and looked at Holly, "Only if I can keep kissing you."

"Oh, no," laughed Holly, getting up. "Clearly it's my job to make you sleep." Gail smirked, and followed her back to bed.

After four nights in a row at her own apartment in her own bed, Gail decided she hated it. She also hated the night shift, and she totally, absolutely hated being partnered with Salvador. He smelled sour and only wanted to talk about jujitsu.

On the one hand, she wanted her shift to be longer so she could get used to it better. On the other, she was grateful she only had to cope with it for three nights, and this was the third. As shift change finally rolled around, she pulled the car into the lot. "Sal, wake up." She slammed on the brakes to snap him awake.

"Damn, woman," he groaned. "Would it kill you to be nice?"

"Yes. I'm deathly allergic to nice. Every time I ride with Price, I have to stab myself with an epi-pen." Her deadpan was not seen as humorous.

"You're crazy, you know that?" Sal shook his head. "Just TGIS man."

Gail rolled the letters around in her head and blinked. It was Saturday. Days often had less meaning when you worked them the way they did. "I'll take care of the car," she told Sal. "What? I can be nice."

The man shook his head again, "You're only nice 'cause you're getting something."

Smirking, Gail popped the trunk to get their gear. "You are shockingly correct, Salvador."

After filling out the paperwork on the car and locking her gun up, Gail took the time to shower and
change. By the time she was done, the day shift had started to drift in. Gail stalled a little, not wanting to chat with McNally or Price, but she checked the schedule to make sure of a couple things. Two days off. Then back to days.

"You look too devious, sister mine," drawled Steve. He was haggard and unshaven.

"I have two days off, brother dearest. Don't call."

He spelled Holly's name in sign language and Gail rolled her eyes. "We missed you at dinner last night. Mother asked, you know."

"I'm sure she did."

"So did Dad."

"Now that's a lie, and you know it, Steven." Gail swung her bag to her shoulder. "Unless he wanted to say how I was delusional."

"He said distracted, and asked if you were still seeing a therapist."

"Christ." Gail shook her head. "See this is why I hate family dinners."

Since he couldn't argue that, Steve just shrugged. "You're serious about this, aren't you?" When Gail abruptly blushed, she found herself the recipient of a surprised brotherly stare. "I feel like I should pull her aside and ask her intentions."

Making the sign for sex, Gail smirked at Steve's wince. "You asked. What's up with you and Traci?"

"It's going okay, I think. Good. I like her."

"You've had a crush on her since that night at the Penny."

"Jerry got there first," sighed Steve. "And then there's Dad."

They both paused. Their father had more weird sticking points than anyone else they knew. "Dad will get over it. Or not. I don't care. I'm actually happy for once, Steve."

"Then grab it with both hands and don't let the bastards take it away, Gail." He grabbed her for a quick hug and then shoved her away. "Get. Leave the crime solving to me."

Gail snorted and headed out. She wanted, in no particular order, breakfast and to see Holly. That gave her an idea, and instead of driving to breakfast, she found a small fruit and nut, hippie place that Celery had told her about, and bought groceries. Then she drove to Holly's and rang the doorbell. There was no answer and Gail felt a little stupid. She had this idea that Holly would open the door, all cute and sleepy in a robe, and Gail would make her breakfast and then maybe things could happen.

Instead, she sat on the stoop and sighed. "Clearly I'm stupid," she told herself under her breath. Holly was probably out, doing things early risers did.

As Gail reflected on how long it was safe to sit on a stoop with eggs and milk, she saw Holly come jogging up. Literally. "Gail?" Holly blinked and pulled her earbuds out. "Did I forget something?"

Gail felt sheepish as she gestured at the reusable grocery bag at her feet. "No. I just finished shift and thought... I wanted to see you." She couldn't remember feeling this way about any of her boyfriends, and even Nick had managed to monumentally screw up surprise breakfasts. Was she the screw up
"With a bag." Holly pushed her sweaty hair away from her face and peered in the bag. "Flour. Eggs. Blueberries. Chocolate chips... Cookies for breakfast?" She sounded disappointed.

Reaching in, Gail pulled out the milk. "Pancakes."

Holly's eyes lit up. "Buttermilk pancakes? You cook?"

"Contrary to what everyone believes, I can cook. Just not first thing in the morning."

Holly made a show of looking at her phone. "It's 6:20."

"I just got off shift." She smiled up at Holly, feeling awkward.

When Holly's face softened, she looked like Gail was the sweetest person in the world. "So this would be dinner?"

"Both. Or I can go wake up my roommates. They'll accuse me of trying to kill them..."

Holly held out her hand to Gail and pulled her up. "If you promise not to burn down my kitchen, I think we can make a deal."

She wasn't sure what the hell had just happened. Or why it happened. But Gail was out the door and angry. "Let her go," advised Lisa. "Better now than six months when you break her heart, or she breaks yours."

"It's too late for that," muttered Holly, and she ran outside without her coat, but Gail was out of sight. Holly vaguely knew where Gail lived, but was startled to realize she'd never been to her apartment. She knew Gail lived with two coworkers, male, but the details were lost on her. Dov and... Nick? No. Chris. An ex.

The cold, late winter/early spring wind whipped around her and Holly shuddered. How little did she know about this woman after all? Gail didn't take taxis, she slept with a light on, she was allergic to tomatoes, she had a morbid sense of humor, and she was bratty and immature. And Holly had no idea where she lived.

Damn it.

Holly pulled her phone out and called Gail. Voicemail. "Hey. Honey, what the hell just happened? If it's what Lisa said, I can explain. Just... Call me back. Okay?"

It was a terrible message, but what else could she say.

A day went by without a reply, and Holly called again, leaving a voicemail again. "Gail, hi. I'm sorry about the stupid things they said, I know you're not uneducated or not in my league. I mean, who cares about leagues, right? Except for sports, they're stupid. Actually, they're made up in sports too, to give us something to side against, which is really fake. Faker than weddings. And— that woman you work with. Price? Her too. So. Um. Yeah. You're not fake. And I'm rambling and I really need to stop talking... So. Call me. Please."

The third voicemail, after a week of silence, was less friendly. "Okay Gail, this is fucking stupid. I know you're not dead. I've heard you're working on cases. This is just stupid, and you're in a damn tree and I'm trying to get you down, but you have to actually answer me sometime. So come on, just
pick up the phone when I call, or call me back. Or ... Something. Anything. This not talking shit is immature."

The day after, she left the fourth voicemail. "That was mean. I was mean. I was angry. I'm still angry. I don't know what to do about this anymore, Gail. I miss you, but if this is what's happening, then I guess ... This is goodbye." She paused. "Goodbye, Gail."

Somehow Holly managed not to leave any more voicemails. She didn't text. She didn't stalk or spy. She just looked away. She moved on. She went on a date, which was with a woman who wasn't as witty as Gail. There was another date with a woman who was lazy, like Gail, but not in an endearing way. After the third date, Holly considered throwing in the dating towel.

"Do you know what your problem is?" Rachel asked the question over a glass of wine at her condo, across town. "You're too picky."

"I have standards. And you're the one who didn't go on a second date with Roger because he smelled funny."

"You're still hung up on the cop."

Holly groaned. "Her name is Gail."

"Her name is walked-out-on-you," corrected Rachel. "You know I'm not saying Lisa was right about it, but..."

"Yeah, I know." Holly sipped the wine, "I'm just going to be celibate."

"Don't tell Dr. BitchTits." There was a pause and they both laughed.

So Holly went on another date and tried to make it work a little. This woman was nice, funny, not acerbic, but had a bit of bite to her. Feisty. And she had a sense of humor. That got her a second date. This went a little better, and she even kissed Holly before going home on her own.

The third date happened to be after she saw Gail again, and spent more than a minute in her presence. And Gail was a damned force of nature. She was Gail. As if nothing had happened for three weeks, Gail asked her out to talk. When Holly casually mentioned she was seeing someone, the hurt in Gail's face astounded her. Through all the not-talking, Gail still had feelings for her. Gail was still totally hung up on her?

Giving in to temptation, Holly made the drive across town herself with the thumb, forgotten in the mess of Gail losing Oliver's daughter. And Gail confessed she felt Holly was the best thing to ever happen to her. That hurt. It stung and it poked and it ripped open everything Holly had tried to push away. It was everything she'd wanted to hear, only four weeks late.

"Goodnight, Gail."

They were the hardest two words she'd ever said.

And in that mood, where her mind was swimming with Gail, she proceeded to make an ass of herself at dinner with her date. Because when she asked Holly what was wrong, Holly told her about her ex, the cop, who dumped her crap on Holly and made her think again about everything.

"You're not over her," said the date, sadly. And she kissed Holly's cheek and left her with the check. Which Holly admitted she deserved.
That was when even Rachel stopped trying to set Holly up. Actually, that was when Rachel told her to call her back when Holly's head was out of her ass, and hung up. Lisa was more crass and told Holly to fuck off and stop being stupid. Her mother was similarly unsympathetic. After all, Gail was the one who walked away and didn't answer.

And that was how Holly ended up filling in her resume and tossing it up in various places. Vancouver. Los Angeles. Mexico City. Paris. It started as a drunk game she could play. Find all the cities she'd wanted to live in and see if they had an opening for a forensic pathologist. New York. London. Budapest.

When she got a phone call from a city she hadn't even applied to, Holly was flabbergasted. They'd pay for the move, give her a pay bump, and make her assistant chief? And she didn't need to learn a new language. But her first thought was of Gail. She wouldn't see Gail again if she did this.

As she went through each stage of the interview, first with the SFPD and then the medical college, she started to wonder if this was all real, if it was all possible. After the first interview with the US consulate and then the Department of Homeland Security, Holly felt a rising panic of reality. This was going to happen.

That afternoon, in her lab, an alert pinged on her phone that brought it all crashing down. "Peck Family Dinner in Suburbia Hell."

Gail had put the alert on her phone. She wanted Holly to meet her parents, and had promised much drinking afterwards. Holly stared at the paperwork in front of her and shoved it all in her bag. Getting drunk now seemed like a better idea, and she went to the store to find something to drink that didn't remind her of Gail for at least 12 hours.

What she found was Traci, similarly determined and similarly flustered.

"Why are you here," Holly blurted?

Traci startled and then blushed. "My mom has Leo. I forgot..." She and Holly shared a look and Traci tilted her head. "Huh, that explains why Gail's been avoiding me."

"Steve hasn't been avoiding me," Holly complained. He hadn't once mentioned Gail though, which was a small blessing.

They both looked at the various brands of wine and liquor before them. "You know what really sucks?"

"I can't drink tequila without thinking about Gail and how she swears it makes her do stupid things?" Holly sighed and put her hands in her pockets.

"I was thinking about vodka for Steve. Maybe getting drunk is stupid."

"Oh, it usually is," agreed Holly. They were silent for a while. "Did they go to the dinner?"

"I think so. Gail was somewhat dressed up and left with Steve." Traci smiled somewhat fondly. "Are you hungry?"

Holly blinked. "I seem to have a dearth of dinner plans," she admitted.

"I know a great dumpling place nearby."

And that was how Holly and Traci found themselves sitting in a booth talking about their failed
relationships with the Pecks. When Traci explained that Steve had followed Dex, in an attempt to ensure Traci's custody battle was won, and possibly set him up. And then Traci had warned Dex. "Isn't that illegal?" Holly made sure to keep her voice low.

"Yeah," nodded Traci. "Steve hasn't told anyone, though. I don't think he ever will." She poked at her potsticker and then ate it. "But Dex is Leo's dad."

"He doesn't sound like a very good one."

Traci looked rueful. "He's ... Complicated."

Holly didn't buy it, and suspected it was more displaced affection for Leo, but that wasn't something you said right away. Well, Gail might. "He had your best interests at heart, Steve did."

"In a creepy, stalker, 'look at me, I'm a Peck' way." Traci put down her chopsticks. "Did Gail do something like that?"

"Oh, no, she walked out on me at drinks after she heard my friend." Holly winced and explained what had happened.

"See, that actually makes sense if you know Gail," sighed Traci. "The only person I know who knows Steve is Gail, and I can't ask her if this is normal." The dumplings made their appearance and Traci took a moment to explain the best dipping strategy.

"Does everyone from Fifteen take food so seriously?"

"You should hear Oliver about schwarma. He has some unholy affinity to this tiny shop. Back when I was uniformed, Gail and I..." Traci trailed off and looked apologetic. "Sorry."

Holly couldn't not smile when she thought about the time she heard Gail shout at Oliver about not eating her food. They weren't even dating then, "It's fine. You two were friends. Are friends."

"As much as Gail has friends." Traci took a bite of her dumpling. "We didn't really become friends until after ... After Andy and Nick left, actually." She looked a little sad, as if there was much more to the story. "She babysat for me that summer. Leo likes her more than Steve, actually. Except she's just inept at sports."

And that reminded Holly about the batting cages, so she related that story. Traci told her about how Steve took Leo to hockey and ice cream. They ended up spending the night chatting about that, their shared misadventures with two people named Peck who, for all their faults, were wonderful people.

"Have you met 'Herr Peck' ever?" Holly ran her finger around the rim of her glass.

"Their dad? Twice, he was ... Weird."

"Oh, no, sorry, their mother. Gail called her Herr Peck half the time."

Traci laughed. "Not met, no. She was there when we graduated, but all I remember was an angry red-haired woman with more brass than blue on her jacket, telling Gail not to embarrass them."

"She's just as lovely as Gail implied, I see."

"Yeah I wasn't looking forward to that part of dinner." Traci smiled, "Gail applied for the detective spot I got."

Holly blinked, "She doesn't want to be a detective, does she?"
"Not then. I don't know about now... She did it because she was supposed to. Half assed it." Traci shook her head. "She's still rebelling against her parents in her own way."

Sighing Holly looked at her plate. "See, and now I have to wonder if that's what I was. Another way to get at her parents."

Traci's hand reached over to touch Holly's. "I don't think so. She hasn't even looked at anyone since, Holly."

"Oh great, and here I am, going on dates." Holly groaned and slid her hand away from Traci's, slumping back in the booth. "She's impossible."

"Cryptic."

"Frustrating."

"Impulsive."

"Reckless."

"Pushy." Traci smiled and added, "Sucks doesn't it?"

"Totally," agreed Holly, despairingly. "God. Maybe I should have gotten drunk."

Traci laughed. "Then we'd be hungover and missing them." They split the check and wandered back out into the spring night. "Gail went to college, you know."

"I didn't know," replied Holly, surprised. "She didn't say."

"Tends not to. That's why she's older than most of the rookies in our class, except me. She has a BS in criminal justice." Traci looked at the traffic driving by, "She likes to act lazy and like she doesn't care, but ever since a year ago..." Again, Traci stopped. "If she ever gets her head out of her ass with you, she might tell you why. Maybe. It's this whole, painful, thing. But Gail did change. Maybe she will again."

It felt like Holly should say something encouraging about Steve, but she didn't know him well enough. She barely knew him by sight. "Steve cares about you," she offered, guiltily.

And Traci nodded. "I know he does."

None of that helped her answer the email awaiting her when she got home. San Francisco. Yes or no?

Chapter End Notes

This is the last chapter for Part 1. Please don't kill me. I'm going to take a short break before continuing on. There IS a next part and it will be called "Do Over" and I promise Golly gets back together.

My Better Half has decreed this will be one giant fic, so settle in, folks. This is long and
I split it up into story arcs (parts) for ease of my own writing.
Peck It Up

Chapter Summary

Having pretty much tanked the best thing that ever happened to her, Gail did try to move on, but if there's anything the Pecks are good at, it's making a complicated situation even more complicated.

Chapter Notes

We are now off track for the show officially, and into original territory. Slightly more realistic dealings with Oliver and Gail and their issues. I suspect some people would argue I'm humanizing Gail too much, but I tried to think up reasons why she would behave the way she does, and decided it's her family, so I'm going to delve into why Gail is Gail. And yes, I do think she loves Oliver in her own way.

This chapter begins some deep stuff and has darkness. Gail has darkness.

While she had her own car, Gail let Steve drive her to dinner with their parents. Her excuse was that she wanted to drink, though the reality was she never got drunk in front of their parents, no matter how much she and Steve joked about wanting to do so. They always wanted to get blitzed, but getting drunk in front of Herr Peck and the Super's Inspector meant being harassed for days. And you just never, ever, got drunk at a fancy restaurant with reporters stalking your parents. They were Pecks. There were rules.

Still, public dinners out with the parents were infinitely better than the ones at home, which she'd managed to avoid most of, by picking up night shifts at the last minute. The public ones, however, she'd been caught and dragged into, and that meant at least one person stopping by the table to interrupt parental harassment. This one she'd hoped would be where she could introduce them to Holly in a way that would prevent a public scandal. Not so much.

"That wasn't so bad," Steve muttered, buckling in. Gail ignored him and turned her face to the street, watching the valet go to get the next car. They pulled out and, in a moment, hit the empty streets.
"You gonna do this all night?"

He meant the silent treatment, probably. "What do you want me to say?"

The dinner wasn't an unmitigated disaster, not even according to Peck standards, which were really low. Judgmental comments from her father about the haircut notwithstanding, he'd kept his opinions of Gail's sexuality to a minimum. Steve had muttered that the table for six had been a low blow. Both of the siblings had Peck'ed it up to the best of their Peckish ability. As Nick had put it, the Pale Fails.

"I don't know," sighed Steve. "I was kind of expecting you to yell at me."

"I'm not mad at you." She side-glanced at Steve and caught him smiling. It was not without notice that Steve took the long, slow, way back to Gail's apartment. He wanted to talk. "I miss Holly," Gail
finally allowed.

Steve turned to look at her for a moment. "I miss Traci."

"Please, it hasn't even been a month." She, on the other hand, was on week seven of the outs, and now the done and gones. "Holly's seeing someone else." Like everyone else in her life, Holly had moved on fast. Gail Peck was really not girlfriend material, thank you very much, Nicholas.

Steve glanced at her, "I'm sorry... You didn't say that before." He sighed, "I'm just saying, sister. If I feel a tiny bit like you feel? I feel you."

Gail snorted and then laughed. Steve chuckled. Within a minute, they were both laughing. "That was the dorkiest thing you've said in hours, Steve," she informed him, smiling for the first time since dinner started.

"Oh, really? You're the one who said 'I'm a lesbian. Steve, please pass the salt.' I mean, come on!" He smirked and stopped at the red light.

"I said please," muttered Gail, and Steve laughed.

"The face Mother made was great." Steve puckered his face up in an approximation of annoyance. "And then there was Dad," she muttered.

Steve winced, "He'll get over it. I mean, Mom's okay, so he'll have to be. The Super's Inspector, and all." They both knew their mother ruled supreme in that relationship, though Gail was starting to think this would not be that simple.

"I should have brought Nick, he would have been their target." Her parents still hated him, though. Twice over. Not that she'd told them the details about the second time, but she'd certainly gotten stern looks from her family for even considering a second round with the idiot. He wasn't Peck Material, her mother said.

"That's mean. You're not mean anymore."

"Am to!"

"You helped a total stranger, Gail! And you said it felt good! You're all soft and gooshy and—" Gail wound up and punched her brother's arm. Hard. "OW!" Steve stared at her as the light turned green.

The car behind them honked, and he blinked. "Steve, green means go."

"When the hell did you learn to throw a punch?"

"I'm a cop, Steve!"

"The laziest one in existence, too," he noted.

Gail slouched in the seat. "Well. I've been working out, okay? It's that or listen to Dov and Chloe. Or Chris."

After a moment, Steve asked, "Sleeping okay?" She snorted. "If you want to talk about it..."

"I really don't, Steve." Gail looked away again, watching the street flow past.

He'd been away when she'd been abducted. When he got back, he tried to talk about it, but Gail had
yelled at him. Then, after one night without any sleep, all alone in their suburban hellhole of a house, she'd shown up on his doorstep at three AM, asking to sleep on his couch. Steve was safe, after all. And he knew, he totally knew it was crap comfort they got from their parents.

Pecks, after all, didn't have anyone to talk to about these things. She couldn't talk to their parents, they wouldn't hear about it, or worse, they'd just tell her to suck it up. Steve, maybe, but he wasn't there at the time, and now it was just too hard to talk about at all. Except for one session with her therapist, Gail had found she just wasn't physically able to talk about it, not even drunk out of her mind. Her throat would close down, her heart would race, and once she even puked.

That one she blamed on the alcohol.

Her current therapist told her that she may never fully get over it, which was just peachy, and something she'd already sorted out. There was even an ugly, painful term for what was going on in her head, with the sleeping and the dreams and the days where it all hurt and she lashed out, angry and bitter and cynical. Post traumatic stress disorder. And there was no real cure.

At least now she could talk around it, tell people to shut up, and move on. It was better than the time she'd thrown a book at Oliver. He was seeing the same therapist she was, and doing much better than she was, which was galling. But then again … Oliver was off the streets now. She wondered if he'd ever be back.

"You gonna take the detective's exam?"

Gail glared at his reflection, "Go screw yourself, Steve."

He sighed. "Fine. Here you go, home sweet, stinky, home." Steve pulled up to the sidewalk and studied his sister's face.

"Steve," she sighed. "Can we just not go next time?"

"If you don't go, I don't go," he agreed.

Gail nodded and got out of the car. Of course Steve didn't drive off right away and she turned around to look at him. Thank you, she signed at him. It was easier this way.

You're welcome, he signed back, and then held up his fingers in a well understood formation. I love you.

"Shut up, asshole," smiled Gail, and she went home alone.

She wasn't supposed to hear the conversation. She was supposed to be working on her immigration papers. But the voice was so familiar it kept pulling at her,

"Look, Gail, I'm sure Dad will settle down..." Gail? Holly peeked around the corner. A tallish man with strawberry blond hair was at the far, far end of the hall, talking on the phone. "Just be happy Mom isn't starting up blind dates again." Blind dates. Gail. Steve, right. She'd only met him twice, maybe three times, and he didn't look that much like his sister. He sighed and looked at the ceiling. Now he looked like Gail. They shared mannerisms when frustrated. "You know that isn't what she meant."

Steve fell silent for a long while, and Holly suspected Gail was ripping into her brother. "I am glad you came to the dinner, Garbage Pail," he said softly. "I don't think so, no. I just thought- Mom thought that coming to dinner at the club meant you'd come to dinner at home." There
was another long silence. "Hah, no, if you don't go, there's no way in hell I'm going. I told you that in the car." He laughed softly, "I love you too, sister dear."

Steve Peck tapped his phone and frowned. He dialed another number. "Hi, this is Detective Peck. Is the Superintendent in? Yes, I'll hold." He rocked on his feet and waited, about as patiently as his sister ever did, which is to say not at all. "Hi, Mom. She's not coming." He sucked in his breath. "I know... Yes, Oliver talked to her... Why me? Come on, she told me to screw myself, Mom." He huffed, sounding just like Gail. "Because she's gotta get it out of her system!"

When Steve started to turn, Holly tried to duck and hide in her lab. Nope, not eavesdropping! "That's not what I meant. Being a lesbian isn't another phase, Mom." Footsteps paced the corridor. "No. That's... Mom, she's not going to be you. Or Dad, or Uncle Al or Gary, or anyone but herself. That's why you've gotta let her be. She's a great cop." He sounded angry. "See? This is why neither of us want to come over for dinner anymore, Mom. At least in public you have to be Superintendent Peck, and worry about the news. Look, I'm working on a case, so you'll just have to entertain without your pet monkeys. I have to go." There was a beep and an annoyed growl.

"Damn it," he snapped loudly. Then he was silent for quite a while before knocking on Holly's door. "Hey, Dr. Stewart." Steve's affable smile seemed stretched.

"Hello, Detective Peck." She returned the smile a little uneasily. But all he wanted to talk about was the case, which was a relief. As he turned to go she felt guilty. "Ah, Steve. You should know... The hallway? Excellent acoustics."

Steve tilted his head and smiled tiredly. "I know."

And he left, leaving Holly to wonder what the hell that meant.

When the call came in the middle of the night, Gail had almost forgotten it was a possibility. "Peck," she mumbled into the phone. "Can you come over?"

Gail's eyes snapped open as the voice registered with her brain, though she checked caller ID first. "Yes. On my way." She hung up and stumbled out of bed, not caring about the noise. Pants, shirt, hat, coat.

As she was pulling on her boots by the door, a cranky Dov opened his bedroom door. "Gail, what's going on?"

Things in the house were still tense. Chris was away at rehab, which Gail felt guilty for not having noticed but also for not going to visit him. But then again, Chris didn't want to see her, so she concerned herself with cleaning his room. "I gotta go, it's a... thing." She didn't bother to tie her boots and tugged her watch cap on. "Don't freak, okay?"

Dov stood in the doorway to his room, clad only in boxers. "Freak?" He yawned. "Gail it's one."

She sighed. "Getting up early is good for you. Aren't you on night shift tomorrow?" Gail grabbed her keys off the peg.

But Dov hesitated. "Did you... Have a nightmare?"

The walls in the apartment were too thin. Gail normally was quiet when she had a bad dream, or a flashback, but sometimes she knocked things off her dresser. And it was no good telling them she
was a restless sleeper, because Chris knew better. "No, but I will if I have to look at you in your underwear any longer." She smirked and bounced out the door.

The drive wasn't too terribly long, but Gail kept checking her phone for another call or text. She pulled up to the curb, not really worrying if she parked illegally, and tried to keep her volume down as she knocked on the door.

One knock, the door opened, and a strained Celery was there. "He's in the dining room."

Gail nodded and went right in. She didn't see Oliver at first, but then saw his feet. For whatever reason, he was sitting on the floor, hugging a photo of his kids. At least he wasn't drunk. Gail sat down beside him. "Hey," she said softly.

"Hey," he repeated.

They sat in silence for a while. "So. Holly is seeing someone," she informed him. "And I helped someone move. I also told my parents I'm a lesbian."

Oliver puffed a laugh. "One step past dating a woman. What did your mother say?"

"She didn't. She just looked like the wine had turned." It had been a great expression. Gail mimicked it for Oliver, who smiled weakly. "My father, on the other hand, informed me I was being a petulant child."

"Only I get to call you petulant, Peck," remarked Oliver, almost reflexively.

"That was the first thing you called me."

He looked at her softly, as if she was one of his daughters. "No. No, I remember this. I called you a delinquent and a car thief. And then you handed over your license. I thought I was going to piss myself."

"Pleasant," sneered Gail, but she wasn't mad. "Steve was such an ass."

"You took his car."

"I borrowed it!" They shared a smile. "Anyway, he didn't press charges, thanks to you." The fact that Oliver (and Steve, technically) was the only officer involved was the only reason Gail didn't have an arrest on her record. She'd actually been resigned to fact that she was about to disappoint her mother, again.

"I was more scared about your mother than what my first, stupid, rookie was going to do to his sister."

"Everyone is more scared of my mother."

"You're not." It wasn't true. Gail was terrified of her mother. He sighed and turned the photo to Gail. "What if he'd taken Izzy?"

"He'd have given her right back and turned himself in," Gail replied, snidely. Oliver cracked a smile. "Or we'd have done the same thing and gotten her back. Just like we got you."

"We almost didn't get you, darling." Oliver's voice shook. "It was dumb luck."

"But you did. And we got you. And you're safe, and Swarek's cheerfully making up with McNally so that's fine." The princess had worn the stupidest expression on her face all day, too.
Oliver stared at Gail. "I got scared," he whispered. "I woke up and I was scared about the streets, and then I ... Was relieved. I don't have to go out there again." Oliver's face drew pinched. "How can I be a cop, and protect people? I can't even protect Andy from herself."

To his credit, Oliver did not blurt the details Gail already knew about Gerald (Duncan, whatever) and Andy. She knew about the cover up. She knew about the deal, keeping Oliver in a white shirt. Her godfather had pulled her aside to ask her to not protect Duncan, which was the weirdest favor ever. But he wanted her to treat Duncan normally. Which probably meant she was going to be his new T.O. since McNally was such a fuck up.

"Oliver, the whole damn city can't do that. Andy's better at self-sabotage than I am!" Gail made a 'kaboom' sound and won a smile from her sergeant. "Cops get scared too, Ollie."

"Don't call me Ollie," he replied, putting the photo down. "I hate that nickname." Then he studied Gail's face. "How did you do it? Go back out there?"

She sighed. "Because. I hate people. But I hate losers and people who hurt people most of all. And... I can stop them. I like that."

"You just want to be the only mean person. But I'm on to you, Peck. You're secretly nice."

"Ice, Oliver. I'm an ice queen and a terrible girlfriend."

"And a good friend."

"If you tell anyone, I will use my connections to have you transferred to the RMCP."

Oliver whinged, "I hate horses." They smiled and he threw an arm around her shoulder. "Thank you." She didn't reply but leaned in so he could hug her. He needed it. "You're a jerk, but you're a nice jerk."

"That's a shitty compliment, Oliver," she laughed.

He sighed, "Izzy said she's sorry for messing you and Holly up."

Gail side-eyed Oliver and frowned, "Oliver, there's only one person who screwed up me and Holly, and you're hugging her."

With a thoughtful sound, Oliver let go. "You wanna sleep over?"

It was easy for Gail to translate that, and she nodded. Oliver wanted another cop around. "Sure. The couch looks fine."

"I have a guest room," he scoffed, and got to his feet.

"Fine, but we're having coffee and none of this tea crap in the morning." Gail took Oliver's hand and stood up. "And tell your girlfriend not to hug me."

"I'm just shocked Peck didn't punch him." It was a voice Holly recognized, and she glanced down the hall at Detective Swarek.

A female officer stood next to him and shook her head, "She's getting soft."

"Maybe she's growing up, Andy," laughed the Detective. "Just because you guys don't understand her sense of humor... Do me a favor and get the evidence report? I'm gonna call Nash." Swarek
walked down the hall and Andy turned to face Holly.

"Oh. Dr. Stewart!" She looked confused and awkward.

"The acoustics," sighed Holly. "I never mean to eavesdrop, but I think they designed this place so we'd never be surprised by an invasion." She saw Andy (McNally, per the name tag) freeze and her face closed. Swarek. McNally. Invasion. Holly kicked herself mentally, wishing she'd paid more attention. Not that Gail had ever talked about the incident much. It seemed to be a sticking point. One of many that had driven wedges between them.

But McNally recovered. "Do you have the reports on the drowning?"

"You mean the body dumped in the lake? Yes." Holly smirked as McNally's eyes went wide. "Would you thank whichever officer controlled the scene? Getting the samples that fast, with that much detail, helped immeasurably."

"Sure, but don't expect her to be all excited about it," replied McNally, absently. "I don't think Gail's been happy in months."

Hearing Gail's name sucked the breath out of her. "Officer Peck?" Holly pulled the last paper from the printer and tucked it in the folder.

The officer gave her a strange look. "Yeah. She's stuck with the rookie, Moore, and he took a lot of wrangling." McNally looked guilty. "And since I'm not allowed to stay at the scene with him, I'm here ... Gail asked me something about diatoms?"

Of all the damnedest things, Holly blushed. "Diatoms in the water and bones. The body wasn't in the water long enough for that. But the water in the lungs wasn't inhaled. Your victim died of anaphylactic shock, source yet unknown. We're still running that."

McNally squinted at the body. "That's what Gail said. Petechial ... Something. She was right? Crap, she's totally going for detective," sighed the officer.

"Oh?" Holy tried to pitch her voice innocently. Gail was going to be a detective? That might make her proposal harder. Would she even consider it in the first place? Gail was Toronto Police Royalty.

"Yeah... Do you know her? Gail I mean."

"We've met," Holly said, a little dryly, and that got a smirk from McNally. Clearly she had no idea about the nature of Gail and Holly's past relationship.

"We used to be friends. And then stuff happened and more stuff." McNally paused and studied Holly's face for a moment. In that look, Holly remembered seeing the woman once before at the hospital. This was Andy McNally who slept with Nick. "Anyway, Gail's been ... Weird. Even for Gail. Like she's changing. Sam thinks she's growing up. Maybe she's just becoming a Peck. Go be a detective, then an officer, then Chief of Police."

McNally sounded both offended and jealous, which Holly found amusing. "And you?" She didn't know why she was asking, but it was comforting to hear that Gail had been doing alright. What Holly really wanted to know was if Gail was single, and she couldn't ask that.

"I just flunked as a T.O. so ... Beat cop forever, just like my old man." McNally paused. "God, sorry, I'm dumping my crap on a stranger. Case?"

Holly pursed her lips. "Well. Officer Peck was right. Your victim was a body dump. The body
started on manicured grass, colored. The chemicals were familiar, so I ran them and they matched what the Blue Jays and other professional fields use.

McNally looked at the report as if she could make sense of this. "Gail's going to be so pissed when Sam tells her she has to check out every baseball and softball stadium in the area."

Holly couldn't help but smile a little. It would, indeed, be very annoying for Gail.

When she got home, Holly started to tackle the personal paperwork and breaking the news to her friends. Lisa was pissed, predictably, and Rachel was upset they didn't talk first. They both blamed the 'Peck Fiasco' for Holly's decision to cut and run out of Toronto, and Holly couldn't really refute it. She still had feelings for Gail, Holly knew that.

Scratch that. She had more than feelings. Gail had uprooted her, given her a glimpse of a future with someone who was an equal in many ways. Gail's feelings for her were strangely unconditional. They never put a label on their relationship, which retrospectively seemed to be a bad idea. Maybe she should have put a label on it, told Gail that she was falling for her, that she was more than just fun.

But that would require being able to define what Gail was to her, and Holly didn't know. She did know there was an ache, a hole in her chest, where there was no Gail. Holly missed the little things, like Gail's grumpy expression in the early mornings, and the sweet looks in the day when they stole time for themselves. She missed jokes about the courier being sick when Gail brought her coffee. She missed hearing Gail berate people for being idiots.

Be honest. She missed Gail, and was starting to think this was the stupidest choice she'd ever made. But there was the job offer. A future for herself. And she was seriously doubting it was the right one. But she'd have to try and ask... She had to.
Chapter Notes

Duncan came back earlier, because the idea of grumpy Gail sans Holly having to be a TO to him was too much to give up. Of course, drama is also entertaining. This chapter ends in a place where I get a little wet-eyed when I re-read it, so I'm sorry if I punch you all in the feels.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sports reminded her of Holly, which did not help her mood with Gerald in the slightest. Him, she wanted to kill. Holly, she just didn't want to think about for eight hours, if possible, and if she was lucky, she could stop dreaming about her too. If she thought about Holly, she'd think about trying to apologize, for real, and maybe some grand romantic gesture to win her back. Or figure out who she was dating and arrest her... That wouldn't go over well either. Better to just work, run, and try to sleep without sex dreams about her ex.

"What's next on the list," she asked Gerald. No answer. Gail looked over and saw he was on his phone. Again. Without warning, she reached over, took the phone, and shoved it in her pocket. "If you touch me, I will break your arm," she growled at him.

Gerald (yes, fine, Duncan) complained, "I was tweeting!" He didn't attempt to get his phone back, however.

"Not. At. Work." Gail bit off every word. "God damn it, this is why you're in trouble to start with. You're not good enough to play on your phone and watch the streets." Gail knew she was, but she'd also been practicing that for years. Her parents bought her the GameBoy she'd wanted, but she could only keep it if, after a three hour car drive, she passed their idiotic tests. "How many cars with out of province plates did we pass since leaving the station?"

"What?" Duncan stared at her and she repeated the question. "Come on," he whinged. "No one knows that."

"I counted fifteen on Queens Quay. And I'm driving, Gerald." She fixed him with a glare. "Where are we going now?" She pointed at the paper and he read the address. St. Clements. Awesome. "This is an all girls school, Gerald. You are not to look, ogle, stare at, or even remotely ponder them. They are off limits."

The rookie grumbled, "What about for you?"

Was that a lesbian dig? He was going to be hurt. "Do you want to fail?" She hated this job, she didn't want to be his nanny. But Oliver and Uncle Al pointed out, rightly, her name was going to protect her from anything the idiot did. She could, freely and clearly, give her opinion and review on him, without fear of retribution.

"No," he whispered.

"Do you want to be a cop?"
He hesitated. "Yes."

God. He was doing this because it was expected of him, just like she did. Except Gail had a complex about failure, and stupid Duncan didn't care. She sighed. "No one likes you, Duncan," she said, intentionally using his real name. "No one likes me either, but I'm a good cop, and they would go to the line for me. You, on the other hand, are an embarrassment." She turned into the parking lot for the school. "I have zero interest in being T.O. to an embarrassment, so you are going to learn what you should have in the academy. I'm not your friend, I'm not your confidant. I'm your teacher, and you will not flunk this class, or so help me, I'll shoot you myself. Are we clear?"

Agape, Duncan stared at her. "Yes... Ma'am. Yes, ma'am."

Gail stopped the car and continued, "Since no one else wants your crap to touch their careers, and I'm the only person who doesn't have to worry about your step-father, I'm your training officer until further notice. You don't touch anything in the car until I tell you to. You don't write anything down in your memo book until I tell you to. You don't talk to other people, you look at me first. You do not tweet, text, Facebook, Instagram, FourSquare, Yo, or any other social media bull while we are on the job until I tell you to, and if you even consider telling people about our cases after shift, I have a cousin in the DA's office who would love to hear that. You do as I "say" not as I "do" and never question that." She paused, and knew this was where Oliver got nice and made a connection of friendship with the rookies. But Gail was not nice. "My job is to keep them safe," she pointed at the people walking around. "And to keep you safe. Which means if I keep your phone hostage all day because it's safer, then you suck it up. Can you do this?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good. Get out of the car." She flipped on the stupid body camera. "Officers Peck and Moore, at St. Clements." She started down the walkway. "The DB was male, Moore. So why are we here?"

He didn't answer, and Gail checked to see if he was thinking or not. "Because. Forensics said the um, the grass matched?"

"The chemicals used on their softball field matched the ones found on the body. And how did we know that?"

"The, uh, the gardening crew." He hesitated, "How come we're not interviewing them? The grounds people?"

"Because that's an important interview and you are not ready for the responsibility," she said flatly. "What do we want to look for here?"

"Someone who knows the victim!" He smiled, confident.

Good enough. The odds of that happening here was pretty slim, which was why she was here with Gerald in the first place. "Do you think it's a student?"

He looked lost at the question, "I guess. Anyone can poison, and it's a chick method-"

"Bzzzzzz! Wrong. Anyone and everyone poisons. More men use it to debilitate their victims." She rubbed her neck, an unwanted flashback. Push the thoughts back. She was a Peck. "This was anaphylaxis. Not poison." Off Duncan's blank look she elaborated. "He died of an allergic reaction."

"Oh. To ... What?"

"Spermicide." It was great to watch his face turn pink.
The interviews with the staff were brief and uninformative. Gail let Duncan try his hand at talking to
the priest, trusting that the collar would keep him in check. It didn't, and after Duncan asked outright
if Father Farr was sleeping with the dead kid, Gail cut in. "Okay, Officer Moore, that's enough." The
priest looked relieved. "Shut up, sit down, listen, learn."

"Yes, ma'am."

Gail pushed her hair out of her face. "Sorry, Father, he's new. How's it been?"

The priest stared at her hair, then his eyes flicked to her name tag. "Officer Peck." He brightened.
"You didn't come to the reunion."

"I told you I wasn't going."

"That was a decade ago, I thought you might have changed."

"Nope, still me." She handed him the photo again. "The reason my rookie was asking you
awesomely awkward sex questions was the kid choked to death on spermicide." Father Farr's
eyebrows rose up in surprise. "No DNA of course."

"You never believed testimony," mused the priest.

"You never bought mine," she retorted.

Smiling, regretfully, he handed the photo back. "I can give you my word. I don't recognize the boy."
Gail watched his face, his eyes, and nodded. "Have you spoken with my younger teachers?"

The phrasing of the question was leading. "Not yet." She studied his face and then asked, "Who
would you start with? If it was one of the girls." Seated beside them, Duncan twitched.

Father Farr, who never used three words of one would do, nodded slowly. "I would speak with Mr.
Darthan last."

Gail pulled out her notes and looked at the name. The art teacher? Now her eyebrows rose. He
wouldn't say the name if he didn't have a gut feeling. The gut was nice, but Gail needed evidence,
even circumstantial. "Okay." She handed Father Farr a card. "You know the drill." He looked at the
card and nodded.

As she led Duncan down the hall, he asked, "You know him?"

"I went here." She paused and looked at the girls leaving the art room.

"Didn't he say the art teacher would be last on his list?"

"He did," she replied. Her eyes sought a specific badge, and she tapped the shoulder of a short,
grumpy, girl. Jerking her chin, Gail introduced herself, "I'm Officer Peck, this is Officer Moore. I
wanted to ask you a question about your teachers."

The girl blinked. "Shouldn't I be called to the office?"

"You didn't do anything wrong, don't worry. I just had a question only the Arts Captain would be
comfortable answering." Gail gestured at the badge, and the girl blushed. "Is Mr. Darthan the
supervisor of the club?"

"Yes, since last year when Ms. Finch started retiring."
"She's still here?" Gail made a note to avoid her.

The girl rolled her eyes. "I know. She's a billion."

"She was a billion when I went here," confided Gail, and won a smile. "How's the new guy?"

"Oh, he's fine. He's a good teacher, but he's weird."

"Weird how?"

"You know how the guy teachers here are always ... Awkward?" Gail nodded encouragingly. "He's not. Not that way, I mean. And not how the priests are. He's just- he doesn't notice."

Gail thanked the girl and let her go. "Rookie, call dispatch and have them run a check on a Mr. Brett Darthan." She pulled her phone out to call Swarek and tell him she had a lead.

At first, not knowing the end of a case bothered her. Over time, Holly accepted that sometimes she wasn't going to get the whole story, and it made her inevitable testimonies easier. With just over two weeks until she left, Holly started to wonder if she'd learn what became of Gail's non-drowning victim, and if she'd have to fly back for a trial later, when McNally showed up again. It was only two days later, and McNally toted all the evidence and papers, in lieu of the courier. Frankly, Holly was surprised.

"You caught him already?"

"Super Peck did," grumbled McNally. "She actually managed to get the rookie to do something right too. Grown up having a fling with a kid, accidental death." McNally shook her head. "It's crazy, right? She's the laziest cop I know, but she's just being freakin' amazing. I don't know how she does it. If all that had happened to me, I'd be ..." McNally stopped and put the box on the table.

All that? Holly didn't ask and signed the chain of evidence paperwork. "I wonder why he didn't call 911," she wondered aloud. "I mean, he died of anaphylaxis, which means it took hours to die, at best. You could drop him off at an ER." Holly realized she was rambling, and stopped, feeling awkward. She didn't really get people as well as everyone seemed to think. Awkward extrovert.

"He actually claims he called 911, and didn't dump the body at all."

Both women shared a look. "Okay, that's weird," decided Holly. "And to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?" At McNally's confused look, Holly pointed out, "We have a courier."

"Oliver. He said sending Gail here kept her out of trouble, and since I'm in trouble again, it's my turn." McNally stopped and stared at Holly, recognition finally dawning. "You're Gail's friend." Holly said nothing, but the surprise must have been evident on her face. "Now I remember! You picked her up from the ER."

"Oh. Yes." This was not going to be a good conversation. "We were friends." The past tense in the statement hurt. Still.

"You too? She's a hard person to like." McNally sighed. "I miss being able to talk to her, though. Did you sleep with her ex too?"

Holly was terribly grateful not to be drinking in that moment. "No."
"She'll never forgive me. At least I didn't screw up her last one. That was all her." McNally turned to go and stopped in the doorway. Her body froze and Holly imagined, if this was a cartoon, a lightbulb would go on over McNally's head. "Oh. Shit..." Pivoting she stared at Holly. "You and Gail... Oh oh my god I'm an idiot!"

In any other time or place, Holly might have found the late realization amusing, "I honestly thought all of you knew."

"Ugh, well it's not like Gail talks to me anymore. God, I'm so sorry, just rambling about her and you guys broke up." McNally sighed again, "She really liked you." Before Holly could point out that McNally didn't even know about her, the cop went on. "She was nicer to everyone. Even me. And then three weeks ago she was back to Mean Gail, except she wasn't. She was, she is different. Believe me, I saw her through two breakups. I know breakup Gail. She likes to get drunk and complain. This isn't that."

Holly sighed. "McNally. I'm sure you mean well, but this is not your business." No wonder Gail hated talking about life at work.

"Gail's still my friend," pointed out the other woman. "Even if I'm not hers. And I'm responsible for some of her issues and if that screwed you guys up, then yeah, it's my business too."

"This has nothing to do with you, or Nick."

The dark look on McNally's face chilled her. "No. It doesn't have to do with Nick at all," she agreed. "Just... If she talks to you, please. Listen. Okay?"

Holly nodded, confused, and was relieved to see McNally let it go at that. But she was left wondering what crisis would cause an ex-friend to still care about Gail like family.

"This is just ... wow," muttered Holly, staring at her steering wheel.

"That is an understatement," sighed Gail. Silence fell again, and Gail couldn't look anywhere but out the front windshield.

After the mutual bomb drops, Gail and Holly had walked silently to Holly's car and said very little. Clearly, Holly was still processing, as the car didn't move and Gail finally cleared her throat. "Dinner?"

Holly startled and nodded. "Yes, dinner— Wait. Dinner?" She turned to look at Gail, perplexed. "You still want to have dinner? With me?"

Nodding, Gail leaned back in the seat. "Clearly we need to talk, Holly. About a lot of things." Whispering her agreement, Holly put the car in gear and drove to her house.

Years of Peck Family Dinners had prepared Gail for the painful awkwardness of a dinner were people were on different pages and stages of their lives. Clearly this was not the case for Holly, who nearly dropped the dishes multiple times, until Gail took over and served dinner.

"Why are you calm?" grumbled Holly. "This is insane. All of it's insane."

Gail tossed the truth around in her head a little before being honest, "I have spent my entire life having a dinner with passive aggressive harassment from my parents, Holly. I'm used to this kind of awkward." She caught the pained look from Holly and smiled a little. "Do you want me to start?"
Embarrassed, Holly nodded. "Yes. No," she said, contradictorily. "Did you listen to any of my messages?"

"All four of them," admitted Gail, willing to let Holly set the pace right here.

"Why didn't you call me back?" It was a nearly whinging tone. Pleading.

Bringing the pasta to the table, Gail chewed her lip. "Because I was sure you were going to hurt me again, like everyone else." She pushed her hair back. "It's funny," she laughed softly. "I was so afraid you were going to break my heart, I went and did it myself. And you know, I actually cared for the first time." Gail sat down. "It was stupid. I don't have an excuse."

Holly sat down across from Gail and picked up her fork. "Is that what you wanted to tell me before?"

"In the hall? No," admitted Gail. "I had this whole other thing in mind." Holly didn't say anything to that, and they took a couple bites. "San Francisco? Is that a lesbian mecca?"

The laugh nearly caused Holly to choke. "Portland or Provincetown, I think," she smiled. "It's for assistant chief pathologist. I was going to give you crap for springing the adoption thing on me, but I did the same thing." Holly poked her dish. "I over cooked the pasta."

"Little bit," agreed Gail. "Next time I'll make mac and cheese, with cheese puffs."

"That's a thing?"

"It's really good," smiled Gail. "And you accepted the job."

"I did."

Gail looked at her plate for a moment. So that was it. "I can't quit my job, Holly." She sighed and looked up at her, seriously. "Even if there wasn't Sophie, I can't leave."

"You could transfer," suggested Holly, thinly.

"Not in two weeks. Not to the US." She took another bite. "This, Toronto policing, is my birthright. I can't." It was hard to admit how invested she was in her job, but the truth was she was never going to leave Toronto alive. This was her life. It had taken nearly losing her job to realize how much it meant, how much she wanted this, and how much she had rested on her name.

Now Holly looked down at her plate. "I didn't realize how much I missed you until you said I was the best thing that ever happened to you."

Quietly, Gail replied, "You still are."

"What about long distance?" Holly chewed her lip and then shook her head.

"No. That isn't fair to either of us, Holly." Long distance nearly always ended poorly, and Gail knew one of them would end up mad at the other. They needed to be together to be together.

"This— Is this it?" Holly's voice cracked, as if she was about to cry.

They looked at each other across the table and Gail sighed. "If it wasn't, would you still want to try?"

Holly put her fork down. "Tell me about the adoption."
"Her name is Sophie." Sophie was hard to explain, but Holly listened seriously and thoughtfully. When Gail finally said she knew it would be probably impossible for her to adopt Sophie, but she still felt she had to try, Holly covered her face with her hands. "I know it's a lot to take in," Gail said quietly.

"Jesus, are you insane?"

That stung. "Because I'm a cop?"

"You're a cop, you're single, you're a beat cop! Gail! If you die, she'll lose two mothers!"

"Yeah, I know," snapped Gail. "But a lot of single cops are parents." She was about to use Noelle as an example but she had Frank, and Gail wasn't sure which way that argument would go. "I'm ready to do this."

Holly groaned. "You'd be a great mom, Gail, but really? This is so you. Reckless."

"Seriously? You're acting like I have a monopoly on impulse."

A heartbeat passed and Holly blushed. "That was fair," she sighed. "I don't want children, Gail."

Gail nodded. "Then that's it." Her throat was tight, and she looked away. She wanted to yell at Holly, that asking her to do this was stupid, that the de facto ultimatum was stupid and reckless, and she knew she had no room to say it. Holly was moving and didn't want children. Finally, Gail took another bite of pasta and asked, "Are you going to sell this place?"

Holly almost dropped her glass. "Seriously? That's where you're going?"

Now Gail's fork went down. "I still want to be your friend, Holly. I care about you, and I'd be a really shitty plus one if I can't help you pack, and sell or rent or whatever." And it was true. She wasn't ready to say goodbye yet.

Holly's look softened. "Oh. Thank you." After a moment, they picked up their forks again and resumed eating, talking about smaller things.

They talked about being stupid. Gail for running off, Holly for letting her friends get away with that behavior. It had apparently made Holly start to worry about her own social inabilities, her awkwardness of not being able to always read people (hence forensic pathologist and not living people doctor). Holly also explained why her friends were family (it involved heartache and breakups and family who didn't always agree with choices).

And they talked about fears. Holly was afraid of the move, far away from friends and family. Gail was afraid of not being her parents to a child. It didn't heal the gaping hole Gail felt, knowing that it was, finally, over with Holly, but having her there at all was better than nothing.

It began the hardest two weeks of Gail's life, however. Ever day she spent with Holly, helping her pack and clean and sort out her life into boxes made Gail feel like she was falling apart. She told her therapist how hard it was, how much it hurt and cut into her. It was worse than the time she'd been shot in her vest. Breathing hurt. But she felt like she had to do this, to say goodbye, and to have closure.

Naturally her therapist pointed out there was a difference between closure and masochism, and Gail mumbled that she still cared for Holly. A lot.

"You're not going to magically change her mind and win her back," her therapist remarked.
"I know, life doesn't work that way. But I just ... I just want to be in her life a little while longer. I don't want the fairy tale to be over yet."

So she held on, kept her feelings to herself, and went running every goddamn morning to try and keep her head clear. That was probably why the nightmare scared the shit out of her. It came out of nowhere. She'd actually enjoyed dinner with Holly, sitting on her deck eating out of to-go boxes, drinking a beer. They were down to the last few bottles, and Holly insisted Gail take the last ones homes.

The last thing Gail really wanted was to have memories of Holly floating around her home. Especially not a six-pack from a microbrewery where they'd had a pulled pork pancake at brunch and then some fantastic sex back at Holly's months ago. But she took the six pack and, finding Chloe on her couch, waiting for Dov, handed it over as a present.

"Here, don't say I never gave you anything nice."

Gail locked herself in her small room, mind drained, and curled up on her bed. When Dov knocked to ask of she was alright, she told him to fuck off and she had a headache. That bought her blessed silence, in which she fell asleep.

Until then, most of her dreams had been about Holly, which was embarrassing and uncomfortable, but not horrible. When she dreamed about someone caressing her hair, however, it was long hair, and she panicked. She knew it was a dream, but she couldn't move, couldn't wake up, couldn't see. She felt the hand on her face, knew it wasn't real, that it wasn't now, and thrashed, throwing herself out of the dream and her bed with a thump.

Christ.

She lay on her floor, panting, waiting to hear if anyone would come knocking at her door. Would anyone just break in and pick her up. Holly had. Holly ran to her when she had a nightmare, and stayed with her to make sure she was alright. When no one came, Gail covered her face with her hands and smothered the encroaching tears. Would anyone would ever do what Holly did? Could she ever have anything like that again?

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, so that's depressing isn't it? Gail needs a hug. Sometimes there are obvious triggers to why you freak the hell out and sometimes you'll be walking down the street when it hits you and you want to scream or cry. Those are the worst.
Chapter Notes

Time to address things seriously. And let's be honest, you didn't really think I was going to write about a long distance relationship, did you? No, there are wheels at work here that no one will like.

Speaking of... A lot of anon people are mad at me and think I've done unfixable things. I do appreciate that my writing evoked enough of a reaction for you to reply, even if it was angry. This is a drama Fic, not angst, and that's all I'll say.

"How can they deny my work visa," she shouted at her phone. "What the actual fuck!?" But the consulate couldn't tell her, no matter how many times she asked. They only said the Department of Homeland Security rejected her visa application, and she could apply again. In a year.

Holly stared at the boxes in her house, angry beyond her capacity to rage or cry. The San Francisco Coroner's Office had been sympathetic, and advocated for her, but it was clear no one was budging. Neither of her best friends had any sympathy either, which only made her more angry. She'd rushed into this, they argued, and maybe it was for the best. But here she was, three days from moving to a new country, with no job and no visa.

After screaming and shouting into her phone, to Lisa and Rachel, and then to immigration, trying desperately to get an answer, Holly turned it off and threw it down the hall. She tore through the boxes with the intent on finding that damn bottle of Jim Bean to start drinking. As she dug through yet another box labeled 'kitchen,' there was a knock at her door. No, a pounding. She ignored it. A voice muttered something. Giving up on her search, Holly lay down in her fort of half-filled boxes. Maybe they wouldn't be able see her.

The pounding happened again, this time with a voice she knew all too well. "Holly, I don't have a key."

"Go away," she shouted. Gail. Gail was outside her door. Why was Gail outside the door?

"Holly, seriously, open the door."

"No," she snapped and stared at her ceiling. "Go away, or I'm calling the police on you."

There was blissful silence for a moment, and then she heard her lock click open and the door creaked. "You're such a pain in the ass," muttered Gail, her voice clearly inside the house. "I had to pick your damn lock."

Holly sat up and looked for her phone. "I'm calling the police."

"I am the police, you nerd," sighed Gail, dressed in her uniform. She looked at Holly for a moment, then the house, and turned around. "Dispatch, 8727," and her voice lowered, saying words Holly couldn't quite catch. Then her door closed and Gail walked around the boxes to sit down next to Holly. "Your neighbors thought you were being robbed."

"Oh." Holly leaned against a box. "I was looking for something to drink." They both looked around
the room, which had a destruction of boxes. Gail had seen it two days before, helping pack the books.

"What happened?" Gail sounded like Gail at her most calm. It was rare, but those moments felt like a safe harbor, where Gail would protect her from anything, and Holly started crying. "Hey, hey," Gail startled and sat down, putting a hand on Holly's shoulder. "Holly, what's wrong?"

Between sobs, she managed a sentence. "The US rejected my visa application."

"What?!" The sheer honestly of Gail's astonishment was refreshing and comforting. "How the hell could that happen?"

Holly couldn't stop crying, though, and Gail ended up sweeping her into a hug and holding her until she stopped sobbing. "I'm getting snot all over your jacket," she whinged, squeezing Gail so hard, the utility belt bit into her side.

"It's had worse, Holly," Gail replied soothingly.

They stayed like that for a while, well past the time that Holly had her breathing under control. "I wish I was drunk," sighed Holly, resting her head against Gail's shoulder, letting herself savor the feeling of Gail caressing her hair.

Gail laughed softly, "I think we did this bit in reverse, Holly. You're not going to cut off your hair, are you?"

"No, I like my hair." There was no reply to that. "You have to go to work."

"I'm at work. Oliver asked if we were friends before sending me to check," sighed Gail. "Come up, get up." She stood, hauling Holly to her feet. "Do you want something to eat?"

"Sure," sighed Holly. "If there's alcohol in it."

"Hm, no. We tried that before, ba— Holly." The slip of an endearment caught Holly's attention and she blinked. "I'm going to order you food."

"Gail, I'm fine."

"Horse shit," smiled Gail. "You're not. I wouldn't be."

Gail ignored her protests and arranged for food to be delivered. She also found the Jim Bean and confiscated the bottle. They ate together, going over what had happened and Gail coming up with a plan of action. After a couple hours, Gail left with the booze, but came back rather quickly, out of uniform and with tequila.

The night was spent drinking, which was far less productive than earlier, but far more fun. They didn't talk about a single important thing, and Gail tucked drunk Holly into her own bed, alone, and said she was going to crash on the guest couch.

"You can stay," whispered Holly, catching Gail's hand.

Gail stared at the plug where the nightlight used to be. "Plus one forever, Holly. I'll be in the guest room." It hurt, and it hurt more when Holly heard the doorknob lock click. Staying or going, they really had ended a romance, hadn't they?

With Holly's life in disarray, Gail stuck by her to help sort out the mess. She pushed the ME's office
to re-hire her, using all the Peck Muscle Power she had. It was a near thing, too. Gail had to resort to her cousin at the hospital faking an offer to make the ME's office realize Holly was in demand (the cost was babysitting and tickets to a Jay's game). Taking back the offer on the house had been harder. Luckily Holly had only intended to lease it out, but there was another tense moment until Gail did a deep background check on the tenants and found just cause to yank that.

When Holly called it an abuse of power, Gail didn't argue that one bit. It was terrifying, since the last time she'd tried to use her Peck name to push things around, she'd been suspended. Justified suspension, of course, but still, it filled her with lingering doubts of if she was doing the right thing. When she'd done it before, it was because she figured she could get away with it. This time, she realized she would do anything to help Holly.

She didn't abuse her power when it came to Sophie, though, who quickly became a regular topic. They talked about their days, and Gail would mention Sophie. Holly would even ask about her, joking she could help teach Sophie softball, since Gail was inept at sports. But they didn't talk about a them. At the same time, it was clear neither of them wanted someone else. It was just strange timing. Holly was still vocal about Gail adopting as a single parent being a terrible idea, which led to a loud argument about if Gail was doing this for selfish reasons or for Sophie.

They didn't get to resolve the disagreement themselves, any more than they'd resolved Holly's move to the States.

The adoption was rejected. Gail was deemed unready and currently unfit, due in part to trauma at her job. She was too close to Sophie's situation, she'd been suspended for poor decisions, and she was too damaged from Perik. Gail was flabbergasted not that Perik came up, but what part came up. The video evidence from the trial of the copycat killer. And not just the part where she got Perik to give up evidence. The entire video had been watched.

It always came back to Perik. Got suspended and nearly lost her job because of him, got it back because of him, got promoted because of him, got demoted because of him. Lost Nick because of him. Panicked and did stupid things and lost Holly. Everything seemed to revolve around one moment in her life.

All Gail wanted to do about that news was either get drunk or go shoot things. Instead she called Holly and asked if she could come over. Sitting on Holly couch that night, Gail talked around the edges of the problem, the obvious reasons why an under 30 beat cop would be turned down, and yes Holly was entirely right, including her living situation, and Holly had hugged her. When anyone else did that, Gail would flinch, but Holly felt safe.

Then Holly gave her a look, as if she wanted to kiss her, and Gail realized she had to do this. She had to do this. If she ever wanted a hope, a second chance, it had to start here. "Holly, I need to tell you something else," she whispered.

"God, tell me you didn't sleep with Nick."

Inappropriate laughter bubbled up. "No, ew no. Never again." The 'ew' made Holly laugh, a little nervously.

Gail let go and sat still, clasp her hands together. Holly, cross-legged on the couch, faced her profile and waited.

It was easier to talk like this, quietly, even in what Dov would have called the 'enemy territory' of Holly's house. She had known in her heart that actually adopting Sophie was never going to be possible. As a single, lesbian, cop, she'd have an uphill battle. But that hope, like the hope of Holly
being back in her life, burned so strong, that she'd dared to dream. She could, and would, still
advocate for her to have a good home, and even if she couldn't be the parent, she wanted to be part
of her life in a positive way. Holly had, weirdly, understood that. Sympathized with it. Pretty much
everything in Gail's life, screwups and all, Holly had understood.

Would she really understand everything? Gail chewed her lip, worrying it.

"What else are you thinking?" Holly's voice was a whisper, as if being loud would knock them out
of the place where they could just exist.

"I need to say something," she replied equally quietly. But the words hung there in her throat. Again.

Holly touched her leg, "You don't have to, honey."

"No. No, I do. I'm just- I'm afraid." There. Hurdle one passed, and Gail exhaled shakily. It was hard
to get words out, always. She couldn't tell Steve. She could barely tell her therapist that she'd picked.
She'd not been able to tell the idiot her parents made her see, and sure as hell she couldn't tell her
parents. Lying to them had been hard, but easier than the truth.

"Take all the time you need."

Of course. Because Holly understood her. That was why this had to happen.

"Holly, I'm scared pretty much all the time, and... The real reason I can't adopt Sophie is why I'm
scared all the time."

She had to say this now. If she didn't, she'd never get the words out. She couldn't look at Holly while
she said this. "About a year and a half ago, I was working on a case. This serial killer went after call
girls, so McNally and I were call girls! He went for blondes, so I was the bait and Andy was my
backup." She laughed, bitterly, and stared at the wall, the boxes on the floor. "I wanted to, y'know,
because I'm a Peck, and we have to do that." A far too familiar tension grew in her back and neck.
Her hands weren't shaking, which was a good sign, though her heart was pounding.

"So I was undercover, at a fancy hotel, looking for this guy. Didn't find him. I went home after
giving my statement. Andy's home. My parents weren't home, and ... I forget why I thought it was a
good idea." She was friends with Andy then. How weird had that been? But she'd let down those
walls a little, let them in, and Chris and Dov, and it hadn't all been horrible. Right? She remembered
Andy's horror when Gail walked, naked, from the shower to the couch where her clothes were. That
had been funny. "He followed me. Turned out it was the taxi driver, the taxi Andy put me in to send
me home."

With her eyes wide open, Gail's brain cheerfully filled in the moments with memory. Calling Nick.
The door hitting her face. Stupid, stupid, Gail, not looking first! Fighting him. Hitting him. Her throat
tightened, remembering his hands around it, and she tugged at her shirt collar. She remembered how
hard it was, putting her tie on for the first time afterwards, using every excuse not to wear one. "He
beat the hell out of me. Drugged me and Andy. I don't remember that either, Andy coming back."

Her face felt wet and the taste of salt was on her lips. Awesome. She was crying on the couch of her
ex-girlfriend. There was a sound, Holly inhaling, and Gail waited a moment, to see if Holly was
going to say something, but there was only the sound of them breathing. "He tied me up." She
rubbed her wrists, feeling the bite of the zip-ties all over again. "When I woke up, I was tied up.
Blindfolded." She felt Holly move beside her, but they didn't touch.

She wiped at her face, the back of her brain amazed at her continual ability to cry without sobbing.
Her hand was now shaking and her tightened it into a fist. She had to concentrate on her breathing for a moment. The memory in her head was when he'd put the butterfly sutures on her head. That was the most terrifying moment. Realizing he wanted her alive for a reason. Realizing how prepared he'd been. If she'd just looked… Except that wasn't true. Gail was able to kick a door in, and she wasn't that strong. A man that strong wouldn't have a problem.

Gail tried to mention the IV, but her voice stopped. That memory hurt too much, still. She was lucky she didn't lose her mind at the ER after the stupid chemical burn, but that was probably because Oxy had a weird effect on her. Reflexively, she rubbed at the spot on her arm where he'd stuck her and remembered being sarcastic to her kidnapper. That helped. "I was in his house, his basement, strapped to a table. He kept me drugged, until he figured out I was a cop."

There was a shift on the couch but again, Holly didn't touch Gail. She was just there. "Jerry, he found me. Good police work, total coincidence. They were looking for someone following me." Gail exhaled. "God, nobody knows what happened really. Just that Jerry got stabbed. Perik, he came downstairs, with the knife, started yelling that I didn't tell him I was a cop. Asking why didn't I tell him? Shouting that was taking care of me." She coughed an un-funny laugh.

Take all the pain and drama of her life, take all the lack of parental influence on her, and add in someone wanting to take care of her who actually wanted to kill her. Of course she kept burning relationships. Every single person in her life who'd wanted to take care of her had hurt her. "Jerry, I don't know how he did it, but he jumped him, put his phone in his pocket. I couldn't move… he'd, Perik'd removed the blindfold so I could see to walk, but the drugs... My legs weren't working. He knocked Jerry out and put me in the trunk of his cab."

The taxi ride from hell. Knowing no one alive knew where you were. By the time the fog of drugs wore off, helped by adrenaline and terror, she could hear the sirens and knew she'd either be killed or saved. She remembered the cab stopping. That moment of terror, trying to rip her hands off to free them from the zip ties, planning to gouge his eyes out. And then she heard Nick and Chris, the trunk opened, the light burst in and her boys were there. They tried to hug her, and she remembered saying she was just cold.

She didn't have to tell Holly she was rescued. She was here. Obviously she was saved. But that last smile from Perik, when he was being cuffed, that smirk was the one thing that made her want to cry. They took her to the hospital. The hospital sucked. Crying in front of Traci, knowing Jerry was dead because he'd come for her, because he put the phone in Perik's pocket. "It wasn't my fault, that Jerry died. But it was. I'm accidentally the reason someone died." Now Holly's legs moved, turning to sit beside Gail, their shoulders nearly touching. "I know it's not my fault, I do. I know it. But…"

"I moved in with Dov almost on accident. After the hospital, I stayed with my parents by force, but I couch surfed a lot. My brother's. Nick's. When he and Andy went undercover, I spent most of the time with Traci, crashing at her place. Nick was gone, six months. I thought I got over my shit, you know? I thought I was feeling better. Then Nick was back and it was all screwed up." She sighed. "When Chris left for Timmons, Dov complained about being lonely so I took the room. Nick wanted me to move in with him, but that felt like the worst idea ever. I didn't want to be alone, but I didn't want to be with someone that close."

"I slept with a light on then. I still do. I don't do well when I'm alone at night. Sometimes I drink too much, which doesn't help either." Her voice felt thick. All the crying was making her head pound worse than a hangover. "And… I don't trust people. So I run away, and I'm cold and unfeeling, because if I'm just going to get hurt, why invest, right?" She paused, "Except there was you."

Now she side-glanced at Holly. Holly didn't say anything, but leaned so her head was touching
Gail's shoulder, which felt okay. "And that's kind of - it's why I was stupid. Am stupid." She sighed. "And have nightmares, and I'm afraid of the dark." Holly made a noise, and Gail went on. "The problem ... Is the trials. I mean, I think I can deal with all the rest, but there was a case where we had to talk to Perik, and it was taped, and ... It's not bad except for the part where it just shows how screwed up I am." She closed her eyes. "They saw the whole interview. It's rough and it's hard, and it's not a wrong decision, but ... I wanted you to know why."

She felt entirely naked. There it was out there. And now Holly was silent.

Holly cleared her throat. "Thank you for telling me." They said nothing for a while, though Holly took her hand. It was clear she was trying to think about what to do with Gail. "Stay here tonight," Holly finally said.

They spent the night like that, holding hands in Holly's bed. They were fully clothed, lying atop the sheets, their bodies barely touching. And it was enough.

Things were 'normal' again for Holly. She was back at work and in her groove again, which felt wonderful and horrible all at once. Having Gail back in her life had been a relief, but strange.

She'd cried at home after Gail's first admitting to having strong feelings for her, raging at stupidity. Mostly Gail's immaturity, but also her own. She could have forced it, shown up and demanded answers, but Holly too had felt guilty. It was stupid to have let her friends goad her, stupider not to follow Gail out sooner. Stupid to have actually felt, for any moment at all, that she could possibly do casual, easy, or light with someone who struck her heart as Gail had.

Then Holly had been the insane one, deciding to move out of the country and beg Gail to come with her. At the same time, Gail moved forward to adoption. And both had lost everything.

Where did that leave them now? Gail had been nothing but a good friend since their mutual bomb drop. She'd helped Holly pack, pick out a new apartment, sort out incidentals. And then she'd done it all in reverse, without asking for a single thing. She'd just done it and been there and it was wonderful to have Gail in her life again. Gail had actually been supportive, unlike Lisa or Rachel, both of whom were barely talking to her at all.

The problem was that Holly didn't want to have Gail in her life as a friend. She'd already worked through the drama of how terrifying it was to be in love with someone like Gail. Given a choice, she wouldn't have fallen for someone who was damaged goods to start with and had a dangerous job. She'd never dated anyone who was shot at before and it scared her. But she couldn't imagine her world without Gail making snappy commentary, or kissing her, and Gail's life was filled with danger.

She was in love with that wonderful, sweet, vulnerable woman, who opened up to her. Gail made her laugh, made her happy, and above all, Gail had really made Holly feel important. Adored. Holly had called her 'sweet Gail' once, and the blush on Gail's body was amazing. She was caustic and witty, and certainly Gail's default setting was to attack the world. At the same time, Holly had caught Gail working with a child witness, and that absolute tenderness with the young boy was painful.

It had been at a minimart hold up. They'd found the boy hiding in shelves behind the dead body, who was clearly protecting him, only after forensics had arrived. Gail had looked daggers at the rookie, but instead of ripping in to him, she sat down by the boy, who refused to get out from behind the mac’n’cheese. She talked to him, quietly, introducing herself, asking little things that made not a lot of sense. Holly was sure the boy was never coming out, when suddenly he squirmed out and into Gail's arms.
Without a trace of discomfort or annoyance, Gail held him and let him cry until child protective services showed up with his parents. Only then did she ask him anything about the shooting. He didn't know who the dead person was, just some stranger at the store. But he had seen the shooter, and described him. Once the boy was gone, Gail tore the rookie a new one, shouting about what clearing the scene meant, and that he could have put forensics in danger.

That was only two days ago, and it had been the first case they'd worked since Holly was back. Before Gail left the scene with the boy, Holly had asked her if she was okay. Gail had given her a momentary sad smile, before returning to tough cop mode and saying she was fine, but she had to kill her rookie. That night, on the phone, Gail told her she worried about Sophie, but she didn't want to come over to sit with Holly, she just needed to talk to her friend about what she could do.

What Holly wanted was what she'd wanted since she'd gotten the job offer. She wanted them to be back together. And she'd thought Gail wanted that too, which was making this weird now-ness so weird. What she needed to do was just ask Gail where she wanted to be, and asking that was hard. It should be easy, natural, like everything else with Gail had been.

Holly pushed her glasses up to her forehead and pressed the heels of her hands into her eye sockets. She tried to think through what she needed to do at work instead of her personal life, though. It wasn't going to be a good idea to slack off just because she was trying to sort out the right way to tell Gail she wanted to get back together together.

Of course that's when Gail texted her.

_I'm coming by with some smelly evidence._

It was impossible not to smile a little. Holly had no problem thumbing a reply. This was easy.

_Thanks for the warning._

_Only fair to give you a chance to fob me off on someone else._

Oh the layers in that statement.

_Why? How smelly are we taking?_

It was just so easy to talk to Gail. Everything with Gail had been surprisingly natural. Why couldn't it all be easy like that?

_Hard to say. I'm nose blind_

Holly thought about that for a moment.

_Officer Peck, are YOU evidence?_

The reply of a sad-face emoticon made Holly laugh. She tasked her assistant to get some scrubs for an incoming officer, and went to prep a place for Gail to change. When Gail and an officer named Price walked in, Holly tried not to laugh. Gail looked exactly like she expected, angry and sullen and frustrated. Officer Price was bubbly and telling Gail how much she liked being back at work. They both had on tyvek suits from forensics over their uniforms.

It was easy to read Gail's expression. She wanted to kill her fellow officer.

"Is that Holly?" asked the other officer in a hushed tone, and Gail gave her a death glare. "Right! Shutting up. But she's so pretty!" The expression on Gail's face would have been funny if Holly
wasn't momentarily worried for the other woman's life.

"Hi," Holly smiled, saving Officer Price from sudden grievous bodily harm. She inhaled to introduce herself and was nearly floored by the smell. "Wow..."

"I wasn't kidding." Gail cleared her throat, "Officer Price, Dr. Stewart." Gail glanced at the curtains in the back of the room. "It's just my pants and boots that are evidence, you get all of Price's crap." Jerking her chin, Gail led the other officer to the back and Holly could hear them changing.

"Dr. Stewart," said Price, in a voice that was meant to be for Gail alone. "You should grovel. I would grovel. I did grovel, because Dov-"

"Chloe, shut up." Gail's voice was quieter, but the tone was not as harsh as Holly might have expected. That made her Chloe Price, Dov's bubbly girlfriend who drove Gail up a wall on a good day, but she secretly appreciated, and don't ever tell anyone that. Holly quirked a smile.

"I'm just saying, she's pretty, you like her, you need to grovel and win her back. It'll be so romantic! You can tell your kids about it every Christmas!"

There was a pause, "My god, you sound like Dov."

"Really?" That voice sounded so ... Perky.

Poor, poor, Gail, stuck with her polar opposite all day. Gail said something in German and Chloe responded. Soon the two were arguing (or not, Holly couldn't tell the difference between talking in German and arguing in German) rapidly. Holly heard her name come up. She coughed and asked, "Do you even know what that stuff is?"

"It's more who it is that we don't know," replied Gail, caustically. "Chloe opened a cabinet and the guy fell out and exploded on her."

"So you know it's a male?" She meant to be sarcastic and teasing. But Gail's reply surprised her.

"Bones." And of all things, Gail rattled off a rather nice description of the pelvic bone's shape. So she was listening all those times.

"I didn't know you knew all that," remarked Price.

"There's a lot about me you don't know, Chloe... And GOD you reek." Gail came out from behind the curtained area in scrubs and paper slippers. "The bag'o'body's on it's way. Think you can clear our weapons first?"

A bag of body was not an appetizing image. "Yours maybe, if you really didn't get any spatter." It was strange, working with Gail again. She was careful about keeping her distance, even when Dov showed up to fuss over Chloe and bring them clothes.

The detective (Traci) came with the evidence, and told Gail that Oliver wanted her to stick with the body. So Gail ended up waiting in the lab with Holly, while she went over the body. "On a scale of one to awkward, with awkward being turtle, how weird is this?"

Holly swallowed a laugh and smiled at Gail, "Less weird than a month ago, but weird."

"Goody. I'll sit outside," decided Gail, and she picked up her jacket.

Holly felt horribly shy when she looked at Gail. "Gail... I know you said not to be, um, private us at
work, but. I just want you to know..." She trailed off and lost her sentence. She wanted to be kissing Gail again, disgusting smelly guy or not.

"You're really bad at this whole girl thing," Gail decided. "I mean, I thought I was bad, but I'm not the one who's been a lesbian since forever." A smile tugged at Gail's lips. "I totally get why you're single a lot."

"Shut up," smiled Holly. Holding up her hands, Gail moved to the door. "I didn't say thank you."

Gail paused in the door way, "For what?"

"Everything. Helping me move and un-move and everything else."

"Hey, we're plus one's forever." Gail paused and kicked at the door frame. "Thanks for listening about Sophie. I took your advice."

"Which part?"

"Helping find a good match for her. Even if it means I can't be in her life." That had been a gut wrenching conversation, with Gail saying she would rather Sophie be happy without her, if that's how it would be best.

Holly reached for the zipper on the bag and pulled her face mask down. "I don't mind if you stay, Gail. You're always welcome here." There was no reply from Gail, and Holly unzipped the bag and started to carefully take samples and remove the bones. She didn't hear Gail leave, so asked, "Why are some of the bones in the bag and some out? You didn't zip this up..."

"And screw up medical jurisprudence? There were two bags."

"Ah, and one exploded over you and Chloe?"

The sound of a chair scraping on the floor preceded Gail's reply, "Of course. The tools in the garage are being processed."

Confident that Gail couldn't see her face well enough under the mask, Holly smiled. Gail was staying in the room. "What were you looking for in the first place?"

Gail laughed, a real laugh this time. "A stolen pedigree cat. Can you believe that? People pay thousands for a special cat?"

"I think my aunt did that once, some bengali thing." Holly glanced over and saw Gail settling into her desk chair, picking up the latest journal. Gail snorted and flipped through the first pages. "So you and Chloe speak German?"

"We speak a lot of the same languages," confessed Gail. "Dov doesn't know any German, though, and it pisses him off when we do that." Which explained why Gail did it. Finding something, Gail skipped to the middle of the journal and started reading. "Legal Implications of Medical Jurisprudence in Field Samples," read off Gail. "You know, you didn't even need all that diatom stuff to find who he was."

Of course she was skipping to Holly's article. "We did to find cause of death," smirked Holly, feeling safe behind her mask.

"I can actually hear you smirking, Lunchbox," Gail teased.
Holly rolled her eyes and continued to separate the bones.
Chapter Notes

If I have to hear that song one more time... Oh well, let's start making things better and get to a happier place.

They worked through two coffees before Gail suggested they walk outside and talk. They were at a tiny shop Holly had picked, nearer to Holly's place than Casa Diaz/Peckstein, the Hostel for Wayward Cops. When Gail referred to it as such, Holly had an honest laugh. They talked about how Gail had yet to kill Gerald, and resented being his T.O. That was official, too. She was going to get another rookie after Gerald.

It was nice. The spring evening wasn't too cold, and she ended up walking Holly to her door.

"Thanks," she smiled, trying not to look as shy as she felt. She wanted to hug Holly, but she didn't want to overstep anything. Her therapist had told her not to repeat past mistakes, and jumping right into everything physical with Holly, no matter how wonderful, would be a repeat.

Holly rocked on her heels. "You're welcome. Better than being yelled at for bad decisions and getting tazed, huh?"

Gail winced but had to smile. "Not in the eye, at least." She exhaled, "I really don't like her, Holly. She's crazy judgey."

"I call her Dr. BitchTits sometimes," confessed Holly.

"I don't think she'll ever like me."

"She doesn't like me much right now."

"You think she'd like me better if I flaunted money?"

Holly made that goofy side smile that Gail adored. "Only if you spent it on a boob job."

They both laughed a little. "Yeah, no thanks. I like my boobs the way they are."

"So do I." Holly's eyes went wide the second she said it. "God, I'm sorry. My mouth just runs off sometimes and I can't stop it. It-"

"It happens when you're nervous," smiled Gail. She was disproportionately happy that Holly liked her breasts. The babbling nerves were why Gail kissed her in the first place. She wanted to kiss Holly now. Instead, she laughed and pulled Holly into a friendly hug. "You're very weird, Holly."

For a moment, Holly was stiff, but her hands reached around and rested on Gail's back, holding on to her. "Are we ever going to be the same?" Holly's voice was a whisper.

"Probably not," sighed Gail, one hand gently stroking Holly's hair. "Maybe we could be something else, though. Something better."
Holly laughed softly. "When did you become an optimist?"

The hug loosened. As much as Gail would have been happy to stand on the steps forever, she let go. Just having Holly in her arms was so good, and so right. She looked at Holly and reflex kicked in. Gail cupped Holly's face with her hands and felt her mouth go dry. "I should go home," she whispered.

Holly's hands rested on Gail's shoulder. "Gail," she sighed. "You can stay."

"No, Holly, I really can't." She leaned in and kissed Holly lightly. "I can't stay because I really want to do that."

"So do I." Holly leaned in and they kissed again. "And I want you to stay."

This was a problem. Gail closed her eyes and stepped back. She let her hands fall to her sides. "Holly, don't," she whispered. "Please, I really ... I love you, but I don't want to hurt us by thinking everything is fine just because we're kissing, when we know it's not. We rushed in to everything."

"You .. What?" Holly looked shocked.

Gail rewound her conversation in her head, caught the reason for the look, and exhaled. "I love you."

There. The three small words Gail had never been able to say before were out there. They just fell out without warning, and they startled Holly enough that Gail was able to take Holly's hands off her shoulders and squeeze them. She did love Holly. Insanely, madly, deeply. She'd never gotten her out of her head.

"I don't know what to say," remarked Holly in a whisper.

Gail smiled, trying to keep her face together. There was no chance Holly was going to say the words back right now, which could mean a lot of things, so she addressed Holly's hands. "You say goodnight, drive safe, and maybe you tell me to call you tomorrow." She squeezed the hands again, and dared to look up at Holly. Tears were in the corners of Holly's eyes. "Goodnight, Holly."

"Goodnight, Gail." A pause. "Text me when you get home."

Gail smiled, a more relieved smile. "I will." She turned to go and made it down two steps.

Cleaning her throat, Holly started to ask, "Gail, If I call you-"

"I'll answer." A pause. "Unless I'm on stakeout."

"That," agreed Holly, "is a good reason." They looked at each other, Gail shyly and Holly anxiously. Finally Holly opened her front door and stepped inside, but she kept watching Gail.

A small wave and Gail turned to walk to her car, parked not that far away. When she got home, she dutifully texted Holly.

Burning off excess energy should be fun. After a long day with horrible cases and emotional stress, hitting balls in the cages was supposed to be relaxing. It wasn't. Instead it was reminding her of Gail's attempt at killing herself with a bat, which was hilarious. And that also meant thinking about Gail.

It wasn't fair to still feel like this about Gail. Sure, she wanted to be back together with Gail, but for her to drop the 'love' word threw Holly off her game. She'd been hoping for maybe make-up sex.
Anything but this. And it was making her conflicted. She'd never stopped caring about Gail, that was simple and easy to understand. The funny, people-hating cop, who cared about kids and was passionate about her work, was immature, and petty and ... Damn it, why did Holly keep rushing to kiss her all the time?

That was how she had gotten into this mess in the first place. Stupid, impulsive, Holly. She fell for the straight girl, again, and then gave her a pass, and then it bit her in the ass. And yet it was still better to think about her complicated, annoying, relationship with Gail than to think about the foster kid on her table today. Starved to death.

Why were people so damn cruel? Gail was right, people sucked. And she couldn't call Gail, because she was spending the afternoon with Sophie and wasn't available. Which was fair, Holly had to admit, and somehow comforting. There was one child Gail was desperate to make sure wasn't going to be mistreated. This new, mature, Gail was strange and wonderful. With an angry grunt, Holly swung and hit the ball, sending it flying into the home run marker, tweaking her back in the action.

There was applause from the other batters.
"Damn it," she winced, and added Salonpas to her mental shopping list.

Holly tried a couple more swings but verified that, indeed, her back hated her, so she called in a night. On the drive home, she found herself passing Gail's cop bar. A handful of officers Holly recognized were headed in and Holly wondered if she was in... Would it be weird to show up? Yes, it would. It would be very weird and inappropriate.

She continued on her way home, and texted Gail once she got in.

*Saw your friends at the Penny.*

The reply was surprisingly fast.

*Game night.*

*Going to beat them?*

*I'm enjoying a quiet night at home with a book.*

Holly stared at her phone. Was Gail home alone?

*Lies. You only read books with pictures.*

*Your articles have pictures. Does that count?*

Holly smirked and winced as she hung up her purse. "Should've stopped at the store." Pressing a hand to her lower back, Holly decided to try a hot shower.

*You're not reading my articles.*

*No, I'm reading some actually dreadful fantasy book. It has a map, and that counts.*

When they'd been dating (the first time? was this a second or a reboot?), Holly had caught Gail inspecting her fantasy and science fiction books more than once.

*I told you Game Of Thrones was dark.*

*Wrong! Kvetch.*
Who?

Damn you, autocorrect! KVOTHE.

Name of the Wind is a great series!

Holly was defensive, but she'd really liked the first two books, and was on pins and needles waiting for the third.

The second book is all about sex! He out-sexes a nymph, bangs a teacher, and is a super Mary Sue expert.

You remembered Mary Sue!

I'm not taking your advice on books anymore.

Holly laughed and tossed her phone onto her bed to try the shower, pain killers, and a heating pad to make sure her back wasn't going to kill her that night. When you spent half your day bending over to peer at things, back care was important.

Her phone had a text waiting for her when she got back.

Why are you home at 7pm, Dr. Stewart?

That's awfully personal, Officer Peck.

Sooner than Holly expected, she got a reply.

It's one of my charming traits.

Why wouldn't I be home at 7pm on a work night?

Because you should be hitting balls, like a good lesbian.

Holly blinked at her phone. Was she that predictable?

I've decided that's creepy.

Sorry.

That was it? That was the reply? She waited a while and got no further texts. "You are annoying, Gail Peck." Holly wedged the heating pad into place and turned it on before settling into China Miéville's latest book. Except... "Damn it!" She snatched the phone back up.

Okay, why should I be at the batting cages?

This reply took longer to arrive, and was short but entirely explanatory.

Traci was working the case.

Oh. That was ... Less creepy. But that also brought memories of the child on her table. Less than half the weight of children his age. Broken bones from systemic abuse and malnutrition. She felt like crying again. Instead she replied to Gail.

I apologize. That's not creepy.

It's okay. I figured you were looking for a virtual shoulder.
Damn. She really was transparent. Deflect. Deflect.

Far more embarrassing actually

Gail took a long time to reply.

Do you need me to call?

In an instant, tears pricked Holly's eyes. She sighed and tried to think about how she could say no when the answer was yes. The answer was that she wanted Gail in her arms, in her bed, and she wanted to comfort herself. Inevitably, the phone rang. "You're trying to say no," remarked Gail.

"I hate people."

"Pretty sure that's my line."

Holly laughed and started crying at the same time. "I really do, though," she sniffled through the tears.

"I'm sorry." Gail sounded sincere and warm in a friendly way that comforted Holly. She couldn't stop crying though. She really wished Gail was there to hug her and hold her.

"Who does that to anyone, Gail?" She sobbed into the phone. Holly had seen hundreds of bodies, and parts of bodies, in her years in the lab. The number of children were thankfully small, but they'd never hit her this hard before. "They locked him up in a cage because he was autistic! They beat him! That.. How can people treat their own child like that?" Her breath caught on a sob and Holly wailed.

But Gail stayed on the phone. "Everyone has one case, Holly," she said softly, her voice breaking through the tears with tenderness. "It knocks us down, humanizes us. Hits harder than all the others, for no reason we can tell. But it does." Holly sniffled and wiped her face. "Pierces the skin. And ... Now it's going to be harder and everything's going to hurt more for a while. And I'm really sorry. But this is a good thing, okay? It's a horrible, sucky thing, but it's good. Because it makes us human."

Reaching for the Kleenex, Holly blew her nose. "That was ... Deep." And comforting. Gail had clearly been there before.

"That was Oliver," Gail admitted. "He taught me that."

"I think I like him."


"And you've ruined this awesome moment," Holly replied, but she started laughing again. Two idiots, laughing on the phone. The laughter lightened her a little.

Gail found her voice first. "That sounds better."

Holly sighed. "I feel a little better."

"Good. So tell me the embarrassing thing." When Holly groaned, Gail snorted. "Come on, after every dumb and embarrassing thing I've done with you, including stupid things straight chicks ask, you can't possibly have a single thing more embarrassing than me at the batting cages."

"Oh, god, you have no idea... I hurt my back hitting a home run." There was silence on the phone.
"That's the good one where the ball goes out of the park-"

"Wow. And you thought I'd hurt myself." The giggles were being barely contained.

"See? I'm hanging up if you laugh!" But it was too late, Gail was giggling like a child. "You suck, Gail Peck."

Gail laughed more now. "You're right, that is embarrassing. Oh, man." She snorted a laugh.

"Now that is a charming sound," smiled Holly, but she could picture Gail in mind, laughing so hard that her jack and coke came out her nose. That had happened before over drinks, when Dov had thrown a dart into someone's hair. "Hey why are you home by yourself?"

She could still hear the smile in Gail's voice. "I asked Chloe to take Dov out, and Chris is working."

"That's how and not why," admonished Holly.

"Oh, I wanted to be alone." Gail was so flippant about things sometimes. "Don't get worried, the lights are on and I'm in the living room. I was watching Big Brother."

"That'll rot your brain."

"Please, I saw the Mary Higgins Clark books on your shelves."

Holly's face burned. After she'd ended up not moving, Gail had helped her unpack and put everything back in place. At least she hadn't found the collection of actual smut on Holly's shelves. "Are you okay?"

"Home alone? Well I set up a bunch of booby traps in case the burglars show up, with a paint can and some marbles." Gail chuckled. "Sophie and I were watching that."

"That's a horrible movie."

"She picked it. Anyway, I'm fine. I'm kind of enjoying it. Thinking about moving out of the frat."

It was hard to say how Holly felt about that. She knew it had been part of why the adoption failed. Was it related? Was it just a sign of growing up? "Well. Don't rush in to anything. Okay?"

"Says the woman who keeps driving across the city to kiss me in inappropriate rooms at my work."

"You kissed me the first time," Holly pointed out, indignantly.

"Seriously, I thought you were drunk or high..." Gail trailed off. They'd talked about that before, though. They'd talked about all of it, from exactly how not-serious Holly had been with her rebound and how she'd been dumped, to how Gail hadn't so much as looked at anyone. "You going to be able to sleep?"

"I think so." Holly hesitated, "Hey... Thanks for calling."

"Any time. Sweet dreams, Holly."

"Goodnight, Gail." They hung up and Holly smiled at the phone. Oh yeah. That's why she still cared about Gail.

It was Holly's idea to go to a movie. Gail had simply asked her to dinner, as a casual thing, but Holly
claimed she seriously needed some brain candy and, after all, Gail had taken Sophie to see a movie. Eager to spend time with Holly, Gail agreed with some guidelines.

"No science fiction," she reminded Holly as they looked up movies over a coffee break. "No fantasy."

"Cartoons?"

Gail paused and stared at Holly. "Oh my god, you want to see Frozen."

The nerd blushed. "Look, it's funny and there's singing and you asked me out, so I get to pick the movie, right?"

It was the smile that did her in. Holly had a soft, shy, introverted smile. She didn't show it often, only in rare moments where she was totally embarrassed (like the time in bed that she'd lasted all of 90 seconds, and blamed Gail's couch foreplay while blushing to the tips of her ears). That smile made Gail want to do crazy things.

"Right. Okay, we go to the kiddie movie, but we're having ice cream after."

"I like this already," announced Holly, and with no shame put in the order for two adult tickets to Frozen.

Gail had to admit the movie was cute, though not her thing at all. Holding hands in the theater was. Holly had flipped up the armrest between them right away, before the lights went dark. After the second song, Gail checked and saw Holly's hand sitting on her own thigh, and reached over to touch it, just lightly resting her fingers on the back of Holly's hand. In response, Holly's hand turned and easily fit into Gail's.

She'd felt a little bad, since Sophie had dragged her to see the movie three weeks ago, but it worked out since Gail paid no attention at all to the film this time. She cared more about touching Holly, holding her hand as if nothing had changed. They held hands through the whole rest of the movie, neither hand sweating, as if it was the most normal, natural, thing to do. They stayed through the credits, since Holly wanted to watch them, and it wasn't until she stood up that Holly let go of her hand.

They did not hold hands walking to ice cream, and Gail let Holly's adorable babble about the movie wash over her. This felt so right. Being with Holly in normal situations, that normal people did, and feeling happy was a strange feeling for an umpteenth generation cop. But she was relaxed and wished the day could never end. Well, maybe it could end in a better way, but Gail was surprisingly alright with just being with Holly and being happy.

Gail bought the ice cream. "Do you want to sit outside...?" The patio was crowded with children and parents, all from the same movie. There had actually been other couples, adult couples, at the film, but none of them were at the ice cream parlor. Did no one else think of ice cream as a date thing anymore? Was this a date?

"There's a park," Holly noted, and looped her arm through Gail's to lead them there. Gail's heart started pounding, and she felt herself heating up. It wasn't until the ice cream started to drip on her hand that she remembered she was even holding the cone.

As they walked to the swings, Gail asked, "What's the part of your brain that doesn't ask for directions and just decides how you feel about things?" She tried to keep her voice light.

"Amygdala." Holly licked her ice cream cone. "Yours is probably on overdrive a lot," she mused.
"Studies show that traumatic incidents center there."

Gail gave Holly a frown. "Wow, really?"

Embarrassed, Holly explained. "You deal with a lot of fear-based situations, and your amygdala is what processes that. So that you're always overcoming those moments, you have to suppress that reaction, which contributes to ... Um. Yeah, that's probably not what you were asking."

"Very much not, you nerd." She smiled, squeezing Holly's arm and then letting it go to sit on a swing. "I meant the part where when you're doing one thing and your brain calms down and you stop worrying about all the crap in your life."

Holly looked thoughtful and sat in the next swing over. "Reptile Brain, possibly, though that's debatable." They swung in silence for a little while. "Why?"

Exhaling, Gail let her feet drag to stop her swinging. "Because when I'm with you, I don't worry as much about the shit-storm that is my life. When I held your hand, in the theater, I forgot to watch the movie. And when you took my arm, I forgot I had ice cream." She leaned against the chain and looked at Holly. "I miss us. And I kind of feel like we have a second chance."

Still swinging gently, Holly nibbled on her cone. "I see," she finally remarked.

"I'm sorry," sighed Gail. She had no taste to finish the ice cream. "I know it sounds like I'm treating you like some fallback plan."

"Are you?"

"No. I never once stopped wishing I was with you." It was true. She'd wanted Holly and Sophie, true, but she thought she couldn't have them both. Then she had this brief, insanely hopeful moment, where she thought she could have them both before life pissed in her cornflakes. Neither. Or maybe not. Was it wrong to want a dream with Holly again? Was it a fallback when it was really something she'd wanted with all her heart even when she said idiotic things.

Holly looked over at her, thoughtfully. "I don't want kids, Gail. Not now, maybe not ever."

"I know," she sighed, but the back of her brain twigged to how Holly said that. "And you were going to leave Canada."

"With you." Holly grimaced. "That was stupid, I know. I'm sorry." Before Gail could say anything, Holly added, "I love you."

"What?" Gail blurted the question without stopping to think about it.

A pause. A heartbeat. Holly's voice was quiet and calm and she repeated, "I love you, Gail Peck." Gail kept staring. While she'd said it before, Holly had not, and hearing it now was crazy. Her pulse pounded in her head, and she felt light headed.

Was she supposed to say it back now? She remembered, dimly, Nick professing his love as he proposed. That was the only time he'd said it seriously, and it never felt like this. "Oh," she finally managed. Swallowing, she whispered, "I love you."

Taking the tongue-tied expression well, Holly pushed off the ground and swung. "I was mad at you for moving on when I did too, which is so insanely stupid of me. It wasn't fair, and I... I don't know if I would have been willing to be a mom with you, Gail, I still don't want kids. But I don't want to be without you right now. So I want to try. And talk."
That had been a fear of Gail's. That Sophie and Holly were and either/or situation. And while the reality looked like that would be the case, she didn't feel that she was settling for one or the other. She'd wanted both. Her life was not a fairy tale. "Can we do this again?"

"No," admitted Holly, "but maybe we can do it better."
Chapter Notes

It took them a while to get to sex before, it will take a while to get back to sex now.
There will be sex though.

Either Gail was playing it cool or she was scared to death and frozen with indecision. No matter
what, she was not making an advance on Holly, even while sitting on her couch, watching soccer
with Holly. They both had a Long Island ice tea and Gail was curled up with her feet tucked
underneath, watching the TV curiously.

"Okay, honey, you have got to be bored."

Gail took a sip of her drink, "What? No!" She paused. "Has Canada ever made it to the … Universal
Bowl thingy? They keep showing commercials for it."

"World Cup, it's this summer. And yes." Holly scooted so her thigh was up against Gail's.

"Ever won?" When Holly hesitated, Gail laughed, "Okay, how many times have they gone?"
Holly scowled. "Once, in 1986." The smirk on Gail's face was epic. "Shut up, we watched it at
home."

But Gail had the giggles. "Baby lumberjack lunchbox."
Holly swatted her arm but smiled. "Come on, we've been in five of the six Women's World Cup.
Came in fourth in 2003."

Gail looked surprised, "Women do this? Why aren't we watching that?" She gestured at the TV with
both hands. Giggling, Holly pointed out a women's match wasn't on. Gail huffed and leaned back,
resting a hand on Holly's thigh.

"It's in Canada next year," she noted, trying not to let her heart race any more, just from having Gail
touch her. "The Women's World Cup. Men's games start in June."

"Huh, maybe I could get tickets from Uncle Al. I'll probably get stuck working though."

"You don't even like it!"

"You like it. Sophie's kinda into soccer. Maybe." Gail tried to shrug nonchalantly, but managed to
look awkward and nervous.

Holly smiled. "You'd be bored, and you know it."

"Hey, they're not sexy librarians, but they're probably cute, right?" When Holly blushed, Gail
grinned, "Please tell me you came out because you had a massive crush on some Brazilian."

"She was German," Holly said defensively. And she had short blonde hair like Gail.

Gail made a satisfied noise and moved her hand from Holly's thigh so she could wedge herself in the
corner of the couch. "Of course she was." Gail put her glass down and draped an arm over the back of the couch. "Sit with me?"

Holly hesitated and then turned around, leaning back against Gail, resting her head against her shoulder. "I thought you were the little spoon," she teased.

Gail gently stroked Holly's hair, brushing it out of the way. "I'm all about new experiences."

This must have been how Gail felt at the movie theater. While Holly was interested in the game, she kept thinking about the soft body under hers, the pale legs touching her own. All she had to do was turn around and Gail would be right there. She turned her face, looking up, and was surprised at how relaxed Gail was now. "You look way too calm."

"No more hair to chop off." Gail stretched her legs, one sliding over Holly's which was not helping Holly's self control. "Pecks stay calm under pressure, don't you know?" Holly gave her best 'oh really?' look and Gail chuckled, self deprecatingly. "When we're not having traumatic flashbacks and freaking out about our self-identities. Which Good Pecks don't do either." The obvious meaning there was that Gail did not consider herself to be a very good Peck. "I'm happy right now."

It was too soon to get into Gail's issues of self-worth and her family. "Really? Gail, you hate sports."

"True, but you like it, and it's kind of nice to get to spend the day hanging out with the coolest chick ever." When Holly poked her thigh, Gail chuckled. "My life is not the happy end of the fairy tale. I have this right now, Holly, and I kinda want to savor it."

Knowing everything she did about Gail's life, Holly could not disagree, but she wasn't quite sure what to say. Just then, a particularly vicious play went down and Holly groaned, "Oh come on! Red card!"

"How can you tell when they're really hurt? Every time someone goes down, they act like their leg came off." So Holly attempted to explain the ways of drawing fouls and scoring and penalty shots. "I don't get why the scores are always one to nothing, then, with all this kicking."

"Well there are offsides rules." Holly tried to explain them, but she was pretty sure Gail didn't follow or care.

Gail huffed but continued to watch until halftime. "They make me tired just watching them run around." As Gail raised her arms over her head to stretch, her bangs flopped into her eyes.

"You," laughed Holly, "Are incredibly lazy." She sat up and turned to look at Gail. The hair was starting to grow out, and Holly reached to push it out of Gail's face. "Still kinda beautiful." In reply, Gail smiled a little embarrassedly.

There wasn't enough alcohol in their drinks to make a claim for liquid courage, and Holly moved into Gail's personal space. She really wanted to kiss Gail again, and the predatory look in her eyes must have been obvious. Now Gail was nervous, but she reached out to touch Holly's arms. "Holly, I want to kiss you."

"We are dating," agreed Holly, and she leaned in to kiss Gail. This was better. This was how things should be, and Holly settled on Gail's lap running a hand through her hair. So much better.

They broke off the kiss before getting further in, looking at each other carefully. Holly gently kissed her again. It was a light kiss, almost the same as in the coat closet. "This is nice," whispered Gail, and Holly sighed, touching Gail's face.
Gail held Holly's hand in place, smiling. Their eyes met for a moment, and Gail pushed herself up to kiss Holly this time. As Gail's hand touched her hip, Holly's eyes drifted closed. She let Gail guide her back into her lap, concentrating only on the kiss. But Gail's hands went no further and she sighed. On an unspoken cue, they broke apart, Gail pulling Holly onto her, tucking Holly's head on her shoulder.

They lay there, quietly, in a safe bubble. Holly's fingers traced the collar on Gail's shirt, drinking in the feeling of nearness. "You haven't told me about any of your cases... Except stinky cat hoarder guy."

"You... Don't want to hear about them from my end, Holly." That was code for Gail didn't want to talk about her feelings and Holly frowned. "Really, I have a mess of ugly cases." But Gail reached to took Holly's hand in her own. "I'm still hunting down Mr. Stinky's cat." When Holly blinked, Gail grinned. "I have talked to every owner of a Scottish Fold in the city."

At Holly's prompting, Gail went on to explain how frustrating it was to track down a damn cat, who probably ran off on its own anyway. And for her part, Holly smiled. This was okay.

She thought her brain was going to explode. "Can women even get blue balls," Gail asked herself, aloud, in her bedroom. Holly would know, but you couldn't really ask the reason behind your ongoing aches what the technical term was for female sexual frustration. And so Gail self-diagnosed herself with blue balls.

Pulling on the snug black undershirt, Gail tried to put it out of her mind. She could hold off on sex, as long as needed to be. Rushing into things was how they'd ended up at a place of insecurity to begin with. Not that it helped to go slower right now, or slower faster, whatever they were calling it. Gail kept worrying she was doing things wrong and was being a bad girlfriend.

At the same time, Holly seemed happier than before. They were cautious about certain topics, but they spent more time together touching. Hand holding, certainly, but sitting on the couch with her arms around Holly had been one of the best days in recent memory. Yes, they'd made out many times, but other than the one, chaste, night, hadn't slept together.

Then there was the other day, when Gail had dared to kiss Holly while they were watching a movie.

It wasn't that she hadn't liked the movie, it was cute and had a surprising amount of action and tension. She'd never seen *Lord of the Rings*, and Holly saw it as a deficiency. So they'd watched. But with Holly leaning up against her for the whole first half, Gail had felt a discomfort unrelated to the hobbits and elves. As Holly started to get up to change the DVD, Gail pulled her down.

The kiss was meant to be just warm and brief, but Gail surprised herself by how much she'd needed to feel Holly against her. Before long, a simple kiss became serious one, hungry and hot. She'd pulled Holly closer, falling back onto the couch, and met no resistance. Instead, Holly had gasped and laughed, letting her weight settle on Gail.

She had missed that so, so much. Feeling Holly against her, having her hair fall and get in Gail's face, and the rims of her glasses bumping Gail's nose. It took every ounce of Gail's willpower not to move Holly onto one of her thighs. But she wanted it, oh god did she want to feel that. And unlike the time watching soccer, there was no need to stop, or feelings of doubt.

Her hands went up the back of Holly's shirt, and Holly made that soft sound she used when she happy and turned on. It wasn't a moan, but something more gentle. They'd started to move more against each other in a way that was more than suggestive, when Holly stopped, pulling away
reluctantly.

That one kiss, that one make out session, kicked Gail's libido into overdrive, and made her wish she lived alone. It just wasn't fair to crave someone that much.

Gail pulled a loose sweater on and checked her phone. She pushed thoughts of Holly out of her head as much as she could, and headed out. Today was a Sophie day. She'd been telling the girl bits and pieces about her best friend, and Sophie admitted she'd always wanted one, but asked if Gail could be her best friend too. It pulled at Gail's heart, the blatant obviousness of an eight year-old. Social services had been a little more iffy about Gail still spending so much time with Sophie, and she'd been honest with them about where things stood with Holly.

Because Holly was worth waiting for.

"Was the courier sick again," asked the man in the white shirt with the name tag of Shaw. It took Holly a moment to recognize him as Oliver. Gail talked about him in possibly the most friendly ways possible, so she understood he was someone Gail actually liked. He wasn't 'people' to Gail, which was high praise.

Smiling, Holly held up her empty hands. "No, I'm supposed to talk to Detective Swarek about a case, and he asked if I could come here. So."

Oliver nodded, "Sam is in the detective bullpen." He turned and shouted, "Price! Come escort our esteemed forensics friend to Swarek, please and thank you." Then to Holly he added, "I'm glad you're back. My petulant Peck wasn't the same."

Before Holly really had a chance to process the comment, the bubbly Chloe Price popped up, appearing out of nowhere. "Hi, Dr. Stewart! You look great. Do you always look this put together? I wish I could. I'm really glad we wear uniforms here, though. I'd never want to be a detective and have to figure out those suits."

Holly shot Oliver a pained look and he just smiled. No wonder Gail regularly reported wanting to kill Chloe. "Dress for the job you want to have," replied Holly, trying to tamp her annoyance down.

"That makes sense." Chloe paused and looked around. "So … are you and Gail … back together?"

Well. That was unexpected. "I'm … sorry. What?" Did they all know? Probably. Gail mentioned once that her brother would spread gossip like herpes, which wasn't an appealing analogy. Though that would imply Gail had told her brother anything, and while they were indeed back together, it was being kept under wraps for as long as possible. No long nights at Holly's, just long phone calls and talking. And sometimes getting a little hot and heavy on the couch. It was frustrating, sexually speaking, but at the same time had been a relief to have someone touch her the way Gail did. Reverently.

"It's just she was all sad while you were broken up, and more grumpy than normal. I mean, it probably had to do with that case too. She kind of takes cases with kids really hard, but don't tell her I said that." Chloe cleared her throat. "Sorry, word vomit. She's just less angry since you came back, though I hear about your transfer not happening, and that sucks. The US is stupid, you'd be great. I'm just really happy that she's happy. For Gail."

Holly tried to figure out the nice way to say she wasn't going to talk about that with a total stranger, when a fit man walked up, "Chloe, stop it." His name tag read Collins and it was familiar. "Sorry, she's really excitable."
"Nick! You're working with Gail, where is she?" Chloe actually looked worried.

"Lockup. You really need to stop interfering."

But Chloe had a look on her face. "You should! You were so good at getting Dov over his issue, and it was really great and—"

"Oh no, no no no, we are not doing this!" Nick looked horrified. "Especially not with Gail!"

Why would he care that much about Gail in that regard? Holly stared at Officer Collins for a moment. Nick Collins. "Oh, you're Nicholas," said Holly aloud and then felt herself blush. He looked nothing like Gail had described, but then again, she also didn't have any photos of him. But this was the man Gail had once been engaged to. Holly felt irrationally jealous. He looked like the perfect trophy husband.

Half embarrassed and half relieved, he nodded. "Yes, which is exactly why this is not a conversation I should be having." At least he was somewhat self aware of how awkward it was for two people who had slept with Gail to talk about one of them having sex with Gail. Or not. Ugh.

"I think that about pretty much everything you say, Nick," remarked Gail in her most acerbic. "Hi, Dr. Stewart."

There was a twinkle in her eye when she smiled at Holly and Holly grinned back. "Hello, Officer Peck. I'm just here to talk to Detective Swarek and …"

"And you got waylaid by Chloe, who needs to mind her own business." Gail shook her head, but was fairly relaxed by Gail-standards when it came to people like Chloe.

"You are back together!" squealed Chloe.

Gail looked momentarily startled. "Don't, Chloe, just … Don't. We're at work."

"Yes, and I should not be here," Nick remarked

"I think that every day," Gail sighed. "Swarek's in the break room." She gave Holly a sympathetic look while Nick just looked like he wanted to run away.

Chloe was just looking thoughtful. "Oh, I get it! You aren't together together. Well that's silly! I mean, I bet it's just like me and Dov, where he was being all stupid and didn't want to hurt me, and I just wanted to get laid—"

"Chloe!" snapped Gail. "Shut Up." There was a bite to her tone that actually did cause Chloe to close her mouth. "Swarek. Break room. Work. Stay the hell out of my personal life, okay?" Turning to Nick, she added, "We have a call, Collins. Stop trying to help people and actually help people."

With one last glance for Holly, Gail hauled Nick off.

After a moment, Holly coughed. "Well. That's awkward."

Chloe sighed. "I forgot he used to date Gail... It feels like a million years ago."

Holly eyed Chloe, marveling that Chloe's takeaway was that, of all things. "Uh huh. Break room?"

Chloe jumped and started down a different path. "She really likes you, you know."

Clearly this wasn't going to end. "I know," sighed Holly.
"You like her."

"That … isn't the problem." Why was she even having this conversation?

"Gail can be kind of immature," Chloe noted. "I don't think it's really her fault. She's got more pressure than I do, and my godfather was the sergeant here before Oliver." With a sigh, Chloe opened the break room door. "Just give her a chance?"

Holly stared at Chloe for a moment, and realized the super-perky person actually cared about Gail as a friend. For all Gail said she didn't make friends, the whole division seemed to be invested in her happiness. "Thank you," she replied, in lieu of anything else to say, and found herself stuck in a Chloe hug.

"Don't see that every day," said Detective Swarek after Chloe left.

"I'm really not sure what just happened," admitted Holly.

"No one really is with her." And thankfully, they got down to work.

---

Does she hug EVERYONE?!

The text from Holly made Gail laugh.

"What's funny?" asked Nick, driving the squad car.

"Lesbian jokes." Gail tapped a reply.

Only once if you're me. I threatened her.

"So. You and Holly." He hesitated and glanced at her. "This is inappropriate, isn't it?" Gail just glared at him. "Right! I'm just … She looked at you."

"We're friends, Nick. Friends look at each other."

"Yeah, she looked at you the way Dov looks at Chloe."

Gail shuddered. "Do not compare her to Dov. Or me to Chloe."

Was Chloe really trying to give us advice on sex?

"I'm not, I'm just saying she really likes you. And if you got a second chance—"

"Nicholas! Seriously, we're not talking about this!" He was silent for a mile after that and Gail tapped in a reply.

Afraid so.

For that alone, Gail might have to poison Chloe. Sex advice was not the issue. They were taking it slow, damn it.

I think you have a lot more friends than you think.

That was a strange text.

I think your definition of friend is strange.
This is possible. I think you're one of the friendliest people I know.

Gail smiled at that peculiar thought. Friendly Gail Peck.

It's all that formaldehyde, Lunchbox.

"How's the girl? Sophie?"

"Jesus, Nick. Seriously?" Gail put her phone down. "Since when have you cared about me?"

The words came out harsher than Gail had expected. Nick winced. "I'm sorry. I just... Care about
you as a friend."

"Well, stop it."

They paused at a red light and Nick sighed, "Look, you like Holly. She likes you. I think you're in
love with her, and you really need to not screw this up, Gail. You ... after all the shit that's
happened, you deserve to be happy."

Slowly Gail turned to stare at Nick. Everyone always thought Gail just didn't have feelings, but
really she just didn't want to talk to people who were going to judge her. As she started to formulate
a reply, a man burst out of a store carrying an enormous TV, ran into the street, tripped, and threw
the television towards the car. Nick slammed on the brakes in time.

Gail snatched the radio to call it in. Work. Work was way better than having awkward conversations
with Nick about the sex with Holly she wasn't having.
Gail's a cop and let's have some cop stuff. And more Chloe. I like her. I watched seasons three and four again recently, and realized how annoying Chloe was in the first episode, but how quickly they tamped her down to be perky likable. She's the anti-Gail.

The positive side was Gail was actually telling her they had to cancel their date night. The negative was the reason.

"I'm sorry, you stopped a radio with your face?" Holly was sure her phone was cutting out.

Gail's reply was more amused than caustic. "That is indeed what I said, Doctor. Have you had your hearing checked out?"

"Very funny. Do you want to explain this one?"

"If I say 'cop' can that be it?" sighed Gail. Holly did not answer and Gail grumbled. "Guys robbed an electronics' store. One of them broke a TV, the other threw a radio at me when I was cuffing the first guy. Honestly it's just stupid stuff, but my jaw hurts so dinner's kind of a bad idea."

"Uh huh," sighed Holly. "And what did the doctor say?"

"The EMT said I should stay off it," Gail quipped. "Actually, Nicholas said that and promised to stop bugging me about sleeping with you. I am so, so sorry about that."

Holly smiled, pretty sure she was the only one who got to talk to Gail like this. It did not escape her notice how derisive Gail was when speaking of Nick. "I've had more awkward days with police officers, but that was mostly after this one didn't call me back after walking out on me."

She could hear Gail cringe. It wasn't really fair to keep poking at Gail about it, but at the same time it certainly reenforced shit which Holly would not accept in a relationship. "And you see how I'm calling you now to explain why I can't go out?"

"I accept your reason," agreed Holly. "Do you need anything?"

"No, I'm just going to pop some more Aleve and watch Big Brother. Pretty people being stupid on live TV, only I don't have to arrest them. Fun times."

"Well. Okay. Call me or text me if you need anything, promise?" That Gail was only taking OTC painkillers meant it couldn't be all that bad. Or it was horrible.

"Geeze, you're pushy," laughed Gail. "Yes, I promise to contact you should I need so much as a tissue."

"Idiot," smiled Holly, "Feel better."

"I will." Gail paused as if holding on to a word. "Talk to you later."
They hung up and Holly stared at her phone for a while. She had been looking forward to spending time with Gail and their non-physical intimacy was growing. Improving really. Gail actually talked to her about things, like a horrific case that was hitting her hard, or that she knew ASL. They were little things but they really were helping.

If anything, Holly was the one in danger of messing it up since she really just wanted to touch Gail and Gail was being weirdly mature and tentative. When Holly mentioned it the first time, Gail said it was at her therapists' suggestion. Not to just jump back in but to take it slow and actually listen to Holly more. Holly decided it would be inappropriate to send the therapist flowers. At the same time, right now she wanted to borrow Gail's gun and hold the therapist hostage until Gail was convinced to move a little faster.

She really did enjoy hanging out with Gail again but after watching *Lord of the Rings* and getting seriously into each other at the disk swap, Holly determined what she wanted was more than just hugs and kisses and holding and talking. She wanted to get back to where she could have Gail in her bed. Instead, she had Gail at her own apartment with boys, watching TV with an ice pack.

"Oh for god's sake, Holly," she snapped at herself. If Gail was going to sit around and mope, Holly was going to intrude and that was that. She stopped to pick up some protein smoothies, certain that Gail was just going to drink and not eat, but also soft serve frozen yogurt. The girl loved her sweet treats and today Holly was inclined to be generous.

She knew where Gail lived now, having dropped her off before, but had never actually gone inside. Holly didn't know what to expect when she knocked but having Chloe open the door wasn't on her list.

"OH! Gail, it's for yoooooouuuuuuuu," sang Chloe, dancing away to let Holly in.

That was very weird. "Seriously, Chloe, I don't want pizza. You and Dov should just go out and— Holly." Gail's head poked over the couch and Holly could see the entire left side of her face was already discolored. Not that it took much, with Gail's pale skin, to stand out. This however was a massive black eye, a fantastic bruise on her cheek, and serious swelling.

"That looks painful," remarked Holly, closing the door. It looked broken. She frowned at Gail and was highly suspicious of the claim of Advil.

"I've had worse." Gail held up an icepack, indicating her treatment regime. The horrid thing was that Gail probably wasn't lying. "I see you've met my nanny. Her cohort in crime is in the back."

Holly smirked and hung up her jacket. "I brought you some food. Can I…?" Holly gestured at the fridge and Gail did a shrug-nod. When she opened the freezer, there were a dozen icepacks. That made sense, given the physical nature of the job, but it was still daunting. "Want a fresh pack?"

"Sure." Gail tossed the icepack over, belying her claim to not being sporty, and Holly exchanged it. "What'd you bring me?"

"Some soft, cold, foods. Smoothies." Holly loaded up the fridge and was surprised at the amount of fresh food. Hesitating, Holly brought the sweetest one over first, along with the icepack. "Let me look." Gail sighed and turned her head so Holly could inspect the damage. She barely touched it and Gail winced. The worst part was where a sharp corner had impacted along Gail's cheekbone. "They really let you home with this?"

"Her brain breaks the machines," remarked Dov, walking in from the back bedroom area. "EMT swears she doesn't have a concussion. They offered her the good drugs, too."
While Gail flipped Dov off, Holly carefully brought the icepack to Gail's face. "She has a tough head," smiled Holly.

"Hah, if I said that, she'd hurt me."

"I still might, Dov," grumbled Gail, and she eyed the smoothie. "This is healthy."

"And tastes good." Holly insisted. With a reluctant, puppy dog, face, Gail took a sip through the straw. She winced a little, but then sipped more.

Holly smiled, "If you have a blender, you can make a lot more like that with your fridge stock."

Snorting, Dov explained, "She's on a raw food kick. Can you believe that?"

"I didn't touch your candy stash, Dov," grumbled Gail, sinking into the couch.

Holly was impressed. "It's good for you," and she settled in on the couch. For all Gail had warned her, the place wasn't that messy at all. It showed evidence of a recent cleaning though, which made Holly think the cleanliness aspect was new. "So give, how bad is it?"

"Fractured. They x-rayed it. Something about a closed fracture." She shrugged and sipped the smoothie. "I have the print out in my room."

A zygomatic fracture made a lot of sense and Gail was insanely lucky that the damage was so light. "Double vision?" Holly studied Gail's eyes, but both pupils were the same size.

Gail sighed, "Blurry." The admission was like pulling teeth. "I'm off work for a while."

"Holly... If you're going to stay," wondered Dov aloud and paused when Gail glared. "Chloe and I are going out, if that's okay."

Holly was about to say they didn't have to, but Gail spoke up first. "God. Please, go. Or I won't be responsible for what happens to your girlfriend." Said girlfriend was all but dancing on her tip toes, watching Holly and Gail.

In mere moments, Dov had Chloe ushered out the door and as it closed they could both hear Chloe exclaim, "They are so cute together, Dov! Almost as cute as you!" There was a sound of kissing and Holly broke up laughing at the disgusted face Gail was making.

"Sorry, you don't have to stay but I really was going to kill her. She's over all the time again since she and Dov made up." Gail sipped the smoothie again, "I actually started running in the mornings just so I don't kill her before my coffee."

"Poor baby," laughed Holly. "And it's fine. I wanted to see you." She hesitated, "I just.. remembered the last time you got banged up and called me."

Gail looked surprised. "Oh, god, no. Holly, that's why I turned down the Oxy. No, I'm okay."

The nightmares and the flashbacks had scared Holly, but Gail seemed much more at ease this time, just a little more pained physically. It was clearly a trade off. Hurt more or sleep worse.

She hadn't really understood why Gail had reacted the way she did to the dark, to being absolutely alone in a strange place, and to taxis. Now that she knew some of the story, the fact that Gail was still rushing to a job where she could get killed was crazy and brave and terrifying.

Holly put that aside for a moment, smiled and reached over. Gently she cupped the unbruised side of
Gail's face. "That has got to hurt."

"It's really not that bad," insisted Gail. It probably wasn't, given everything else that had gone on in her life, but Holly didn't think for a moment that it didn't hurt. She sighed and gently kissed Gail, startling her. It was a soft kiss, a welcome kiss, a real kiss. Gail made a happy noise, winding a hand in Holly's shirt to pull her closer. The kiss became more heated, but a moment into it Gail winced and pulled back.

Holly shook her head. "Yeah, it doesn't hurt," she admonished. "How about we just sit here and watch TV?"

Gail sighed. "I liked the kissing part better."

Since both of Gail's hands were quickly occupied with an icepack and a smoothie, Holly situated herself so Gail could lean back against her and Holly could toy with her hair. Yes, damn it, she loved the hair. "It's growing out. Are you going to keep it short?"

"Dunno. It's just hair, right?" That, Holly had to agree with. "I'm not bleaching it anymore." While the bleach and the pale skin were amazing, the warmer natural colors would be beautiful in a different way.

They made it through one episode of Big Brother and Holly was surprised that the DVR auto played another. Apparently Gail had a backlog. With her jaw hurting, Holly didn't expect much conversation out of Gail and was content to simply sit here, holding her, for another episode. By the third one, Holly thought her brain might melt. "Gail, honey, can we please watch anything else?"

No reply. Holly squinted and realized Gail had fallen sound asleep on her. Actually asleep, too, not the fake sleep. "I should have brought a book," Holly muttered and flipped the TV off. The only thing within reach was a People magazine, which was poor reading, but better than sitting doing nothing.

That was how Dov, sans Chloe, found them when he returned. "Is she…?" he asked quietly.

"Out like a light." Holly carefully took the warm icepack off Gail's face and held it up for Dov, who tossed it back in the freezer.

He walked back over and stared down at Gail for a while. "I asked her to move in with me, when Chris left. Nick had come back, but when I asked her, we both felt alone. She even volunteered to move into the den when Chris came back. I couldn't ask her to leave."

Holly stroked Gail's hair softly. "Thank you for doing that." Dov made a 'hmm' noise and nodded. "How is Chris?"

"Okay. Better. He's working tonight. I'm getting him to NA and all the fun stuff, though... Gail takes him sometimes too."

"I won't tell her you told me she's being nice," smiled Holly.

Dov hesitated. "I love her too, you know. Not like you do. I mean, I did. Or I thought I did. I was on Vicodin and totally confessed to her. Broke up her and Chris. But she never makes fun of me about that." He sighed. "But I do. Love her. She's the family I chose."

That was a surprising statement and Holly nodded. They said nothing more about it, both watching Gail sleep. It had taken Holly a while to understand the levels of sleep Gail possessed, but this particular sleep of exhaustion was hard to fake. "I should probably get her into bed."
"I am going to get out of here before she wakes up and yells at me." He smiled and vanished into the back.

It took a while to wake Gail up. "Honey, you need to sleep in your actual bed." Finally, though, Gail squinted up at Holly and sat up.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"You stopped crime and a radio today, honey. It's fine." Holly smiled and caressed Gail's right cheek. "Come on, let me get you into bed."

"No, I'm okay," insisted Gail, getting up slowly and wincing as she touched her own face. "I hope Nick's knee is worse than this. He tripped on the TV and banged it."

"Less visible."

"I know, right?" Gail went to get a fresh icepack and then hesitated. "I'm serious, Holly, I can tuck myself in. Besides, I gotta lock the door."

Holly stretched and stood up, "Dov can let me out."

With the icepack in hand, Gail hesitated. "Could you stay?" Her voice was quiet, almost embarrassed.

They both looked towards Dov's room. "Just to sleep," Holly said slowly. Gail nodded quickly. The presence of roommates certainly would put a halt to any shenanigans, which made it relatively safe. Not that Holly wanted to be safe. She wanted to have been at a romantic dinner and convincing Gail to stay at her place that night.

"You can say no," Gail pointed out, stupidly. "I mean, you already came all the way over here and you have work tomorrow and I don't."

"I don't," replied Holly, smiling at Gail's babble.

"What?"

"I have tomorrow off. It's a holiday? Don't you guys take those off?"

Gail looked embarrassed. "No. I mean, sometimes, but I usually work them so I can avoid my parents."

Nodding, Holly got up and picked up her purse. "Which room's yours?" Gail took her hand and led her into the smallest room and they closed the door. Nothing would happen that night, Holly knew it, but she found herself sleeping the best night she had in months, curled around Gail in a tiny bed in a tiny room, with a light on in the closet.

"Holy hell, you better not let mom see you." Steve Peck eyed his sister, much to Gail's annoyance.

"She already knows, you moron," snapped Gail. "You know she gets reports on us daily."

"Yeah, well hearing and seeing aren't the same. How can you even see?"

The blurry vision had gone away pretty fast and the pain was really tolerable. "It looks worse than it is, Steve." It was too boring to stay at home and she'd begged Oliver to let her work the desk and admit.
"It better. I brought you the smoothie."
"You should start with that next time," and Gail grabbed the cup. "I can't wait till I can chew again."

Smirking, Steve sat on the edge of the desk. "Messing with you and Holly making up?"

Gail glowered, "I know all your bad habits and Nash is my friend." It was not an empty threat and Steve held up his hands. "Besides, you two just sorted your shit out too."

"True," allowed Steve. "You like her."

"Seriously? Why does everyone want to talk about my personal life at work?"

"When do you give us a chance otherwise, kiddo?"

Challenge accepted. "Buy me a drink tonight at the Penny."

"Oh! You're drinking again?"

"A, single, drink. And I'm not on the fun drugs." She sipped the smoothie and was somewhat disappointed it didn't taste as good as the night Holly came over. "Since when have you counted my drinks?"

"Who said I counted? Drink tonight, on me." And Steve headed back to the bullpen.

That was something to look forward to, at least. Gail might call Holly, but she still felt like walking on eggshells around her. It was too weird and too fragile to assume anything, no matter how passionate things could be. They had to have stability to make it last and Gail wanted Holly. For as long as humanly possible.

Swirling her smoothie, which was very watery, Gail sighed and contemplated how thin the ice of the relationship was. If Holly made her a better person, then she really needed to live up to that. She felt she was about Sophie, talking to her honestly about the adoption situation, asking her what she wanted. When Sophie asked if Gail could adopt her, she'd had to explain why her job was making it a bad idea. With childish logic, Sophie pointed out her mother had been a single mom and that day, when Gail left, Sophie had been angry with her. Three days later, Sophie apologized, but asked if Gail had a boyfriend.

"No, not a boyfriend, sweetie," Gail had explained. "I have someone I like, and we talk about you a lot." Immediately Sophie wanted to know details, which Gail skirted around carefully (was he handsome, did he want kids, and so on). The social worker dropped that bomb for her, asking in front of Sophie if Gail's girlfriend was going to meet them any time soon.

Schooled from an early age not to over react, Gail just watched Sophie's eyes widen as the clue dropped and the reality of why Gail had avoided details was explained. And, with a complete lack of guile, Sophie demanded to know when she could meet the girlfriend, what her name was, and was she pretty? Gail showed a picture and was amused to have Holly deemed 'very pretty'. She promised to ask Holly, but then the stupid radio thing had happened.

When Gail showed up the day before, with her black eye and bruises, Sophie had been appalled. Gail was forced to explain what happened, but promised that Holly was a doctor, and was taking care of her. All that drove Gail desperately into the arms of work, yet again.

Jarring her out of her thoughts was a shout, "Petulant Desk Peck!" Oliver's voice rang out. "Come. I have need of your smiling, discolored face."
She rolled her eyes but willingly ceded the desk to anyone else. "Yes sir, Oliver, sir." She tossed him a salute, which he returned laughingly.

"I need a secretary and you type faster."

"This is an abuse of power."

"Only if I ask you to sit on my lap. Besides, I bring a bribe." He held out a styrofoam bowl. "Little bird told me you're still not chewing."

"Would you convict me if I shot Chloe?" Gail took the bowl and smiled at the ice cream. "What am I typing?" Oliver put his hand on a stack of papers. "Oh, you owe me a lot more than one plain vanilla, Oliver." He promised more and blew her a kiss as he left.

The reports were all old, and dead boring. But it was better than answering phones since everyone left her alone. She finished the smoothie and the ice cream but only a third of the papers. It was time to scrounge the fridge. Without the paperwork to occupy her brain, thoughts returned to Holly. She wanted to talk to her, just about anything without being creepy, and finally had an idea.

_I have apples, oranges, cranberry juice, raspberries, blueberries, strawberries and bananas. Is that healthy enough?_

Pulling out the food, she dug the ancient, but effective, blender out from a cabinet. It was probably old when her parents had worked uniforms in 15. The phone dinged.

_Are you eating enough protein right now?_

Probably not. The idea of blended meat was disgusting and that meant scrambled eggs (which she hated) or protein powders. Gail stared at the cabinets and found some whey protein powder that hadn't expired.

_Whey protein?_

_Check the sugar content._

That was enlightening and she put it back. Who knew there was that much sugar in 'protein' powder? Well, besides Holly.

_Yogurt?_

The yogurt was actually hers and was really low in sugar. Greek yogurt without the fruit in it meant no one ate her food.

_If it's the Greek stuff you had in your fridge yes. But not with the juice. Milk would be better._

Perfect. Gail dumped it and everything but the apple into the blender.

_Thanks. Steve found me a smoothie but it wasn't as good as the ones you brought me._

She ran the blender, watching the food pulverize, and got yelled at by a grumpy McNally who had shouted her name a few times. Gail flipped the off switch, "What the hell is that loud noise?"

"Blender?" She gestured at the machine and jiggled the contents. Mostly done. She pulsed it a few more times, getting a wince out of McNally each time. A fringe benefit.

As Gail poured the well blended mix into a tall cup, McNally lingered. "So. You ... Still can't eat
solid foods?"

Gail eyed McNally with a frown. "Soft foods are fine. The less chewing, the better."

Fidgeting in the way she did when nervous, McNally poured coffee. "How's Nick?"

That's what she cared about? Of course. Gail rolled her eyes. "Fine. Doctor popped his knee back into place. He has the night desk duty." One person at roll call had implied her day shift roll was because she was a Peck. Oliver, bless his soul, said that was right, because Pecks ask to come back first.

She sipped the smoothie, which was a little thick but tasty. Gail pulled her phone out again to thank Holly and saw the doctor had already replied.

*Don't keep me hanging! How is it?*

*Heaven in a cup*

McNally lingered. God she was annoying, "Okay, McNally, give."

"I don't know how to start." That was new. "I just. I miss being able to talk to you. About stuff. You made more sense about Sam and you didn't let me be stupid and ... I need a friend like you, Gail, and I don't know what to do to fix this."

Gail wanted to just be cruel, but of all the damned things to happen, her phone beeped. Holly. And thinking of Holly made her self-reflective. Gail knew damn well what McNally wanted to talk about and why. She closed her eyes and sipped the smoothie. "Okay. I do."

"You ... You do?"

"It's five words, McNally, follow along okay?" Gail stared at McNally in the eyes. She held up a hand, ticking off a finger for each word. "I'm sorry, it was wrong."

McNally's eyes darted from the hand to the eyes and then she nodded. "I'm sorry. It was wrong."

She paused, "Now what?"

Wondering when she became fluent at girl, Gail waved at the table. "Now tell me what really happened. And ... Then you can buy me a drink later." Hopefully Steve wouldn't count.
This chapter has a payoff. It's what you're thinking, too.

When Holly sent the text, offering to deliver sexy smoothies, she was partly joking. Looking at it with no reply for hours made her wonder if she'd spooked Gail. Why was she doing the chasing again? This was the woman who'd ignored her for weeks when scared, and them dumped her life on Holly again. Why was she in love with a damn project girlfriend. As Holly packed up for the day, she was livid. Gail was doing this shit again.

The phone beeped.

_Jesus, Andy is a talker._

The name Andy was familiar. Andy McNally. Only Gail had only called her McNally before.

_Andy?_

_Girl Guide McNally wanted to apologize, so I thought I should listen._

That barely sounded like Gail. Holly hesitated. Gail was listening to an old friend apologize. She wasn't running off and being a brat. Holly felt insanely guilty and relieved. Sitting down, Holly tried to assess her own reaction and feelings.

_Wow. How'd that work out?_

_She's buying me a drink at the Penny._

_Sounds promising._

_Not as much fun as home deliveries from you, though._

Holly smiled. Okay, she was blowing it out of proportion. She got to her car and considered asking to come to the Penny. But getting more people involved in their recovering relationship felt like a bad idea just now.

_So you're up for going out?_

Holly chewed her lip waiting for an answer.

_Maybe. I'll be home by 8_

So not a long night. That was smart.

_Let me know if you want home delivery then._

Gail replied right away.

_You do not play fair, missy._
Sorry. Mature, dealing with her shit, Gail is surprisingly attractive.

This time the delay in replies was probably legit and related to Gail thinking.

I have Thursday off. Maybe we could hang out again?

There's a soccer game.

You are a mean, mean, woman!

Is that a yes or a no?

Yes. And you should think about how much I like you, that I'll watch sports with you.

Holly smiled.

She could see Holly checking her out in the reflection of the oven. "Chop the salad, you perv."

"I am! How come I'm making the salad if you're making dinner?"

"You like rabbit food. I'm making tamales." Gail wrapped the last one and tossed the pan in the oven. Leaning over Holly's shoulder, Gail pondered the salad. "You should put an avocado in there. They're the good fats."

Holly laughed. "How do you know that?"

"This incredibly hot doctor told me that was why I was eating a guacamole smoothie last week." She kissed Holly's cheek and went to put the cookware in the dishwasher.

"Speaking of last week, how's your jaw?"

Gail considered her own black and blue face. "Feels okay. Yellow is not my color, though." The bone had cracked, but not much, so it only ached a little and then only if she touched it the right way. Or slept on it. Strangely it didn't remind her of Perik at all. Possibly because it was the other side of her face. It was a very different sort of pain for a very similar injury. Already, Sophie was over the fear of the injury and asked Gail all sorts of details about the job.

Armed with two avocados, Holly smiled, "Maybe not that shade, no. I'm glad you're feeling better." She paused and then went to chop the avocado.

Smiling, Gail hopped up to sit on the island and watch Holly chop. Once the salad was done, she waited for Holly to cross her path with empty hands and reached out to her, "Hey, come here for a second."

When Holly slowed, Gail pulled her over and looped her hands behind Holly's head. "I thought you were all about taking it slow," smiled Holly. It was clearly not a complaint.

"Fast would be kissing you and wrapping my legs around you." Gail did neither of these and simply smiled at Holly. "Maybe I'll kiss you."

"That would be nice."

Gail smiled and leaned in to kiss Holly. It was soft and warm and so easy to just fall in. "Yeah, that's nice," agreed Gail and she ducked her head down for a second kiss. Holly's hands ended up on Gail's thighs, not gripping them, but in tight fists. There was a tension and Gail could tell Holly really
wanted more.

If one of her boyfriends had pulled what Gail did, she'd have dumped his ass and never looked back. That Holly actually was letting her back in was a miracle and a blessing. "Gail," whispered Holly, her eyes closed. "There is such a thing as too slow."

Taking the comment for what it was, Gail pulled Holly a little closer and kissed her again. This time Gail gave in to the craving to kiss like they had before in interrogation and the shower. To kiss Holly with passion and, yes, lust. Holly's hands moved to Gail's waist as she stepped in closer. Gail smiled, breaking the kiss, "I take instructions better, I think."

"Stop talking," whispered Holly and kissed Gail hungrily. It was impossible not to get wrapped up in the kiss and Gail's hold on Holly tightened. It felt so, so good to be kissing her again and a familiar ache was burning for more. Would this be a bad time? It felt right and natural when Holly moved one hand under her shirt. Gail clutched at Holly's shirt, tugging her closer still, winding one leg around to hold them in place.

However, when Holly put her other hand on Gail's face, she pressed harder on the bruise than she meant. Gail yelped and jerked her head back. "Ah, sorry," Gail winced, putting the back of her hand on her cheek to cool it down.

Holly exhaled, "I should be apologizing, honey. I forgot." She tenderly cupped Gail's face. "You really are beautiful." Kissing her softly, Holly went to the freezer. "I have ... Peas."

"It's really okay. I don't think about it." Unless she slept on it or someone touched it. Holly ignored her and wrapped the peas in a dish towel and pressed it to Gail's cheek. Best not to argue, and Gail held it in place.

"I have some arnica upstairs. And Tylenol. Or do you want something else?"

Gail grabbed her arm. "Hey, Lunchbox, you didn't hurt me." But Holly had tears in her eyes. What would Oliver do? "Hey, it's okay." She pulled Holly in for a hug, pressing her safe cheek against Holly's. Holly squeezed Gail tight and sniffled.

Finally Holly mumbled, "Your job scares me." There it was. "You get shot at and hit with radios. Some of you die." She sighed, "I've already picked you up at the hospital."

Putting down the makeshift icepack, Gail stroked Holly's hair. "Oh, Holly," she sighed. All the love in her heart wasn't going to make that any easier to stomach. "That's probably why your friends are worried about us," realized Gail. Holly nodded and Gail felt a little vindicated. "Lisa could work on her words."

That made Holly laugh. "Really? You're going to say that?"

"Hey! I'm growing." But she had to laugh too and in a moment they were both just laughing helplessly. Gail sighed and kissed Holly's cheek. "Do you ... Do you want to talk about it?"

Shaking her head, Holly sighed as well. "No. Not right now." She lightly kissed Gail's bruise.

"That doesn't hurt," smiled Gail. Her stomach interrupted the tender moment and they both laughed. "Okay, I need to eat something, baby."

Holly tilted her head, "Baby."

Gail scrunched her face up. "Lunchbox?"
But Holly kissed her again, "I like it. How about we eat the salad and then your tamales and then..."
She trailed off, expectantly.

"Then I have to go home, because I have to work tonight," sighed Gail. Technically this was her breakfast. Holly scowled but kissed her one more time.

"At least I'm getting you to eat salad!"

"You need to explain this again," growled Rachel. While she was the more forgiving of her friends, she had not been pleasant when faced with Holly's abrupt 180 with the whole moving thing and less with the re-introduction of Gail.

"I told you, after the move didn't happen, we kind of fell back together."

"You mean you took her back."

Holly winced and nodded. She knew Rachel and Lisa were not going to take that well. "We talked."

"Holly, she didn't talk to you for three weeks!"

Lisa added, "And you were moving!"

"I know," sighed Holly. "It's complicated, okay."

Rachel scowled. "I don't like it."

"You broke the rules," added Lisa, with a similar scowl.

"Oh come on, this isn't about the damn move," snapped Holly. "I'm serious about her."

It was amusing to watch Rachel's jaw snap shut. Lisa frowned more. "You're serious about her," Lisa repeated. "You also said no one was going to get hurt."

"Well, if someone hadn't been a classist and gave her a chance, no one would have," snarled Holly.

"I do not understand you," Rachel cut in.

"What's to understand?"

"Well except for telling us she was gorgeous, which she is, and straight, you haven't told us anything! That's not what we do, Holly!" Lisa was angry, but had a point. "You were going to ask her to move with you and don't think you're off the hook there."

Holly took a deeper breath. She couldn't tell them about Sophie, since she still didn't know how she felt about it, but the rest... "She's smart. She picks up new skills insanely fast. She speaks French, beautifully. And Italian. Can't play sports with other people, but I think that's a psychological thing. She hates people, loves kids. She's *amazing* with kids. Music, she can sing with any pop tune on the radio, but has a massive blues collection. She has this horribly dark sense of humor that I like, she takes the world by the horns. She doesn't take shit from people and ... She gets what I do."

The last was a dig at her friends but Holly didn't regret it in the least. But that was actually important. Gail *got* her work. And on so many levels, Gail understood what Holly was about. Her friends at least had the grace to look apologetic.

"That isn't fair," muttered Lisa.
"I'm just saying, out of the three of you, only one helped me with that move."

"How serious?" Rachel was thoughtful now.

Holly didn't answer right away. She knew the answer want going to help in the arguments at all. "I'm in love with her."

Looking like she'd bitten a lemon, Rachel put her coffee down. "Holly."

"I'm serious enough that I want to make this work and I don't want my best friends in the universe to just write me off because they don't want to get to know someone I really care about." A pause. "She said it first."

Both Lisa and Rachel looked at each other. "Okay," Rachel decided. Lisa blustered and Rachel was louder. "I want to meet her again. Maybe she's just not the kind of person who makes a good first impression, Lisa."

Holly smiled hopefully. Now she just had to get Gail on the same page.

Gail whinged, "They don't like me, Holly."

This time Holly was being firm. "They don't know you. You're dark, you're funny, and I love you, so you're going to get to know them." Gail scowled and Holly glowered.

"Fine, I'll be on my best behavior."

"Gail, I'm serious. If you pull that shit again-

Gail threw her hands up. "I wasn't thinking that!" She sighed. "I am not running out on you or them. I just... I don't think I'm going to enjoy this. We have nothing in common."

"Sure you do."

Rolling her eyes, Gail fell on the couch, "Name me one thing I have in common with Dr. Lopsided Boob Job."

"Me."

Gail blinked and looked back at Holly. She was slightly upset and Gail swallowed. "You're right." She held out a hand and Holly came over, but did not sit. "I'm sorry."

Holly reached out and brushed Gail's hair out of her face. "I know. You don't like people."

"I like you." Gail wrapped one hand in Holly's. "They don't like me."

"Well yeah, you hurt me, dummy."

"Yeah, and you forgave me. And they didn't like me before I hurt you."

"You don't make a great first impression, honey. You tried to arrest me."

Gail snorted. That's what Dov had said. "What reason do they have to like me? I'm not in love with them. They don't know I'm an awesome kisser!"

That won a smirk from Holly. "Oh, don't mention that. Lisa will talk your ear off about the lesbian
sex web." With another fond hair tousle, Holly went to the kitchen.

Gail stared after her. "The lesbian sex what!?"

This time, Gail was on her best behavior. She held Holly's hand most of the night and was polite, if terse, to Rachel and Lisa, tolerating their nagging. Both of her friends repeated, many times, that Gail was the luckiest woman in the world and she better not hurt their friend.

When the two went to get drinks, Holly leaned in. "Holding up okay?"

Gail nodded. "I was a jerk. I deserved most of that." She sighed and looked longingly at Holly. "They really care about you."

Holly smiled and kissed her gently. "See, you have something in common." And Gail's eyes drifted closed as they kissed.

"Ugh, again?" That was Lisa.

"Oh shut up about it, BitchTits," joked Holly, and Rachel guffawed.

"What the hell, Holly!?"

But Rachel joined in, "Oh come on. Who slept with her professor's wife?"

As one, Holly and Rachel said, "BitchTits."

When Lisa started to protest, Holly added, "Who had a random hook-up and ditched us without a car at the jazz festival in Montréal?"

Again as one, "BitchTits."

Lisa pressed her lips together and spoke before they got further down the chain of The Adventures of BitchTits. "Okay, fine, but I don't make a habit of dating straight girls."

Holly was prepared to counter that but Gail simply remarked, "I'm not straight." Everyone stopped. "What?" Her face was collected and calm, in the way she got when someone was being dense.

"So how do you identify?" Lisa was her most demanding.

"Misanthropist." Gail winked at Holly who laughed. Even Rachel smirked.

That did not appease Lisa, however. "Seriously."

Gail sighed and picked up her drink. "I hate labels, you're worse than my parents." Hiding her smile behind her own drink, Holly squeezed Gail's knee under the table.

"Your family knows?"

"About Holly? Kind of. I haven't told them we got back together, which has nothing to do with Holly. I don't talk to my parents much in general. But I did tell them I was a lesbian at the family dinner." Gail smirked, "I like that word better than gay, Holly. Lesbian." Holly grinned and kissed her quickly. "So very much lesbian," smiled Gail.

Disgruntled but accepting, Lisa moved on and told Holly about her last date. Then Rachel told them about a trip to Paris and Holly glanced at Gail. If she was bored, she was hiding it well and simply
listened with her normal bitchy-resting-face expression. This time Holly had made sure to stress the fact that Gail wasn't being bitchy like that, and Lisa had understood.

Speaking of Lisa, she started droning on about the riding instructor at her barn and how she was amazing, and Gail tsked. "Yeah, she's straight."

Everyone stared at Gail again. "I'm sorry, do you even know who I'm talking about?" Lisa was about to be her worst.

And Gail rattled off some information about the instructor, including how she'd come in third at junior nationals twice. "She used to date her instructor in high school. Still does, even though he went after McNally a couple years ago." Holly quickly sipped her drink to hid a smirk.

Lisa was flabbergasted, "Why do you know that?"

"How do you know that?" Rachel was a little louder than necessary.

"We use those stables for training—"

"Gail Peck!" Lisa was floored. "Gymkhana Juniors champion four years running! Reserve senior champ-"


The reality that Gail was, in fact, not actually as blue collar as all that was known to Holly. The horseback riding was not. "You didn't tell me you rode horses."

"It doesn't come up much anymore. I mean, cops barely ride horses nowadays." She shrugged again, "Pecks have to know. Steve's terrible at it, though. Probably why he rushed for detective."

"She didn't just ride horses, Holly, she was a goddamn genius." Lisa was positively astounded and any lingering snideness seemed to have fallen away. "Why did you stop? Everyone said you could go to the Olympics!"

That was surprising and impressive and Holly looked curiously at Gail. "Because you're a Peck, right?" She smiled and kissed Gail again. In a way, she was grateful for Gail being a target as she didn't have to argue about the move. Again.

"Pretty much," sighed Gail. There was an undertone that Gail was just not going to talk about in front of Rachel or Lisa. "I went to the Academy, not a lot of time for that."

Rachel huffed, "I have to ask... Why a cop?"

"Pecks have been police officers in Toronto for ... As long as Toronto's had police. Family business." Gail caught Holly's hand under the table.

"Don't worry, they don't understand why I'm in forensics either," smiled Holly, squeezing Gail's hand.

It was after dinner, with Gail driving them back to Holly's, that a more real answer came out. "It's hilarious that I'm really only great at the stuff my family wanted me to learn so I could be a cop."

"You're a good cop, Gail, everyone says so."

"Yeah, and I'm supposed to be a great cop." She sighed, "I stopped riding, competitively, because
my parents said it was taking too much time away from all the other things I was supposed to do."

Holly frowned, "Why did you decide to join the force?"

There was a long silence and Gail tapped her fingers on the steering wheel. "It was a deal to get them off my back after the wedding. Don't get me wrong, I wanted to, but not as much as they did. They just expected me to do it and part of me felt I was supposed to. But ... The more I think about it, the more it's a thing I have to do. I mean, I get scared too, but when people need someone between them and the crazy, I just don't run away. I can do that." She side glanced at Holly. "Sorry, that's not really an answer."

Putting her hand on Gail's shoulder, Holly smiled. "No, I understand." It was hard to explain why she was in forensics. Why she had a need to answer those questions. "Besides, you're not a Peck."

Gail laughed, "Oh, really?"

"You're my Peck."

After a moment, Gail quipped, "Steve will cry."

Holly could tell Gail was trying defuse the tension. "I'm not about to ask Steve to come inside."
Looking at Gail drive, Holly made a decision. She let her voice drift lower, "Spend the night with me, Gail."

While Gail's eyes didn't leave the road, Holly was sure she was being checked out in the mirror.
They'd fooled around on the couch since getting back together, but they hadn't been as intimate, physically, as before. It was something they both wanted and just hadn't rushed back into. A flush was rising on Gail's neck. That was an encouraging reaction. So was Gail swallowing and nodding, "Okay."

The tone was so blasé it was pure Gail. "You can say no, honey."

"Uh huh," she replied, her voice a little higher than normal. Clearly she had no intention of declining the offer. Single syllables. Holly smiled smugly and leaned back in the seat.

Deciding not to tease Gail too much while she was driving, Holly stayed quiet until they got to her house and parked in the garage. Gail lingered at the door from the garage for a moment, her face still red. Holly took her hand, "Gail, I want you."

The blush deepened. Gail just nodded and followed Holly inside. When Holly put her purse down on the kitchen island, Gail stepped into her personal space and kissed the side of her neck from behind. Shuddering, Holly tilted her neck for more access. "Holly," she breathed, almost reverently, and brushed her lips against Holly's skin, hands lightly holding her waist.

That was two syllables. Holly sighed and turned around, bringing her hands up to run her fingers through Gail's short hair. They hesitated a moment before kissing, not in trepidation, Holly felt, but out of a need to experience everything anew. The kiss was hungry, no, starving, and Gail wasn't holding back any desires now. She was a little forceful but in a way that felt so right. Holly's pulse pounded as Gail pressed their bodies against each other. "Bedroom," she groaned.

Gail pulled away for a moment, her eyes half closed. "Soon," she agreed, and started to kiss Holly's neck and collarbone. Letting her head tip back, Holly squeezed her eyes shut and gave in to the feeling of Gail's lips on her skin. Oh god, yes. A hand slid under her shirt, touching her ribs, almost touching her breast. The lips were on her chin, and now her lips again, and they kissed.
She wasn't going to be able to keep standing and Holly took the effort to step back and pull Gail with her. "No, now." While Gail's face was still red and serious, her eyes were smiling. "I need you in bed," she informed Gail and led her upstairs.

There was a different kind of shyness in bed this time. The clothes came off faster, before they even got onto the bed, but there was a slower pace as Holly reacquainted herself with Gail's body. She'd lost some weight in the two months since they had last been naked in front of each other, in ways you couldn't easily tell when Gail was dressed. The non sporty girl had new muscle definition. "How did you change that much that fast," Holly wondered, running her hands over ab muscles that had not been quite that noticeable before.

"Lots of running." Gail's voice was still higher, more tense. "It was that or I killed Chloe."

Well, they couldn't have that. It was impressive how fast Gail built muscles and learned things. Holly wanted to take stock of every curve, count every bruise, and measure every inch of Gail's body. She gently touched Gail's left cheek, "Does it still hurt?" The discoloration was faded and nearly invisible, unless you spent a lot of time studying Gail's face.

"Not if you're kissing me." Gail threaded a hand through Holly's hair and pulled her in for a kiss. That was perfection. Their bodies were easing into sync quickly, where it was so simple to know what to touch and where and when and how. This was the easy part of Gail, of loving her. The universe was two people and everything made perfect sense.

And there were hands and lips and hands and finally, finally, release and sleep.

It was still dark when Holly realized Gail was talking. "Right now?" A pause, "I'm not. At home." A longer pause. "Are you sure? ... Well. If you don't, I will." She hung up and rolled onto her back with a groan of annoyance.

"You okay?" Holly yawned, completely awake now.

"Crap," muttered Gail, and she turned to look at Holly. "Sorry, Dov... You know what, doesn't matter right now." She leaned back to toss her phone onto the nightstand and then scooted closer to Holly, reaching over to brush the hair away from her face. "You are so beautiful, Holly," Gail whispered.

Holly blushed. "You're pretty sexy yourself, officer."

"I missed this so much." Gail's fingers trailed down Holly's face to her shoulder, arm, and then dipped under the sheets to find her hip. With a contented sigh, Holly's eyes drifted closed and she reveled in the sensations of Gail's fingers on her skin. She'd missed that too.

When Gail's hand moved to a more suggestive location, Holly curved towards the hand, only to have it inch away. "You're a tease," she muttered.

Lips pressed into her neck and Holly moved to give Gail more access, drawing her arms around the blonde. "Get used to it," Gail warned her. "I'm not leaving this any time soon."
Three coffees and she still wasn't really awake enough for parade. One of the coffees was Holly's super strong espresso. The second was a depth charge from a coffee house by her own apartment, which had been empty. The third was actually tea, handed to her by Andy.

"You look wiped," Andy remarked, slipping into a seat beside her.

"Long night." She sipped the tea, which was doctored the way she liked. "Thanks."

"Wow. I got a Peck thank you," joked Andy.

"Bite me," Gail grumbled and drank the tea.

"I feel better. You weren't at game night."

"Because that's sooooo much fun." But Andy was giving her a look. "What?"

"You had a date!"

Gail blinked a few times. She hadn't really been talking to Andy much since that day, and in the last three weeks, they'd really just talked about Sam, and Duncan (Gerald, whatever), and other things. Gail had not mentioned her personal life. "Oh. Yeah."

She tried to think about how to talk around it, when Oliver saved her. "Good to see one of my Diaz/Pecksteins made it to work," announced Oliver. "Peck, my office after parade."

So it was going to be that kind of day. Gail tried to put the night out of her mind, pretty unsuccessfully, and peeked at her phone. Messages from Holly but not Dov. Odds were that Oliver wanted to talk about Dov and Chris, so she flipped the sound off and surreptitiously texted Dov.

Oliver is looking for you - 30 min

As a child, her parents had drilled into her the need to listen, process, and multitask. Doing it at parade was easy, and she took notes while focusing on the day's routines. "And that's it people. Check the board for your assignments."

Gail glanced at her name on the board as she headed to Oliver's office. McPeck. Damn it, Oliver. Could be worse. At least Duncan could be trusted regularly with other officers now, though she felt a little bad for him being stuck with Chloe. "You wanted to see me, Oliver?" She tried to look bright eyed and bushy tailed, but probably didn't manage it.

"You sleeping okay, Gail?" Oliver looked seriously concerned.

Jesus, you don't sleep one night... "Yep." When she'd slept, it'd been great. It was just that there
hadn't been a lot of sleeping. Of course, the not sleeping part had been pretty fantastic too. Make up sex was awesome. She was sure her face was giving her away, but it was hard not to smirk.

Too late. Oliver noticed something. "Uh huh, so. Diaz and Epstein?"

"Not home when I got there." An honest reply.

"Everything okay with you three? Diaz has been weird, I know."

What? "Yeah, we're fine." Generally they watched each others backs, but this wasn't the first time Chris had been left to his own devices at night since he got hooked on drugs.

The desk phone rang and Oliver frowned. "Stay." She shrugged and finished her tea while he grabbed the phone. "Sgt. Shaw... Epstein! Where the hell are you? Uh huh. And Diaz? ... Peck's right here. Where the two of you should be. Get the hell in here."

Gail peeked at her own phone. Sometime between parade and now, Dov had texted her that Chris had been at Nick's and overslept and they were going to an NA meeting. "So. Patrol now?" She gestured at the door as Oliver hung up.

"Just... One thing." He hesitated, in his endearing dad way. "How are you?"

Unexpected. "Fine." An understatement to put it mildly.

Oliver, per usual, didn't buy it. "When a lot of stuff hits us at once, it's really hard to process all of it. And you, you've had a rough couple of years." Where was this going, wondered Gail, frowning. "That case hit you hard earlier this year."

She hesitated. "Yeah, it did."

"And I said things were going to hurt more for a while." Nodding, Gail had to admit that he was right. "Dov said you weren't home last night." Before Gail could ask what the hell was going on, Oliver added, "I asked Dov and Chris to keep tabs on you, after Perik."

Now she was annoyed, "You asked them?"

"They came to me... You were sleeping on their couch sometimes, Gail. Chris worried, and he didn't know what do with you." Oliver looked so pained, Gail felt guilty for being annoyed at him. "I told him that he and Dov should be your friend and watch out for you. Make sure you're not alone."

"Oh. That's... I thought this was about Chris."

"It is. Dov's going to run himself thin right now, looking out for you and Chris and Chloe." Oliver looked serious for a moment, though Gail wondered what he knew about Chris. "So I'm asking, are you okay?" Gail started to reply when Oliver said, "Don't just say 'yeah' okay? I'm serious. You've been through a lot, you're acting tense lately, and then you were out all night and you look... Well you look like you haven't slept. Gail, you're not drinking, are you?"

Gail stared at Oliver. "What?" She forgot to be a cool Peck in that exact moment. "That's where you all went?"

"Look, I'm just saying it's been an extra rough couple months, with you and Holly and breaking your face-"

"Oliver, I, literally, slept on my face wrong. Which is the second most annoying about that stupid
fracture. I wasn't drinking, I had a beer at dinner and..." She stopped. Damn it. It was Oliver. Gail tried to find that cool-as-a-cucumber Peck face and, as casually as possible, added, "And I spent the night at Holly's."

Oliver blinked. "Holly's."

"Yeah, Holly's."

"So you weren't home because you were at Holly's."

"Oliver, why does everyone need to know about my personal life?" She ran her hands through her hair. They were really intent on ruining a great thing, just because she wanted to hold on to it privately for a while.

"Because we care about you," but he was grinning. "You spent the night at Holly's. So ... Things are good?"

"Don't be an ass, Oliver. I know your secrets."

He smiled more. "We should have dinner. You and your girl, me and mine." She gave Oliver her best 'you are an idiot, please shut up' look, but he smiled. "I'll figure out dates! Go make the streets safer, Peck."

Gail escaped and pulled her phone out.

*Oliver interrogated me about our sleepover.*

She tossed her cup away and went to find McNally, while Holly replied.

*I told you to call in sick. You looked exhausted.*

*And whose fault is that? Headed on patrol with Andy. I'll text you later.*

"McNally! Come on." As expected, Andy was awkwardly talking to Sam. "I'm driving."

That got Andy's attention. "Why are you driving? I got you tea!"

"I got the keys!" She didn't, but she was closer to the garage and thus had the car keys and was in the driver's seat before Andy. "If you're nice, you can pick lunch."

Andy laughed, buckling in, and Gail pulled out of the lot. "You're in a good mood today. Date really that good?" Turning the car down the road to a scruffy part of their patrol, Gail pondered how to explain it. "I mean, what was she like? Or... Was it a she?"

"Yeah, I'm done with men, Andy," she sighed. "Team switched."

"Is it really that good?"

"No scratchy beard stubble or chest hair." Soft lips. Curves. Oh yes, women had everything men were missing. "Way less smelly." That made her think about the heady, mind-spinning smell that was Holly. The way the scent of her skin and sweat circumvented thought. The taste of ... Oh god, how Gail had missed that.

Andy seemed to accept that. "Okay you have a really good point there." There was a pause and Gail's phone beeped. "Is that her?"
"Probably." Gail checked the street. She wanted to check, but she'd been trying to be a better person, and better people don't text and drive.

"So? What's her name?"

Gail sighed. "Holly." That shut Andy up for a moment. "Don't act so shocked, we've been talking things out a lot."

"You didn't cheat on her like you did Nick, did you?"

"Oh, that would have been better on so many levels." And Gail actually detailed the drama for Andy, who asked all the right questions and made the right noises at the right places.

They paused at a perfect moment, Gail's hallway confessional, to check on a gang hanging outside a store. They'd looked like they were dealing drugs, but instead they were swapping thumb drives. Andy insisted on checking one, and they were rewarded with some interesting music.

"That has to be the weirdest deal I've seen," laughed Gail.

"It could have been an illegal software ring!"

"They use torrents for that, McNally, don't you read the notices?" When Andy looked indignant, Gail smirked. "You lose the lunch offer. I'm picking schwarma." She could get some for Oliver too, and try to bribe him off of his idea for dinner double dates.

"That so isn't fair! Man and you got laid last night too." When Andy caught sight of Gail's side eye, she huffed. "Oh come on, you look that tired and you're in a good mood?"

Gail's phone buzzed. It was probably Holly, but she ignored it for now. "Why are we having this conversation, McNally?"

"Oh. I thought... Sorry." When Gail glanced over, she saw Andy looking nervous again. Jesus, she was such a baby sometimes.

"If you start asking me for details about lesbian sex, I will tie you to the roof of this car."

Andy was quiet for a moment, "I think I'm jealous of you two. When did you get emotionally older than me?"

Wasn't that a funny thought. Part of why Gail had liked Andy was that they were the same age when it came to relationships, and similarly stupid. "Steve and I decided the Peck Cycle of Self-Sabotage and Relationship Jenga needed to stop."

"Jenga ... Wow, that makes perfect sense! Pull out the blocks, and boom." Why was Andy the only person who got that metaphor? "You really like her."

"Okay, now we're stopping!" But she smiled. She really liked Holly. The rest of morning patrol was quiet, so Gail pulled up at the middle eastern restaurant. "Ten bucks."

"I'm paying?"

"For yourself. Schwarma, fries, salad, coke. Trust me, it's heaven." Gail walked around the car and held her hand out, "Actually make it fifteen. We'll split Oliver's."

While Andy grumbled, she handed over a twenty. "I want my change, Peck!"
"Change comes from within, McNally!" Gail inhaled as she stepped into the store. It was quiet, as usual for a weekday. "If I wasn't hungry before," she sighed, happily.

"Officer Peck!" The old man behind the counter smiled, looking a little tense. "Your hair's growing out."

"It must be where yours is going, Mr. Abrams." She'd known the man for years, since before becoming a cop, and had always teased him about balding. When she'd shown up with her short hair, he'd been delighted. "Three chicken lunches, please."

"Three, one with no tomatoes, you seeing someone I should know?"

Gail hesitated and decided not to address that today. "My partner and I are bringing one back for Oliver. You know he can't say no to your wife's pita."

"I keep telling you, it's laffa. You should remember." In truth, she did, but the old teasing jokes were the best. Gail watched the old man move about, more stiffly than normal. He wasn't really old, but she wondered if he felt that way.

"You know, I know a great osteopath," she mentioned, pulling out her phone.

His head jerked in a funny, nervous, way. "Can't help getting old," he said, with forced levity.

Maybe it was something personal. Maybe he and his wife were having problems. Gail frowned but tabbed her phone open to answer the texts from Holly, one asking if Gail was going to kill Andy too, and another about lunch.

_Girl Guide McNally and I are getting schwarma. Want one?_

"Mr. Abrams, can you make that four?" Gail suspected it would not go to waste, no matter what. "No tomatoes on that one, too."

"Oh ho," he laughed, seeming to understand right away why there were no tomatoes on the new one. "I should get my wife here to girl gossip you." He would never actually ask, saying before that it was improper to speak to a girl about those things. But he would tease her a little.

_That sounds great. I'll call off the courier._

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"Oh ho," he laughed, seeming to understand right away why there were no tomatoes on the new one. "I should get my wife here to girl gossip you." He would never actually ask, saying before that it was improper to speak to a girl about those things. But he would tease her a little.

_That sounds great. I'll call off the courier._

_Girl Guide McNally and I are getting schwarma. Want one?_

"Mr. Abrams, can you make that four?" Gail suspected it would not go to waste, no matter what. "No tomatoes on that one, too."

"Hay is for horses."

That joke was old. "I thought your daughters were coming back from school for the summer."

His back stiffened. That wasn't good. "Today they're off. Not enough work."

Gail played it cool, "Sucks, doesn't it? Finish all your holidays and now it's dead?"

"Since when have you known my holidays?" The tease was a little forced.

"I remember the one in spring when you're closed for a whole week. The no bread one right by Easter." She knew what Passover was, even if Dov had been made to explain the details once.
Mr. Abrams smiled and handed over two bags. "Cokes?"

"Three Cokes. One Sprite." Oliver would be able to get away with a Sprite, but Celery would hassle him for a Coke. She paid, leaving a tip in the jar, and watched as he scribbled the receipt by hand, "Machine down?"

"My printer is stuck," he sighed. "My son-in-law swears he can fix it." The receipt went in the bag, which wasn't normal, and Gail thanked him. The receipt was always placed on the counter, with the change on top. Always. "Come again, and bring your friends."

She smiled and went back to the car. By the time she got there, she was frowning. "Here, check the receipt for me, will you?" She put both bags on Andy's lap before starting the car.

"Sure. You got my change?" Gail ignored her and pulled up Mr. Abrams name on the computer. Nothing for him or his kids. Or his son-in-law. "What's wrong?"

"Not sure. Maybe nothing," sighed Gail, tabbing through the family. She went back to the wife and started on her family. "Receipt?" The machine hadn't looked broken, and there had been no sign. But.. Why would he hand write the receipt?

Andy pulled it out, "Do I have to check his math?" She absently flipped it over and muttered, "Weird doodle." Doodle? Gail started the car and headed down the block. "It's all wiggles and shapes. What's up with that?"

"Give it here." Gail held out a hand while turning the car.

With a shrug, Andy held it over. "The station's the other way." Gail ignored the question and looked at the receipt. It wasn't doodles. "Gail, I know you got top scores on the driving course, but, um, can you look at the road?"

Instead, Gail swung into the alley behind the stores and stopped the car. "Shut up for a minute, Andy," she said quietly and stared at the paper. Those were not doodles. It was Hebrew script. She'd seen it before. Pulling out her phone, Gail saw three texts from Holly, but skipped them to take a photo of the receipt and send it to Dov. "Andy, ask dispatch to get Dov on the radio and translate what I sent him."

There must have been something in her tone, because Andy did it right away. The phone pinged her back with a translation. "Please help. Hostage." Gail was out of the car calling for backup, drawing her gun, "Andy, go around the front and tell Mr. Abrams we're missing an order of fries or something."

"That's your plan? Not waiting for backup?"

"He didn't say armed." Gail wasn't stupid, nor overly brave. She was confident though. Leaving her cell in the car, Gail waved Andy off and crept along the alley. People like Andy and Swarek ruled with their gut. Pecks used their brains, and Gail was no exception to that. Mr. Abrams had been glancing at the back. There was someone held back there.

"Store's closed now." Andy's voice was low and quiet in the radio. "Sign says back in 15."

"Copy," replied Gail.

She heard Andy knock on the door and ask, loudly, "Excuse me, Mr. Abrams?" Smart, smiled Gail. Andy was going to keep up the facade of a lost item.
Gail reached the back door and put her ear to it. She could hear people talking. "Just ignore her and she'll go away." That voice didn't have the same lilt or accent of the Abrams family. She looked at the basement windows, the small hinged ones, but they were closed. The lights were on. Gail oozed forward. "Andy, can you see anything?"

"Negative." Their voices were low. "Door isn't locked."

"Hold on." Gail leaned forward and looked in the window quickly. It had taken her years to train her eyes to be able to look at a room and lock it in her mind in that split second. "Two men. Mrs. Abrams is tied to a chair. Can you go in without making the bell jingle?"

There was a pause. "I think so."

"Okay, I'm going in the back." Gail stepped back to the door and turned the handle slowly. No sound. She pushed it lightly. Thank god for good maintenance, there were no squeaks. Waiting a long moment, Gail made sure none of the sounds changed, and slowly closed the door behind her. Pause. Wait. Listen. "I'm in," she told McNally.

"I'm in," repeated McNally. "Visual?"

"They're down the stairs." It was a poor tactical plan to charge them, and neither one of the officers suggested it. Even if it was only three steps, they didn't have a clear view.

"Second exit?"

"Negative." Gail checked her gun. "Front rooms?"

"Cleared." Andy stepped in from the front and nodded.

They took up flanking positions on either side of the door, listening carefully. The two strange men were talking about drugs. Andy and Gail shared a confused look, as the captors demanded the Abrams tell them where the drugs were.

Gail touched her radio, "Dispatch, 1521, what's the status on backup?"

"1521, dispatch. Backup is twenty minutes out."

"Copy. Hostage situation is drug related."

"Copy, drugs and guns units alerted."

They should wait. Protocol was protocol. But then they heard the sounds of someone being hit. It was possibly the only thing she and Andy would agree on. They locked eyes and nodded, Gail dropping low, Andy staying high. One step, Gail in front. Two steps, gun safety off. Three steps, turn.

"Police! Freeze!"
It was bad that every time she heard about shootings and 15 Division, Holly rushed to the station. In this case, Holly was actually at the station when she heard that Gail and Andy were involved in a shooting.

Seated at a desk was a very tired looking Dov. "Hi, Dov. Do you know where Gail is?"

He blinked at her. "Dr. Stewart. Uh, Gail's out with Andy. Were you supposed to meet her?"

"She asked me to meet her for lunch." Holly eyed Dov. "You can call me Holly."

Dov looked sheepish, "I just figured out where Gail was... I'm sorry for bothering you in the middle of the night."

"It's alright." She really hadn't minded, though going to her work physically exhausted was less of a problem than Gail doing the same. "Can you see where she is?" Holly gestured at the computer.

"Oh!" Dov reached for his keyboard when an alert went off from dispatch, calling in a hostage situation. The car number caught Dov's attention. "Crap, can you hang on a second?" Without waiting for an answer, Dov bolted to the office in back.

Holly sighed and sat down, wondering why cops were so weird, when an announcement came in for backup on the officer involved shooting. Assistance needed for officers McNally and Peck. Shots fired.

Her blood felt cold and Holly ceased to hear anything around her. She wasn't sure she was even breathing. "I got it, Epstein. Go, take Other Peck." The names pierced her horror, and she turned to see the white shirt. Oliver Shaw. "Hey, Holly, come with me for a minute, okay, darling?"

She had heard him call Gail that, darling, and without processing much, Holly followed him to his office and allowed Oliver to sit her on his couch. "Shooting?" Her voice shook.

"You just sit and breath for a moment, Gail's gonna kill me if you pass out." The use of present tense caught Holly's attention. "She's fine. Andy's fine. They're waiting on guns and drugs to take over the scene."

"But ... Shooting?"

"Hey, hey, I know that's scary stuff, okay?" He sat down next to her. "They had everything under
control. No one got hurt, okay?"

Holly felt like she was about to cry and Oliver pulled her in to a hug. Waterworks. "We just... I
just..."

He patted her back gently, like a father. "I know." And Holly suddenly understood why Gail adored
this man. He was a rock in a storm. A gentle, wonderful, soul. "It takes a while to get used to this
kind of thing, if you ever do," he told her. "My wife never did. Celery, she gets it."

"Celery?" Holly blinked at the name.

"My girlfriend. Gail didn't tell you?" He sighed. "You two should talk. You and Celery I mean. We
cops, we do crazy things like get shot at or kidnapped or hold grenades. And you, you crazy people
who love us... I think it's harder for you."

Holly shuddered and let go of Oliver. "I was coming by for lunch," she whispered.

Handing over a box of tissues, Oliver smiled. "You're having schwarma too? Perfect, it'll help."

Really, Holly had no idea how that would help, but a cup of tea did. Oliver had her wait in his office,
and he ran back and forth, bringing her news of where Gail was, her ETA, and promises that the
food would be good. It did help calm her down, surprisingly, and Holly was able to erase most of the
signs of crying by the time Andy and Gail arrived.

She heard them first, and Oliver asked Andy to come with him, sending Gail to his office. "Hey,
sorry the food's cold," she said quietly, closing the door. There was a smudge of dirt on her face.

"You were shot at," whispered Holly.


Her hands started to shake again, and Gail took the tea mug away. "Is it always going to be like this?
People throwing radios at you and shooting at you?" Gail took her hands and said yes, softly. "I
don't know how anyone can live like that," she whispered, looking at Gail in fear.

Stiffening, Gail looked down at their hands, "This is what I do, Holly." She sighed, "I wish I could
promise I'll always be safe, but ... This is what I am."

It was clear that Gail thought Holly was about to dump her. The only way to explain otherwise was
to hug her, and Holly buried her face in Gail's neck. She didn't care that Gail smelled nasty or that
she was still dirty. She cared that Gail came back to her. "Promise me something."

"Anything," agreed Gail, her face pressed against Holly's hair.

Holly knew she was about to ask something unreasonable and impossible to hold Gail to, but she
said it anyway. "Always come back to me."

The negotiations with Holly had been harder than with social services. All social wanted to know
was how serious Gail was about Holly, since she hadn't mentioned her before except to Anne. Holly,
on the other hand, wanted to know what Gail expected of her. After patiently explaining she just
wanted them to meet, possibly to be friends, and if not, Holly never had to see or hear about Sophie
again, Gail was surprised by a glare.

"Gail Peck, don't do this. Don't chase me away."
"I'm not! I'm just... I'm trying not to pressure you or-

"It feels like you're making me decide if I want you and Sophie or nothing at all."

Gail took Holly's hands, "No. I swear no. That's not at all what I'm saying." She chewed her lip. "I love you. And yeah, I love this kid, but it's not the same thing."

But Holly was not convinced, "I don't know if I want kids... No... I don't want them, Gail. Not right now, maybe not ever. So this is a big thing."

"Okay, I understand that." She studied Holly's face. "If I was volunteering as a big sister or mentor, would you be okay with it?"

Blinking, Holly nodded, "Sure."

"Well, that's what this is now."

Holly frowned, "If they'd said you could adopt... Where would we be?"

"I don't know. I don't know that I can know, Holly." She drew Holly's hands up to her mouth and kissed them lightly. "I want a lot, and I know I'm asking a lot right now. I kinda got into this without you, and I didn't expect, I didn't even dare to dream I could have this back. I'm as lost as you are, baby."

In the end, Holly agreed to meet Sophie. The girl, upon seeing Gail, sprinted away from her social worker to get a huge hug. Immediately she started telling Gail about how she was learning French, and proceeded to flaunt her vocabulary. When Gail replied in kind, Sophie cheered, announcing she knew Gail would know French. Only then did Gail lead her over to where Holly was sitting with the social worker.

"Sophie, remember I told you about my girlfriend?"

The little girl looked up with curious eyes at Holly. "She's prettier in person," Sophie said, in the childish whisper that was not quiet at all.

"Why do all your friends say that?" Holly blurted the question and then blushed.

"Because it's true," Gail smiled and sat down next to Holly. "Sophie, this is Holly." Hands were clasped in a very adult manner.

After a moment scrutinizing Holly, Sophie declared, "You don't look like a doctor. Gail said you were a doctor and took care of her after she stopped a radio with her face."

"I'm a forensic pathologist." Noticing Holly's hand shaking, Gail reached over and took it in her own.

The action was not missed by Sophie, but she was more interested in Holly's words at them moment. "What does that mean?" So Holly explained, in broad terms, that she helped find out why people died. This led to a few more related questions about how Holly and Gail worked together sometimes, and finally, "Did you find out how my mom died?"

Holly looked panicked and stared at Gail. "No, she didn't," replied Gail calmly, squeezing Holly's hand in support. "But we met at a crime scene." And she easily distracted Sophie from that topic by telling her how she'd tried to arrest Holly at the scene.
The intentional inaccuracies in Gail's story made Holly step in to correct her, and soon they were bantering about the day. Sophie giggled and claimed Gail's free hand, leaning against her to continue talking to Holly. They quickly found common ground in movies, both having loved *Frozen* (though Gail got a light glare from Holly when Sophie leaked that Gail had taken *her* first).

After a while, Gail and the social worker stepped away to talk about the current status of Sophie's situation, as well as the idea Gail'd had, but also to let Holly and Sophie talk a little more privately. Holly had barely noticed Gail left until she came back and kissed her cheek, "Come on, you nerd, it's time to go."

Sophie pouted but hugged Gail tight. "She's nice. I like her." This time, Sophie remembered to keep her voice quiet.

"I like her too," Gail whispered back.

The conversation was repeated in the car, with Holly, though not in whispers. The difference being Holly added, "I see why you like her. I worried it was just guilt."

"You, my therapist, social services, and everyone else," acknowledged Gail, sighing.

"Speaking of social services..."

Gail pursed her lips and turned the car down a different direction than Holly's place. "Someone I know might kinda be a good fit."

"Someone ... Peck?" Holly looked worried.

"Ew, no. Someone sane. Remember the wedding?"

Holly laughed, "I don't think I can forget, honey." Then she caught on, "Wait, they'd adopt her?"

"Foster," corrected Gail. "I asked Noelle for advice when I started this, cause she did the whole IVF thing for a kid and... Well she's still on maternity leave, but she was interested when I brought it up." That had been weird, asking Frank if she could come over to talk to them.

Frank had been surprised, but he'd also been the frequent recipient of political workplace bullying by Elaine Peck, and having her daughter talk to them about fostering a kid because *she* couldn't was, they all agreed, really not what they'd expected. Noelle was amused at how much Gail had grown, and said she'd think about it, in a way Gail read as 'I will talk Frank into this.' The girl network was amazingly powerful.

This was explained to Holly, who was very quiet. "You'd be cool Aunt Gail?"

"I guess, yeah."

More silence, and Gail pulled up at a quiet French restaurant. Holly remained quiet as they were seated and until they ordered. "I think I could be okay with being Aunt Gail's girlfriend."

Gail covered her smile with a sip of her iced tea. "Thank you, Holly."

With a sigh and a smile, Holly reached across the table to touch Gail's arm. "You're very persuasive, honey. And clearly deficient in musicals, cartoons, and sci-fi. Someone has to help her!"

"Do you want kids?"
Gail froze where she was, her lips just starting to move from Holly's collarbone to regions southern. "What?" She pulled her head up, perplexed and flustered, fingers still on the buttons of Holly's blouse.

"Kids." Holly managed to force her voice into calm and casual, trying not to let Gail's hands get the better of her. She even tugged Gail back up to settle in an easy cuddle on the couch.

There was a frustrated grumble from Gail, but she rested her head on Holly's shoulder. "Yes, I want kids." Gail's hand slipped under her shirt, fingers roaming over Holly's stomach. "Why?"

Holly squirmed, "I don't really right now."

"I know that, you dork," laughed Gail, surprising her. "You told me before."

"Oh. I just thought... I mean, with Sophie and all..."

Propping herself up, Gail frowned at Holly. "Are you worried I'm going to leave you because of kids?"

No. Holly was more worried Gail was going to leave her because she was dead. There was a scratch on Gail's arm right now, caused by nothing more than a failed attempt at learning soccer, but it worried Holly nonetheless. "Yes," she replied. "I don't want you to get dissatisfied. Regret not having kids in thirty years."

Gail made a soft noise and kissed Holly's neck. "Thirty years, huh? You see us together that long?"

Holly swallowed a dry throat. It was a measure of her fear that she realized she'd rather talk about kids than make out with Gail just now. It had been getting worse, and she knew it. The more she thought about what Gail did, the dangers, the more she wanted Gail here with her safe. The more she wanted to touch her, like Gail was touching her right now.

But at the same time, the constant little things were driving her crazy. Ok, being shot at was a big thing. The bruises, the sore muscles, the aching back, the feet, the headaches, were wearing on Holly. She found herself constantly panicking every time Gail so much as winced. It was worse when she caught Gail taking extra time stretching before they ran. Was something wrong?

"Hey, baby, what's wrong?" Gail had stopped kissing her and the hand on her stomach stilled.

"Sorry," mumbled Holly and she squirmed out from under Gail, feeling a need to put distance between them.

Gail frowned, "Don't you go up a tree, Holly." Her voice was tender. She pulled her legs up to sit cross legged on the couch, facing Holly. "Yes, I want kids. I love them. But they don't have to be my kids. I want them in my life. That doesn't mean they have to be in my house."

"You wanted to adopt on your own!"

"Sophie was different. Is different."

"What if there's another Sophie?"

Looking thrown, Gail exhaled sharply. "Well. Okay, what if you have a Sophie?"

Holly blinked. She had never loved children like Gail, and she wanted to say it was impossible. Gail loved them because they weren't people yet, but Holly feared them for the same reason. Neither she
nor Gail really understood people like Dov or Oliver did. Motive was different. Understanding people who knew who they were was hard enough. Understanding people who were figuring it out? Just look at her record with straight girls.

Gail reached over and put a hand on Holly's leg. "I love you, Holly. I'm not running away, I'm not giving up or settling or anything else. I want to be here, with you."

Holly nodded, but didn't say anything. She had doubts. She would, possibly, always have them. But now, this time, she let Gail's gentle touch turn her face and bring her into a kiss. There were too many things to fear right now, with Gail getting hurt again, or changing her mind about kids, or what about men? It was all just too much sometimes.

Gail sprawled on Holly's bed, giving in to the feeling of absolute relaxation seeping into her bones. Hands pressed down on her shoulders again and Gail groaned. "Not too hard?" Holly's voice was soft.

"No, it's great."

Holly continued to massage Gail's shoulders, "Good." She moved her hands to Gail's neck and gently pressed on the muscles. She was sitting on the back of Gail's thighs, which was exceptionally comfortable.

"I hate softball," muttered Gail.

"You're supposed to slide feet first." She could hear Holly smirking. "And you don't slide into first at all. I told you you could overrun it down that path."

"That pitcher was going to touch me with the ball, and I know that means I'm out."

"She would have had you out by touching the bag, silly."

"I'm never playing with you again."

"The fact that you are topless in my bed suggests that may be a lie, Ms. Peck."

"That's Constable Peck to you, evil doctor." She winced when Holly pressed on a sensitive spot on her back.

"At least you're not going to tease me about hurting my back hitting a home run anymore."

"Says who?"

Holly laughed, "Gail, you tried to dislocate your shoulder sliding into first base!"

"And who hit the ball that scored a touchdown?" There was no reply and Gail smirked. "I know it's called a run."

"You are insane." Holly moved off Gail's legs and kissed the sore shoulder. "Need anything?"

Sitting up, Gail carefully rotated her shoulder and grimaced, "Yes. Do you have any Tiger Balm?"

"No, but hang on." Holly kissed her briefly and vanished into the bathroom. She was spending a rather large amount of time damaged at Holly's place. Of course, it was somewhat normal for Gail to come home banged up and bruised. It was not normal for Holly. "Salonpas," announced Holly, coming back with a patch. She carefully applied it to the stiffest part of Gail's shoulder.
It didn't smell as strong as Tiger Balm, thought Gail, and she tried to see what it was. "Is this like icy hot?"

"Similar, but they had better double-blind results. And you can wear a shirt." Holly held out Gail's shirt. Her eyes darted around Gail's body, doing an inventory. When they stopped on the discoloration on Gail's ribs, which was from bouncing off a car door last week chasing a perp, Holly turned away. This was not the first time Holly had stopped looking at Gail's body, and it was starting to get worrying.

"I was thinking I'd walk around topless for the rest of the day." But she took the shirt and put it on, following Holly out of the bedroom. They hadn't really talked about things regarding Gail's work since the schwarma case. While Gail cheerfully accepted free schwarma for life, and grumpily took the commendation for being the reason a drug smuggling ring was discovered, Holly had been tight lipped about the whole thing.

Actually, Holly had been very hands off lately, in the physical sense. They'd run around and had fun, hiking and playing softball (not that Gail would admit it was fun at all). But other than kissing, there had been a dearth of physical intimacy. Gail was pretty sure Holly was still creeped out about the shooting that wasn't even a shooting. The idiot drug runner/kidnapper shot his own damn foot! Andy and Gail hadn't ever laughed so hard giving statements before.

"That would make dinner interesting," joked Holly, but her voice was too tense to make it funny.

While it would be easier to climb a tree, Gail took a deep breath. "Hey, can I ask an awkward relationship question?"

Holly paused on the last step of the stairs. "That you're asking it that way fills my heart with terror, Gail."

"It's … I love you. You know that, right?"

"Was that your awkward question? Because yes, I know, and no, it's not awkward."

"No. I just want you to know I'm not, like, trying to break up or anything stupid like that!"

"Not helping," and while Holly smiled, it was a tense look.

This was not a conversation that was going to be easy, and Gail knew it. But when your girlfriend started getting weird about touching you, or looking at you, and stopped sleeping well, you had to do something, didn't you? Scratching the back of her head, Gail grimaced. "Does it bother you, me coming here banged up all the time?"

"Yes," admitted Holly, faster than Gail had expected. "I hate it." She looked down the staircase and away from Gail, her face tightening up.

"I don't have to—"

"Please don't say you don't have to come over when you're hurt, or I'll never see you." Holly's voice sounded tense, and she walked into the kitchen.

Defensively, Gail wanted to point out it wasn't every time, but the reality was at least every week she had something new. Usually it was something strained or sore, but sometimes it was a bruise from an arrest. Gail was adrift for words. Not at a total loss, as she had an idea where to go with the conversation. She leaned against the stairwell. "Okay," she said to buy some time. "What do you hate about it?" She had a good idea, but just in case she was off base, Gail figured she should ask.
With one hand on the refrigerator door, Holly stood perfectly still. "All of it. Every time I see you, you have a new bruise, or something hurts, or you're sore. Like, last week when you were limping? I had this whole terrible, horrible story in my head that you'd kicked a drug dealer or twisted your ankle jumping a car, or ... Pretty much anything except having a stupid ingrown toenail because your nail clipper was old." Holly turned to look at Gail. She wasn't crying, which didn't help Gail understand her mood in the slightest. "I hate that I have five ice packs in my freezer, just in case you come over hurt again. And I hate worrying that I'm going to hurt you when I touch you when you come here. Or that you're going to call me from the ER again or, or worse."

The fact that Holly dumped all that so fast meant Gail was right about needing to talk. And she was right about exactly what was going on. "Okay," she said slowly. "Do you want me to take the sergeants exam?"

Holly looked blank for a moment. "What does that have to do with anything?" Thankfully she didn't sound angry, just confused.

"White shirts don't generally get involved in the psychical stuff." It was more boring, in Gail's opinion, but she wanted to see where Holly's mind was at.

Scowling, Holly pointed at Gail. "You are not quitting your job to sit at a desk and order people around. And you don't want that."

That escalated quickly. "Good? I ... Holly let's sit down okay?" They moved to the living room but Holly kept standing. Oh good. Gail sighed and sat down on the couch, looking up. "I don't want you to be scared every night."

"You're a little late on that, Gail." Holly's snide reply was on par with Gail's best.

Any enjoyment Gail found in Holly's ability to give as good as she got was lost by the truth of that statement. "There are other cop jobs that aren't as dangerous," she said softly.

"Yeah, and I'd still freak out if you came home with a hangnail!" Holly looked bitter and before Gail could comment, she added, "Yes, I know how unfair I'm being."

Gail took another deep breath. She couldn't believe she was about to say this. "Holly. I think you see a therapist." Never before had Gail seen Holly's face shut down like that. "Don't tell me I'm being unreasonable, Holly," she continued softly.

"I really don't want to talk about this." Holly folded her arms in a posture Gail read as defensive and scared.

"I know." She pitched her voice the same way she did when talking to children. This was a time to be careful and kind. "But I'm a cop. And it's scary." Her standard of using small words might backfire here, but Gail held on to that. The theory was that if you lowered the wall, it was easier to talk about things.

Holly turned away, but did not walk away. "Were you scared about your parents?"

"Not often," she admitted. "But I was ... They're older, you know? By the time I was born, they both had desk positions." Gail sat back, trying to project the aura of comfort and safety. "I was more worried someone would shoot them at a press conference or something public." She remembered crying to Steve about assassination fears.

Facing away, Holly's back stiffened. "Great, so even if you get a desk job, you'll still get shot at."
"Well. Yes." There was no point in lying or trying to make it light. "I'm a Peck, Holly. I'm always going to be a target of something."

Holly didn't say anything for a little while, and Gail let her wait. Luke taught her that waiting people out had a power all it's own. "Does it help you? Talking to a stranger?"

Exhaling, Gail looked at the ceiling. In public, she made a lot of wise ass comments about therapy. It was no secret that she hated the department therapist, and being made to talk to anyone stuck in her craw. "Sometimes it does. I don't really have anyone to talk to about stuff."

That got a reaction. Holly pivoted and looked absolutely hurt. Quickly Gail reviewed what she'd just said. Her mother had always stressed she memorize what she said, so she could regurgitate it in court later, and Gail had found it to be a strange benefit to a relationship with a woman. Rarely had she ever found a need to do this dating guys. "You don't have anyone?"

Gail winced a little. "Well. No. Not about some things. I mean, I couldn't exactly talk to you when we weren't an us, could I?" It was rational. Hopefully Holly could understand that. "And right now, I really don't think you'd be okay with me telling you why I'm annoyed about the stupid commendation, 'cause every time I mention it, you get that look on your face." She pointed at Holly, who was currently wearing a closed expression, clearly unhappy and trying to hide it with blankness.

Called out, Holly tried to force her face into any other expression and failed. "What look?"

"The one that says I'm really freaked out about my girlfriend getting hurt, to the point that I'm not really sleeping well, I'm scared to touch her, and it's a problem I don't want to talk about.' And … I can't believe I'm saying this, but I do want to talk about it."

Holly's face tightened. "It's not …" She stopped and tightened her arms around herself.

Okay. Here was the hard part. Gail looked at her own hands for a moment and then, slowly, made herself watch Holly's face. "If you can't deal with this, it's okay."

She did not want to say it at all. The very idea that she was trying to give Holly an out burned. But being with someone who was going to be miserable with you wasn't fair to either of you. Gail learned that with Nick, twice, and she'd be damned if she did that to Holly.

It was a little gratifying to see the abject shock and horror on Holly's face. "You're giving me an out?" She was a little incredulous.

Gail put her elbows on her knees and rested her chin in her hands. "No, I'm reminding you that you have one."

"You're not," replied Gail, earnestly. "I've just— I've seen a lot of relationships fall apart over this. Oliver, my godfather, my aunt, cousin Larry. And it's stupid, right? Because you fell in love with me for who I am, and what I am, and now it's making it all hard and weird and I know you love me, but it's hard. When I get hurt, which is gonna happen, it's gonna be painful for you. And, baby, I have a lot of baggage."

Holly's arms twitched, but she stayed where she was. "I don't want a therapist to tell me the best thing is to leave you," Holly said in a small voice.

Puffing a laugh that wasn't funny at all was all Gail could do. "God, neither do I."
"What if they do?"

In Gail's experience, it had never come to that, but she could imagine it might one day. "Then maybe that's the right thing for us." It took monumental effort to keep her voice relaxed, and Gail was abruptly grateful for years of police work. Though she was never going to tell Holly she treated her like a terrified witness.

Finally Holly sat down, though not beside Gail. She took a seat on her coffee table. "I'm scared," she said, staring at Gail's knees. "About us."

Gail reached out one hand and put it on Holly's knee, trying to be comforting. "Me too." She'd lost Holly once before, and the idea of telling her it was okay to leave was horrible. If given the option, she'd rather watch Dov and Chloe make out than even consider this.

One of Holly's arms wormed out of its protective shield enough to cover Gail's hand. They both sat there, looking at their hands, for a long time.

Chapter End Notes

Don't panic! They're not breaking up at all, they just have some things to work out. And that's why there's one more chapter for this part. Chapter 20 doesn't even get you to the half-way point of this fic. Yikes.
Science was great. You could put the right formulas in and there were answers, solutions. You never had to speculate on their meaning, unless you were a cop like Gail, you just had to process evidence and study bodies and report the findings. And damn it all, Holly loved that about science. Working backwards to figure out that someone had lived in another country based on the density of their bones was, as Gail would say, the shit she lived for.

The fluffy 'science' of psychiatry was not Holly's cup of tea.

If she'd have her way, her brain would cheerfully accept the fact that Gail had a high stakes, high risk job, and move on. Her brain had other plans, like waking up and freaking out when Gail wasn't in bed. Which wasn't uncommon, even when Gail was spending the night. She caught herself listening to the reports from dispatch more often, straining to hear if anything was happening at 15. And she was afraid to touch Gail half the time.

Which is why she agreed with Gail, and ended up going to talk to a therapist. She was entirely annoyed with the necessity, and after a weekly visit for a month, entirely displeased with the current results. There weren't answers for any of the problems in her head, just more questions and poking at them to talk about them. It was like inviting the world's neediest girlfriend into your life, and having them badger you for an hour.

It wasn't helping much that Gail didn't come over on nights when Holly had talked to the therapist either. Initially, Holly had been surprised that Gail didn't want to have dinner after her session. "You won't want to," Gail had said both knowingly and cryptically. And that first time, she was annoyingly correct. Holly's head had felt full and confused and talking to Gail, or even looking at her, was painful to contemplate.

That wasn't how she felt right now, and as soon as she pulled into her garage, she yanked her phone out to call Gail. "You suck," she informed her girlfriend, not giving Gail a chance to say hello.

"Ooookay," drawled Gail. There was a muffled sound, Gail talking to someone else, and then a door closed. "What did I do?"

"You and your stupid therapy idea. This is stupid. It sucks, and I hate it and it's not doing me any good. I still hate you getting hurt, and I'm still worried about you."

Gail sounded amused, "Baby, I really don't think that is gonna change."

"Then why am I going," wailed Holly, throwing her fridge door open. She stared at the take out boxes which had not been there that morning. "And why do I have food in my fridge. Were you over?"

"Yeah, I picked up your usual 'I am grumpy' order from the Chinese place."

"I'm not grumpy! I'm pissed off at wasting my time and money." She put an assortment of the take out on to a plate. "Four weeks. Four hours, where I sit in a room and she doesn't even ask me questions half the time!" Holly slammed the microwave door and stabbed the reheat button hard enough to make her finger hurt. "I mean, she doesn't even ask me why I'm worried about you in the first place! Or why it scares me. Which, no thanks to her, I figured out was because I'm in love with you and I don't want to lose you. Duh, thanks a lot." Holly huffed and looked at her finger. In the silence, she realized Gail hadn't spoken for a while. "You're very quiet."
"I was waiting for you to finish." Gail sounded exceptionally polite. "You didn't say that before, you know."

Holly paused and tried to think about what she just said. "Say what?" More than once, Gail had repeated, word for word, something Holly had said. It was creepy, and Holly asked her not to do it anymore. Especially if they were fighting.

"You said you're in love with me and didn't want to lose me."

"What? I never said that before?"

"Nope." Gail popped the P in nope.

Holly frowned and took her food out of the microwave. "Isn't it obvious?"

"Sometimes," allowed Gail. "But, y'know, I'm all fuzzy inside now. It's nice."

That was a strange thing to contemplate. "Do I not say I love you?"

"You do."

Which meant the other part, about not wanting to lose Gail, had been unsaid. Holly stared at her dinner, confused, and thought back over the day. "I've always thought that. I hated it the first time. I don't want you to be just ... Gone." So why had she not said it before? "Oh. Shit."

"Hm?"

"Son of a bitch, that goddamned therapist!" Holly groaned and covered her face. All this time she'd just not been willing to say that out loud? "Am I an idiot?" How stupid did you have to be to not know that you were afraid of losing someone to the point that you couldn't say it. "Why is just saying this making me feel better?"

There was a laugh on the phone, "Did I tell you about the dinner with my family? The one you were gonna come to?"

"You ... No." Holly knew that sometimes Gail would go on a tangent that didn't feel at all related, but would loop back around.

"Steve and I went, solo, and it was epically horrible. Every way you could imagine. And my mother said that now that I broke up with you, she had a nice young man I should meet."

Holly scowled. "I'm mad at her right now. Is that okay?"

"Join the club. I'm President, Steve's the Treasurer." Gail chuckled. "So I told her that I was a lesbian."

Out of nowhere, Holly felt better. She smiled and felt her face warm up. "At dinner?"

"Yep. I said I was a lesbian and asked Steve to pass the salt."

Holly giggled. "What did Steve do?"

"Passed the salt, duh. But. That was the first time I said I was a lesbian to them, out loud. And it felt good. Like everything was going to be easier. I didn't care who knew I was into women, I mean, it was kind of obvious, right? But saying it changed how freaked I was about it."
Which was why Holly was feeling better. "How come you're smart about this?"

"I have a lot more issues, baby. You should eat dinner before you have to re-reheat it."

Holly sighed. The daunting realization that Gail was getting smart about dealing with her shit simply because she had that much to deal with was depressing. "Will you come over?"

There was hesitation on the phone. "You sure?"

"I think... I want to see you. I don't want to talk about everything, but I want to hug you." She paused and felt herself blushing. "I don't want to be alone right now."

After a moment, Gail exhaled and replied in the best way. "Okay. I'll be right over."

"I'm not used to you being happy," Chloe told her at the Penny.

"I'm not used to drinking with someone with that shitty a dye job, but there's a first for everything," remarked Gail, sipping her beer.

Per usual, Chloe did not rise to the bait. "And the beer. You don't drink hard stuff as much."

Gail put the pint glass down. "Is there a reason for all this, Chloe?"

The smaller woman smiled and shrugged. "I was thinking ... Dov actually talking to me, making up. That was you."

It was, but Gail was loathe to admit it. "Yeah, right. Because I want to hear the Dork Kingdom banging in the next room over." Truth was, she did. The alternative was to listen to Dov lament about his relationship, and in a house with a recovering addict and a broken heart (at the time at least), fixing one thing felt a hell of a lot better.

"You like me."

"No, I don't," snarled Gail. "I tolerate you."

There was no reply to that, as their order of mini burgers showed up. After a whole day riding with Gerald, Gail would actually rather hang out with Chloe. Since Chris, Dov and Holly were working, at least hanging out with Chloe seemed better than being alone.

It had not taken long for Gail to really hate an empty house. Once in a while it was alright, but actually being alone for a whole night hadn't ended well recently. Things came and went of their own volition, without any regard for Gail's wishes. This time of year was turning out to be tense and frustrating, though. The weather had fooled her, being colder than normal, and she wouldn't have thought about it, but Oliver had asked if she wanted the day off in such a weird way she'd had to think what he meant.

Dates were not Gail's forte. She rarely remembered the date of anyone's birthday, and she constantly forgot the date that Nick's parents died (even though she had good cause to remember that). If Steve hadn't programmed them into her phone, she'd forget her own parents birthdays and their anniversary.

When she and Holly started getting serious, Gail warned her. Holly wisely took a page from Steve's book and programmed her birthday into Gail's phone, but not their anniversary. After all, how did you count a relationship that started at a crime scene and just fell into something more.
But. Today was a day she didn't want to remember, and everyone else did. Today was a day she could have cheerful blocked out for eternity.

"Why did you stop drinking?"

Jesus. Chloe. "Because I have to drive home."

Lie. Because drunk and remembering Perik led to vomiting.

Chloe split the fries, putting ketchup on a bread plate. "How come you're not scared?"

"What?" Gail stared at the woman, absolutely lost.

The vinegar was passed over for Gail to doctor her fries. "Scared. Sometimes, when I hear a gunshot, I freak out. I think ... Maybe it's going to happen again." Chloe touched her neck. "And stupid Wes left the blood clot, which could still kill me, thank you. And I think every day that I could die."

Gail narrowed her eyes. "And you're telling me this because..."

"Because something happened to you," whispered Chloe. "I didn't know... I didn't see it before. But it's like, now that I've seen death, which I know is such a trope, right? But now that I've seen it, I can see it in people. Like Oliver."

"It's a different club," Gail muttered and ate a fry.

"What-"

"No," growled Gail. "No, just... No. Ask Dov, shit, ask Andy or Traci. I don't care, but I'm not talking about it." And of all things, Chloe backed off, apologizing. Everyone knew anyway, but she wasn't going to tell Chloe when she could barely tell Holly.

The thing was that it sucked. Literally. It sucked the air out of her lungs, preventing her from talking about things. It sucked her courage away. It sucked her self-confidence. So she put up more walls, cared less, and hunkered in cynicism. They ate the fries in silence, Chloe volunteering to get the next round, and when she came back with beer for both of them, Gail cleared her throat.

"I'm a cop," she told Chloe. "I go out and protect people who have no idea what the hell is out there. I'm Buffy. I stop things from being worse, I catch losers doing stupid things. So ... No matter how scared I am, no matter how much I don't want to do it, I have to do this. I have to put my vest on and go out there because there isn't another choice for me."

The words sat there between them. Chloe's eyes were wider than normal and she nodded, looking relieved. "Thank you," she whispered.

Instead of going straight home, Gail offered to drive Chloe to her place. Anything to defer the possibility of nightmares. She almost accepted Chloe's offer to come in and hang. Desperate much? What she wanted really was to be asleep, preferably with Holly near her. Holly wasn't home tonight, Holly was working overtime, on some sort of punishment gig after her re-hiring.

So she lied to Chloe, said she was just going home to crash, and drove. And drove. It was like going on patrol, only she drove by her friends' places. The lights were off at Sam's but on at Andy's, implying god knows what. Nick's living room lights were on and the flashing colors indicated he was watching TV. Or sleeping with the TV on. Sometimes he did that too.
Nick *should* have been the person to talk to. He should have been the one who understood any of it. But he didn't and he wasn't and he couldn't. He understood pain, but not when it was you. Nick was the guy who understood loss, not horror. Nick was the guy who lost everything, always, and forever.

For a very long time, Gail felt the same way. That maybe he and she were meant for each other because everyone else left them. Even after Nick left her, twice. She took him back because he did, eventually, come back. And yet it was never right. She was always going to break his heart because he wouldn't give her his.

Oliver, also, she couldn't talk to. He was home and clearly with Celery, as the lights and sounds from that apartment were friendly and welcoming. Celery would let her in, no doubt, just to hang out, and Oliver had texted her earlier, asking how she was. Gail had lied, said she was fine, and ignored the question.

She didn't drive out to the PeckMansion. She couldn't do that, since they'd see her car, know *something* was up, and berate her for not getting over it. Two years, she should be over it, right? Gail knew she'd never be over it, but she may one day be able to better cope with it. She did check on Steve, in his shitty apartment, and then Traci and her mother. Frank and Noelle. She'd have called Sophie if it wasn't such a shitty hour.

Knowing that Holly was at work didn't change the need she had to just go to her house, though. Gail drove to Holly's, letting herself in through the garage. She turned off the car and texted Holly, knowing she wasn't going to get an answer.

*Are you stuck at work?*

Surprisingly, she got a text back in moments.

*Till god knows when.*

*I'm at your place. Is that okay?*

*Honey, you can always be there.*

Gail wasn't sure if it would be harder to easier to be at someone else's that night. She checked Holly's front door, the security system, and then the whole house. That night, Nick hadn't replied at all. Not to the calls or texts. But Holly did. She replied right away when Gail texted, even though she was busy.

Sitting on the couch, Gail tried to convince herself that being home alone was okay and safe and normal, but it wasn't working. She tried watching television, but every sound started to get to her, make her twitch.

Damn it. Chloe had to ask, didn't she? Oliver had to care, didn't he? She could have just forgotten the damn date and moved on with her life.

What did normal people do in these moments?

Gail looked at her phone and picked it up. The last time she'd tried this, he never answered. She pressed the call button and swallowed. It was answered.

"Hey, honey, I'm sorry, it's going to be a long night-"

Closing her eyes, Gail cut into the apology, "Can you please come home?" She couldn't say more, the words made her throat thick, and she hated, despised, the desperation she felt. At the same time,
she prayed that Holly would hear it in her voice.

There was a pause, an infinitesimal pause, before Holly replied. "Yes."

Whispering a thank you, Gail hung up and hugged her knees. She hated this. She hated feeling this way. Needy. Scared. Alone. It didn't feel like a panic attack, Gail knew that very well. The empty feeling of isolation crept in and Gail concentrated on her breathing. In and out.

That's how she was when the garage door went up and Holly came inside. She knew it was Holly the same way she knew when her brother was there. "Hey," breathed Gail, resting her face on her knees.

"Hey." Holly sat next to her, not touching her.

Gail's voice was a whisper. "I forgot what today was." She saw Holly's perplexed expression, "Oliver kept trying to get me to go home. Andy was really weird. And ... I just forgot."

Exhaling, Holly moved, hesitating as if she wanted to hug her. The back part of Gail's brain realized that tomorrow was the anniversary of Jerry's death, which she ought to warn Steve about if he hadn't already known. He may not have. Traci had the week off.

"I don't know what to do," admitted Holly, at length.

Really, Gail didn't know either. "Last year, I got so drunk I threw up."

"Hm. Let's not."

Slowly, Gail lifted her head up. "I just... I needed to be with you." She held a hand out to Holly.

When her hand was grasped, squeezed, Gail felt the tension start to slide away a little. "Can you ... Come here?" Holly's voice was soft, and Gail nodded, scooting until she was wrapped in Holly's arms. That was better.

"This isn't how I communicate," she told Holly, letting go of her own knees.

The arms were soft and comforting though. "I know," Holly laughed. It wasn't a funny laugh, it was a laugh that just expressed emotions Holly couldn't put into words. She'd laughed like that during sex and the first time it had surprised Gail. Now she understood. Holly could share joy, humor, nerves, fear, or just everything with that laugh.

Uncurling her legs, Gail settled against Holly, listening to her breathing and her heart. "Sometimes... A lot of the time I'm okay alone," she said into Holly's shoulder. As Holly's hand stroked her hair, she relaxed a little more. "Thank you for coming back."

"You only have to ask, honey," whispered Holly, holding her close.

It was an answer to a question Gail hadn't realized she'd been asking her whole life. The obvious questions she'd given up on years ago. Why wasn't she the one? Why wasn't she special enough? Why did everyone else get happiness and not her? But this was different. This was a answer of what life was supposed to be.

This was love and peace. Comfort. All the things she'd craved from Nick, the strength that he'd been afraid of giving her or was unable to, they were here. All the things she'd loved about Chris, his caring nature and the undeniable comfort, they were here. It was all here, in Holly, in her arms and her heart.
She closed her eyes tightly and pressed her face into Holly's shoulder. This was a new world, and a new feeling and ... New everything. It was new. And it wasn't terrifying. It was right.

The night shift was a strange idea. Many people excelled at it, but Holly was a morning person, and had hated it. Gail just hated getting out of bed, regardless the hour, so it didn't make too much of a dent in her attitude. But a week of only seeing each other in passing was already surprisingly painful after two days.

Perhaps the upside was Gail usually got three days off afterwards, which meant one day sleeping to get her mind back to 'normal' hours and then two days where they could spend together, like a normal couple. Normal.

Her relationship with Gail was anything but normal. Holly smiled, folding away the last of the clothes Gail had left over. Tempestuous, strange, wonderful. The way Gail's childishness still shone through the odd, newfound maturity was a delight. At first Holly worried that the bratty, sassy woman she'd fallen for was going away, but in their short time apart, Gail grew up without losing herself.

And damned if it wasn't sexy. A woman like that, who was always confident, sarcastic, and yes, bitter and jaded, was attractive. It was mostly the confidence, to be honest. Gail threw herself at things she wanted with a reckless abandon, certain that it would be something. Except... Not people. How many times had she been discarded to grow that wary of people?

The phone rang, startling Holly, and she smiled to see Gail's face on the screen. "Hey, I was just thinking about you."

"Oooh, sexy thoughts?" Gail's tone was light and breezy.

"Depends on who you're with and if I'm on speaker."

"Duncan, ew, no. I just wanted to tell you I love you before I go patrol the city streets for losers and failures."

Holly blushed. "What time do you get off shift?"

"Six, same as usual. Why?"

"I don't have to be at work till eight. We could have dinner."

Gail snorted. "You mean we could screw before you go to work, and I can sleep like the dead in your house?"

"I'll be quieter." Holly had no guilty feelings about her intention. But the sex, which was great, was only part of it. She wanted to keep tabs on Gail's emotional temperature, as it was.

"At seven AM, everything's about the same, Holly," laughed Gail. "How about this, call me when you get up, and maybe we can have breakfast."

"I don't like the maybe part of your equation, honey, but I'll take it."

"Good, go to sleep. I love you."

The casualness of that comment, the ease of it, made Holly blush. "Love you too, honey. Night."

Hanging up, Holly smiled at the phone. Love. That was a wonderful feeling. That was something
missing in her other relationships. Not that Holly was all that great at dating to begin with. Falling for unavailable people was her forte. Even Gail counted as that in the beginning, but she was so damn magnetic.

Getting the second chance made things worthwhile. It made the drama of the breakup and the move that wasn’t all seem like those Herculean trials one had to face in order to prove worth. It was ... It was simple.

Of course, better would be Gail not having insane hours and weird shift changes, because that night began the week of her girlfriend being a phone. There were three calls a day. Holly called when she woke up, usually catching Gail right at the end of shift when she was stuck finishing paperwork. Then Gail would call when she woke up around six at night. The third call was before Holly went to sleep, a call from Gail to tell her where she was, who she was with, and that she loved her.

Gail always told her she loved her before going on patrol now.

Sunday was Gail's last night on shift, and Holly had made sure to free up Tuesday and Wednesday for it. She even worked the weekend, picking up an extra shift, just to be sure she'd have no arguments from her boss. The current medical director of the lab was not her fan, and since most forensic pathologists reported up that chain, Holly was stuck with a boss whom she didn't care for, and who wasn't always too forgiving about her wanting time off.

Come Monday evening, Holly realized how little she cared about that. She came home to a second car in her garage, a note on the kitchen with a list of dinner choices, and a note reading 'for gods sake, wake me up when you get here, I want to see your unpixelated face.' It was romantic, for Gail at least. Romantic to Holly certainly. Picking the first dinner suggestion on the list, Holly ordered in Thai food.

She left her bag downstairs and rushed up to the bedroom, where Gail was curled up making a cocoon of all the blankets. Holly grinned and kicked off her shoes before kneeling onto the bed to kiss Gail. She was not surprised when a hand wormed out of the covers to pull her into a half hug, half cuddle. "Honey, I smell like death."

"Don't care." Gail's voice was muffled by the blankets and Holly let herself be pulled into the embrace. It lasted a moment before one baleful blue eye peered out from the nest. "Jesus, you reek. What the hell?"

"Long day," sighed Holly. "I'm going to shower. Dinner will be here in half an hour."

Pouting, Gail let go and rolled away, somehow managing to straighten out the blankets as she did. "What time do you have to be at work?"

Holly smiled and headed to the bathroom, "Thursday. Eight AM."

The look of sheer delight on Gail's face made the weekend and Monday all worthwhile.
Damn it, Gerald!

Chapter Summary

Part Three: It's Not A Choice

Golly is back on, but life isn't easy for a Peck in Toronto. After all, people don't get Visas revoked like that, normally. Something happened to cause that, and we should find out what.

Chapter Notes

Gerald does get to work with other people, but since Gail can keep him in line, this happens. If I did other POVs, you'd get a Chloe and Duncan ride. Just imagine it though.

The hardest part about having to work a murder scene was not looking at Holly too much. She was at work, they were at work, and Gail's job was to maintain the perimeter. Those were rules Gail agreed with, and in fact had pushed herself. Some Peck rules had started to make more sense. Of course, when she lectured Gerald about medical jurisprudence, the laughter had been from Holly.

"Stand here. If anyone tries to cross the line, ask for their badge or ID. Then ask me to verify. Copy?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Gail nodded and walked over to Traci and Holly. Implementing the fear of Gail in Gerald had been a trial. "You sure that's wise?" Traci glanced back at the rookie.

"Traci, I will look the other way if you shoot him." Gail sighed and looked at Holly and the dead body, "Just be glad he didn't sit on the body when he was trying not to puke."

The doctor looked up, annoyed, "He was here?"

"No. He was there." Gail pointed at the other body. The rotting one. "He started stepping back, but I hauled him up to the rocks. Dry heaves. That's when we saw number two here, and he freaked." She rolled her eyes. "I should make him clean out the division's fridge."

Traci laughed, "That's mean."

"Oliver's mean. I'd rather babysit Izzy again and deal with her stupid questions."

"You lost Izzy last time," Holly noted, looking up from the body. "What questions?"

"She asked if we boned," grumbled Gail. Her rookie was gazing off into nothing. "Hey, Gerald, eyes front!" He snapped his head around and Traci chuckled.

A little miffed, Holly remarked, "Inaccurate."
"That's what I said."

"If you two are done flirting over dead bodies," teased Traci, "maybe I can get some info?"

"Please, I've seen you and Steve at work." But Gail turned to Holly for actual information on the case.

Adjusting her glasses (which Gail had to remind herself not to smile over), Holly offered a tidbit. "The body wasn't moved since it landed here. And he's fresh. Rigor's just starting to set in."

Gail and Traci exchanged a look. "Fresh body dump on an old site," said Traci. "Unless Mr. Maggoty there …" Both cops looked over at the more decomposed body.

"I won't know until I get back to the lab," noted Holly, a little pointedly. "But. He's been there long enough for second stage larval development to begin, and the soft-tissue damage from decomposition appears to have been impacted by wildlife." She sighed, "I'd say you're looking at weeks, rather than days. Versus this one, who's been here hours, at most."

When Traci opened her mouth, Gail leaned towards her, "Don't ask her about the variable rates of rigor mortis." Then louder, she asked, "Let me guess, me and Gerald stick around here?"

"Unless you want to send him to the lab with the bodies," suggested Traci, and both Gail and Holly glared. "Or he could stay here or—"

"Or the lab can call us when they have results. Really? You want me to be half the town away from Gerald? God knows what he'd get up to on his own."

"You've got to take the training wheels off sometime, Gail. He will pass."

Gail huffed, "Yeah. Yeah, well not today." She pulled out her logbook. "One fresh, one old, anything else?" For some reason, Holly hesitated and then said what sounded like 'ivy.' There wasn't any ivy around that she remembered, but Gail took a second look.

"Ivy?" Traci, too, was confused. "Like trace from another location?"

"No, like intravenous … He has an IV tap in his arm." Another hesitation, "And it looks wrong. It's not even in a vein. Here, wait..." Holly turned the arm over and gestured at the still intact IV port.

Both Gail and Traci leaned to get a better look at the arm, Gail absentely rubbing her right forearm. "Anything in his neck?" she asked carefully. She knew she was going to have to get used to looking at this, but some days it was harder than others.

"Not that I can see here," Holly pursed her lips. "It's almost like they just put it in for show. Which I gotta say is weird."

Gail stopped listening for a moment, thinking backwards through every case she'd worked on, or read about recently. Just for show. Why would someone stick an IV in for show? They were clearly hiding 'something' but what? What it did mean was that the IV was unrelated to the actual death, unless he bled out from it, which looked unlikely. The forensics nerds could try to get a print off it, of course, but …

Turning around, Gail looked at the ground. She heard Holly start to ask what was wrong, but Traci hushed her. The ground wasn't super dry, but it hadn't rained recently, so tracks should stand out a little. Gail studied the path for a moment and looked up at the 'safe' end where she'd stuck Duncan. That path was not one they'd used because it was too steep for the forensic gear, though it was closer
to the parking lot. It was a little worn down, in the way unofficial trails generally were. Gail looked at the path. No one would use that path often. If you did carry a body down it, though, you'd have the perfect angle to toss a dead guy out of sight of the normal trail. "Hey, Gerald," she called up to her partner. "Any wide wheel tire tracks up there?"

"Um. I … like a van?"

God help the future of police work. "Deeper than a van. Wider tires. Look in the grass." She moved to get a better view of the idiot.

"Maybe?" He carefully moved away from his station to look at something. "There's some tire tracks here, which is funny cause the parking's like ten feet away. Maybe some kids making out?"

"Don't touch it," ordered Gail and turned back to the body, only to find Holly and Traci grinning at her. "What?"

Traci pulled out her phone, "Care to share with the class?"

They looked so weird, smiling like that. Gail rolled her eyes. "Someone with access to medical supplies drove past the parking lot and chucked our fresh guy. It's either bad luck they landed near the other guy, or they've used this as a dump before. Either way it's lazy not scoping your site first," she sighed. People didn't get that there was an absolute art to being lazy, and it was to be good at what you did and not slack off. Gail had, twice, and both consequences had been galling.

Leaving Holly with the bodies for a moment, Gail showed Traci where she saw the trail broken, and then they went up to check on Duncan's possible tire tracks. "Nice," grinned Traci. "You really should take the exam, Gail, you'd make a great detective."

"And work with you or my brother? Hell no." She shoved her hands in her pockets, looking around the parking lot. Something was still bothering her about it, reminding her of … something. "You want us with the bodies or here?"

"Stay with forensics," decided Traci. "I'll go back with the body." Giving instructions for Duncan to stay there and not let anyone but forensics near the tire prints, Gail and Traci took the longer way back down to the nerds. "I gotta ask, how did you get him to stop taking photos?"

Gail reached into a pocket and held up Duncan's phone. "If he's smart and does well, he gets it back at second break. Otherwise he gets it back at the end of shift." Covering her mouth, Holly tried not to laugh.

On the other hand, Traci did just laugh. "How many times has he gotten it back before shift change?"

"Too few to count." The phone went back into her pocket. "Fine, I'll stick here and look for clues with Scooby-Dum." As the bodies were loaded away, Gail found herself thinking more about the oddities in the situation than anything else. Stupid, lazy, or unlucky? Well, that would have to wait for the autopsy.

At Traci's request, Holly called Gail with the preliminary autopsy results. "It'll cheer her up, and maybe she won't kill Duncan." Holly had to agree Traci had a point and once the bodies were in the cooler, rang up Gail's phone.

"Peck," she answered, perfunctorily.
"It's Dr. Stewart," Holly smiled. Most of the time Gail answered the phone as girlfriend Gail even when she was at work, but when they actually worked a case together she was very much Officer Peck. Really, Holly liked the smart Officer Peck who was great at anything she put her mind to. It was one of the things she'd like in Gail early on, the smarts and the snarks.

"Results already? Hang on..." There was the sound of shuffling and Holly heard Gail talking to someone. "Rookie, quiz time. Fastest way back to the station?" Holly couldn't hear the answer but Gail's reply surprised her. "Okay, Duncan, you can drive us back." A pause, "Phone or car, your choice." There was a thump and Gail spoke to the phone again, "Sorry. I can't take notes and drive, Doc."

"You're letting him drive?" It was hard to be mad at Gail about it but she was a little nervous. "I think I'm more scared then when you get shot at."

"So am I," confessed Gail. "Results? Your lab guys have picked bits from every tree, bush, and blade of grass in the area."

About to tease Gail that it was impossible in such a short time, Holly glanced at the clock. "You're still there? Gail, it's been five hours!"

"I know, I'm starving. Lunch was some disgusting sandwich. Results please? Or are you splitting more DNA?"

"Sorry, results. The deaths appear unrelated. The older one matched a missing persons. Detective Nash is running that right now, looks like he hit his head when he fell."

"Wow," sighed Gail. "Twenty feet from the trail. That's horrible."

"Given the depth and dimensions of the skull fracture, he was likely unconscious."

"Is that good or bad?"

"Subjective."

Abruptly Gail snapped, "Hey, Gerald, take the left. If you scratch the cruiser it's coming out of your paycheck." Then a lower growl, "I'm going to kill him."

Holly laughed, "You're having better luck than Andy did."

"Don't start," groaned Gail. That was code for 'I'll tell you about it later.' But Gail went on with work. "Fresh body?"

"The IV was totally useless, not even used. I sent it to CSI for prints, but frankly there was talc so don't get your hopes up."

"Hold that thought. Gerald, what's talcum powder have to do with medicine?" Not bothering to correct Gail about talc versus talcum powder, she listened for the stammered answer of gloves. Not bad. "Good. But remember that means old gloves, or not medical grade. They use cornstarch now."

Holly grinned, "I didn't know you knew that."

"I know a lot of things." She could hear Gail's smirk. "Old gloves. Anything else?"

"He was shot."

"Woah, how'd we miss that?"
"You'll like this," grinned Holly. "They bandaged him up, like crap by the way. You did better with Chris. Then they redressed him, and then they dumped him."

There was too long of a silence before Gail replied. "Huh."

Holly had a bad feeling she'd said something wrong. The silence dragged on. "So. On your way back to the station?"

"Yes, yeah, if Duncan doesn't flip the car over." Gail sounded distracted and not the way she had been at the crime scene. "Thanks."

"Hey, Gail... We still on for dinner?"

"What?" The brightness returned to Gail's voice, though it sounded forced. "Yes, definitely yes."

Still, Holly wondered what she'd said to bug her girlfriend wrong. Gail did show up at the restaurant, barely on time, clearly just out of the shower and out of breath. "Cutting it fine," smiled Holly, relieved to see her at all.

"Sorry," Gail looked apologetic and sexy in jeans, a dark shirt, and a long coat. "I was talking to Frank, he was our sergeant before Oliver."

"I believe I may have attended his wedding," teased Holly.

Gail gave her a smirk, "Yes, that. He's working upstairs now."

"Are they really going to foster Sophie?"

"Huh? Oh! Probably. They filed the paperwork, aced the class. This was something else, though. Work and I... Doesn't matter, sorry I was late." She reached across the table for Holly's hand. "Let's not talk about work. Unless you want me to tell you how Chris ripped his pants. I let Duncan take a photo. We're trying to let Oliver put it on the official division twitter."

Dinner became a lighthearted affair, which suited Holly fine. She began to think there was nothing at all wrong and Gail was just a little distracted from an interesting case. They split a desert, after Gail begged Holly to just try the cake which was sinfully delicious. In return, Holly asked Gail to come over which was readily accepted and, in the mind of some, actually sinful.

By the time Holly drifted to sleep, she'd almost forgotten the weirdness of Gail on the phone.

Gail's nightmare startled Holly awake. More often, Gail woke up without a noise, but this time was the first since the Oxy induced drama, where she'd yelled when coming out of the dream in the guest room, that Holly heard anything. This wasn't a shout or a yell, but a sound like a choked cry of someone about to vomit, and Gail sat bolt upright, clapping a hand to her right arm, hugging it close.

It was the motion that fully shook Holly out of her own, clearly much better, dream. Her brain lagged a moment, connecting the sound to the motion to the woman in her bed. "Gail?" There was no answer and Holly pushed her hair out of her face to get a better look. "Hey, Gail, it's me, Holly."

"Yes!" Gail's voice was tense and strained, like it was an effort to get sound out. "Holly." Her back was soaking with sweat.

Holly fumbled for her glasses and sat up. "Honey, it was just a dream." Slowly, Gail's hands moved to cover her face and she nodded, not speaking. Was it safe to touch her? Holly reached over and her hand hovered over Gail's back before resting her palm between Gail's shoulders. The sweat was...
cold. "Hey," she whispered. There was no shaking this time.

Nodding again, Gail inhaled a shuddering breath. "I'm okay," she whispered.

She was clearly anything but. Holly sighed and scooted over closer. While Gail didn't move towards her, she didn't lean away either. "I'm here, honey." Another nod. Gail was taking long, deep breaths, controlled breaths, that came out shuddering.

Without a single idea what to say, Holly leaned against her girlfriend, hoping that the physical nearness would help. It didn't seem to be hurting at least, as Gail leaned into her as well after a while. "I'm. Okay," she whispered again, sounding like she was affirming that with herself more than anything else.

"Do you want the lights on?" First Gail shook her head no. Then she nodded a yes. Holly reached around Gail to turn on the lamp on her side. "I'm here," she repeated and wrapped her arms around Gail loosely.

Another nod and Gail exhaled slowly. "Bandages," she said quietly.

"Are you- are you hurt?" Holly started to let go, but Gail caught her hands.

"The bandages, on the fresh guy. The IV. Reminded me..."

Holly frowned. "The IV?"

"Perik. He put an IV in my arm." Gail took another deep breath and let it go slowly. She reached up and touched her neck again, as if checking for something, then her forehead. "He put sutures on my head, to stop the bleeding. My head... The door hit it."

That was new information. Every once in a while, Gail shared a little more about the incident.

"Honey, you don't have to say anything." Nodding, Gail leaned more into Holly's arms. They sat like that for a while, Holly's back against the headboard, Gail in her arms. It was hard to keep that level of tension and Holly felt herself starting to drift off. She glanced at Gail's face and saw her eyes wide open. "Lie down?"

"Yeah." Gail let go of Holly's hands and surprisingly turned her light off.

"Honey, you can keep it on."

"I know," Gail replied, and once Holly was lying down, settled her head on Holly's shoulder. It was easy to wrap her arms around Gail and hold her close.

"Sleep?"

"No, I'll just see it again. Him again." She sighed. "I just want to lie here with you."

"Okay," agreed Holly and she closed her eyes.

"Your glasses are still on, baby." Holly took them off, carelessly tossing them onto the nightstand. At least Gail was up to complete sentences now.

She gently rubbed Gail's back and sighed, trying to think of what to say. "How did Nick deal with this," she wondered, barely noticing she said it aloud.

"Didn't. If I felt... off I didn't stay the night," Gail replied, sounding almost apologetic. Holly paused and thought about the implications of that. Did that mean Gail trusted her where she didn't trust
Nick? Her hand stopped as she realized how much Gail had let her in more than anyone else. "You can go to sleep," whispered Gail.

"Don't want you to be alone in the dark."

"I'm not. You're here." While flattering, Holly fought for awareness and to stay awake longer. She knew she wouldn't be able to tell by Gail's breathing if she was awake or not, so she kept lightly rubbing her back. "Holly?"

"Yes?"

"I always gonna have nightmares."

This wasn't a question but Holly treated it like one. "Yes, you are." She hugged Gail a little. "I'm right here." Gail's body relaxed a little. Listening to Gail's breathing, Holly realized she didn't care how late she had to stay awake or how little sleep she got, because she wanted to be right here, for Gail. With Gail. She closed her eyes and let Gail's even breathing lull her to sleep, hoping it would be comforting enough.

After Dov, Chris, Nick, Andy, and Chloe bugged her, Gail took her notes and stole her brother's desk. She'd begged Frank for a copy of some files, and technically could have gotten the rest from Steve, but for now, she had enough. Fake ambulances were still bugging her. The tire prints from the double dump two weeks ago had, indeed, been from an ambulance, which had reminded her of the body dump at the lake, over six weeks ago. That had been the accidental death of a teenaged boy, but Gail remembered the 'killer' insisted he'd called an ambulance. The phone records backed that up, but there was no trace of the actual pickup.

The theory she had was someone was playing fake EMT. But why would they pick up these bodies? She'd found nothing in common, and started reading phone transcripts. The 911 call was normal, until she hit something downright weird, and logged in to Steve's computer. It was easy to get access to the 911 calls and Gail plugged in the headphones to listen, eyes closed.

"911 what's your emergency?"

"Oh god, he's choking and turning blue. He can't breathe. What do I do?"

"Sir, do you need an ambulance?"

"Yes!"

"What's your location, sir? Can you see a cross street?"

"It's... I don't... Hang on." A door slammed. "327 Blue Ridge, off... Um... Off Cornwell. Wait! There's an ambulance! Hey! Hey! Stop!"

The rest of the call was him reading off the ambulance number to 911 and disconnecting before he'd gotten a reply from the operator. She must be pissed. But Gail frowned. He did call 911. He then grabbed a passing ambulance, which was the devil's own luck. And then ... Nothing.

The ambulance number was a fake.

Who the hell did that? Why the hell would anyone do that? If Gail was a fake ambulance driver in a fake ambulance, why would she be looking for people who would die en route? Did that happen a lot? Probably, but where did they go? She snatched pen and paper from Steve's desk and scribbled
How many people went missing every year? Were there a lot between pickup and ER? How easy was it to lose a body at a hospital? Could you deliver someone right to the morgue? What about real people picked up by a fake ambulance? Maybe they left AMA. Could you do that? How long did it take for a hospital to realize an ambulance didn't show up? How hard was it to fake being an EMT? How many bodies never made it to the morgue.

She sighed and put the pen down, followed shortly by putting her head on the desk, pillowed by her arms. It was annoying to not get this out of her head and Gail felt like she should already know a lot of this.

"Napping?" Traci's voice cut in to Gail's thoughts.

"Reading. Thinking. How do you get anything done?" Gail turned her head to the side and looked at the detective.

"Yikes, you need a nap." Traci sat down on the table. "Holly keeping you up at night?" she teased.

"No," grumbled Gail and buried her face again.

"Did you do something stupid?"

"What?" Gail turned so she could open one eye and glare at Traci. "Is my track record that horrible?"

After a moment Traci said, "Yes, it is."

People sucked. Gail scowled and closed her eyes. "It's not Holly."

"Good. I like her."

Everyone liked Holly. For all she claimed not to make friends any more easily than Gail did, she was incredibly likable to pretty much anyone with a brain and quite a few people without them (i.e. Duncan). "Why is it every time I don't sleep, everyone's up in my face about me being an alcoholic or screwing up my love life?" Traci made a thoughtful sound but didn't press. "Do you think about him?"

"Who?" She sounded perplexed.

Gail picked up her head a little, propping her chin on her fists. "Jerry."

Exhaling, Traci slumped a little. "Yeah." She glanced at the desk that had been Jerry's and luckily was not Steve's because, wow. "What brought that on?"

Nerves kicked in and Gail started digging her thumbnail into her fingers. She could trust Traci, who had been there when she'd been in the hospital and was a friend. "Not sleeping." she said vaguely, trying to allude to things without having to say them aloud.

"Not sleeping because of, or because of not sleeping?"

While the sentence was convoluted, Gail understood. "First one." Not sleeping because of Jerry and Perik.

Traci frowned and got what Gail could only presume was a 'concerned mother' expression. "Gail." She hesitated. "I'm not sure what to say."
Neither was Gail, to be honest. She propped her chin up in one hand. "It's just what it is, Traci." She shrugged a little. Really, she didn't want it to become a big deal. Yes, she still had trouble sleeping, she still had nightmares.

Sometimes it felt like she wasn't making any progress at all. Like all the hours figuring out who she was, not just being Gail the Pale Fail and letting her name push her around, was for nothing. But that really wasn't the case. She was better, and it wasn't just Holly, though that was a major catalyst. Gail honestly wanted to be a better person, do better and be more than just someone floating at life, resenting being a Peck and yet using it to meander forward.

Traci reached down and picked up Gail's note paper. "So what's this?"

A subject change was welcomed by all. "The tire tracks at the double body site were an ambulance, but not a model used by any of the nearby stations."

Eyes widening, Traci gestured, "You gonna follow up on this on your own? The case is pretty cold."

"Yeah, I know. But it's just bugging me. It made me think about the underage sex teacher."

"Oh yeah, I remember." Traci paused, "You know, the idea of an illegal ambulance ring is pretty crazy."

"Aaand this is why I didn't tell anyone." She snatched the paper back, carefully putting it into her folder.

"Seriously, what good would it do anyone? Let you dump bodies in weird places to make people not use ambulances? Drive everyone to one specific company?"

Absently, Gail let her own, private, theory see the light of day, "Cover up a bigger crime."

Traci scoffed, "That's way too much work for such lousy output, Gail."

"Depends on how big the crime is, doesn't it?"

There was a moment of hesitation. "Okay," allowed Traci. "But that's crazy. You'd have to have to have a massive network." She shook her head, "No way, I take back everything I said about you being a good detective. You're totally Fox Muldering."

Which made Holly her Scully, and that wasn't too bad. "Never. Mind." She rolled her eyes at Traci, "I'm going now. You're as bad as the rest of them." Gail paused to change a setting on her brother's chair, and went back to find her rookie and head back out to the streets.
Chapter Notes

Andy's back! And Gail being a cop is her birthright, of course. Marlo is not pregnant. There's just an IA case about her still going on because I don't hate McSwarek that much. Also the ultrasound was dated 2009, so the kid would be around 3.

Thoughts on the idea of Gail and Holly with a kid? Please vote. All votes (even 'NO!') are welcome.

Random questions weren't too unusual for Holly's job. Police generally weren't scientists so they asked questions in weird, round about ways, trying to put their ideas in an order only they understood. She just wasn't used to the source of her strange questions being her girlfriend since most of the serious relationships she'd had were broken over the job. And the questions really were odd, like how many bodies did the morgue lose a year and did Holly know any EMTs.

After that, however, no mention was made of the topic and Gail seemed no more or less distracted than usual. There were no repeat nightmares, though it wasn't as if she saw Gail every night (especially around shift changes, Gail frequently lamented her hatred of the night shift). Nights they didn't spend together were often filled with phone calls. Sadly, right now Gerald—Duncan (damn it, Gail!) was Gail's regular partner, and she didn't feel comfortable flirting on the phone in the car and only called Holly back in private.

There was also Sophie, whom Gail saw regularly. Holly went with her on those and they both had dinner with Noelle and Frank. Frank had been flummoxed at the appearance of Holly at dinner, having not been privy to the usual gossip about Gail, though Noelle confided she'd thought something was up when Gail brought Holly as a plus one, but hadn't expected that either. Then she proceeded to give Gail crap for not warning her about the gay thing.

They'd all talked about Sophie, what the odds were, did Frank and Noelle really want to become that big a family, that fast. And then everyone spent a Saturday with Sophie, together, and Frank was sold, provided Gail promised to babysit. It was really that easy, which amazed Holly. When Frank asked her directly about wanting kids, Holly had stalled, which did not go unnoticed by the other two police officers, though Gail didn't make a fuss and simply said that Holly did not. It was true, but Holly started to wonder if she was wrong.

And then there were the breaks. Not dating breaks, they'd worked through that and had no interest in a revisit. No, the breaks of not being able to see each other for days. The breaks where where Gail worked too many hours, Holly had court, and now two weeks had passed between the last time Gail had spent the night. It made Holly feel like a total horn dog.

There had been a surprise afternoon visit on Sunday when Gail showed up unannounced, still in uniform, and explained she had four hours and was going to kill her roommates. Holly had been watching TV and finishing a needless proof of an article, but Gail had said she didn't mind just hanging out. They never even made it back to the couch, heading right upstairs as soon as Holly got a clear look at Gail in uniform. The uniform really was a turn on. Leaving the police car parked
outside on the street for three hours, however, had encouraged her neighbors to knock after Gail had left and ask if everything was all right.

What she needed was to get her mind off it for a while. Being grumpy because you couldn't be with your girlfriend all the time was juvenile and unproductive.

Holly pulled on her running shoes and stepped outside into the damp Toronto spring. A muggy heat hugged the air and Holly sighed, thinking about how sticky it was for late May. If you can't get your endorphins out one way, best to try another, and she turned on her running mix before stretching and heading down the road to her favorite park trail.

Running was her zen, her meditation. She'd gone into medicine out of an interest in health, but forensics had fallen into her heart like a calling. It was impossible to explain her devotion, but with it, everything made sense. Similarly, running made sense. One foot in front of the other, your heart pounding and blood rushing, and then the brain chemistry kicked in to make you forget the pain and aches, and all that was left was joy. Which made it a lot like sex with Gail, if she was being perfectly honest.

Running cleared her brain, which was entirely unlike sex. At least not sex with Gail. That tended to completely blank her brain. The first time Gail had gone down on her, Holly forgot how to speak in English for long enough that Gail found it hilarious. And none of that was helping her not think about the sex she wasn't having because schedules sucked.

What would be nicer would be if Gail would move in with her, but that was an odd thing to ask. She'd never successful lived with another woman before. College barely counted, and that had been living together to girlfriends to being dumped and ex-roommate/girlfriend moving in with another girl, leaving Holly to deal with a new, mid-term, homophobic roommate. Other than that, she'd never had a girlfriend she wanted to see that often.

But she sucked at girls. Girlfriends. Relationships. Gail wasn't the only one with a terrible track record and commitment issues. Good lord, and the whole kids thing, which was a massive commitment Holly was terrified to consider. Except thanks to Gail, she was now actually thinking about it as a possibility. Holly slowed down as she reached a corner, saw no cars, and sprinted across the street to hit the trail. Feet pounding did, eventually, calm her mind down and she made her circuit thinking of little beyond the songs and the air and the quiet.

As she sprinted across the street again her phone started ringing. Holly did not slow down, but thumbed the hands free button. "Hello?"

"Jaywalking's against the law." Gail's voice was surprisingly cheerful for the hour. Given her way, Gail would never be out of bed before noon.

But that wasn't the weirdest thing. How did Gail know she'd just jaywalked? "Are you tracking my phone?"

"That would be a misuse of power." Gail sounded a little out of breath now that Holly thought about.

"Where are you?" Holly stopped moving forward and jogged in place.

"Waiting for the light to change."

"That's a what..." Holly trailed off and turned around, looking back at the corner. There, jogging in place and waiting at the light, was Gail in shorts and a police academy sweatshirt with the sleeves cut off.
It was hard not to laugh and Holly hung up. The light changed and Gail joined Holly. "That was incredibly rude," smirked Gail.

"The 80s called." Holly flicked a finger on Gail's top.

Gail plucked at her sleeveless sweatshirt, "It's Steve's. I stole it, in lieu of having a boyfriend to steal comfy clothes from." She stopped jogging and started stretching.

"The one lesbian drawback. Giving up already?" Holly slowed down but kept bouncing in place.

"Puuuuuhlease, I've done four miles." She held up her phone so Holly could see the running app. "This is, by the way, your fault."

Holly sighed and stopped running. "Okay, spell this one out."

"You making me care and healthy and all this crap. I could be asleep right now." Gail shook her head.

"And that's your excuse for coming miles out of your way for a run."

Gail pointed at Holly's legs, "Those are my excuse." When Holly didn't reply, she sighed. "I wanted to see you, and ... I don't know, it seemed like a good idea. Meet you jogging, go to brunch, stay over tonight?"

"It's not a terrible idea," allowed Holly, a smile tugging at her face. "However..."

"Oh, no no, you are not working, I checked." Gail held up a finger. "Your case plead out last night. Steve was in the judges chambers all night. If he didn't tell you, I will flatten his tires." Gail reached for Holly's hands. "Please? I traded shifts with Andy to have a whole weekend off. No work. No trial prep. Just us."

That sounded far better than anything else. "I'm going to call Steve. And the ADA," she warned Gail but tugged her in for a kiss. "If I hear you threatened anyone..."

"Just Andy," promised Gail. "Come on, I'm hungry."

Holly rolled her eyes but laced her fingers with Gail's and let herself be led off to a brunch.

"What's it like?"

Gail opened one eye and looked at Andy. They had ended up at the Diaz/Peckstein apartment, Andy lamenting over yet another fight with Sam and Gail trying to actually be a friend. This had involved drinking at Gail's because the odds of Sam showing up there were slim. Gail ruthlessly punted the boys out, texted an apology to Holly about breaking the 'only get drunk with your girlfriend' rule (which Holly accepted), and proceeded to get half-blasted on margaritas with Andy in her living room.

The drama had been expected, somewhat, when Marlo showed up. The internal investigation had been rather ruthless, led not by Gail's mother, thank god, but a pretty anal retentive Inspector whom Gail knew. It had still been rough since Andy had known about the bipolar situation. Realistically, Gail pointed out that if Marlo had told her superiors before it became a problem it wouldn't have been quite as bad. Not everyone who was bipolar went off the rails and Gail knew a few officers with serious issues. Herself included. She hadn't mentioned her own PTSD which worried her at times like this. Rarely had her mother had any sympathy for anyone with issues like that, though Gail
certainly did.

After the complaining Andy had become maudlin and quiet, lying on the floor hugging a pillow. Gail took the couch and relaxed in the quiet for a while.

"What's what like?"

Andy sat up, "Sex."

Gail blinked and turned onto her side to stare at Andy. "I'm pretty sure you've had sex, Andy."

"Oh, yeah. But not like you." While Gail tried to work out if Andy was calling her a slut, Andy added, "Lesbian sex."

Was this how it'd felt when she'd asked Holly those horrible questions in the closet? Holy crap. "I'm not having sex with you, McNally."

Andy groaned, "Not in a million years, Peck. I've seen you naked. Not interested."

"Same here," smirked Gail.

"See? That doesn't make sense." Andy hugged the pillow closer. "You don't check anyone out?"

Gail huffed. Wow. People did just ask lesbians weird questions. "What are you really asking?"

"Are... You gay or just gay for Holly? And is it gay or lesbian or..."


Andy let that ruminate in her brain for a while and Gail could hear the hamster wheel spinning. "How did you know?"

"Which? Holly or lesbian?" The look on Andy's face clearly said both so Gail chewed her lip. "Holly first. She kissed me at Frank and Noelle's wedding." That brought a widening of eyes to Andy's face. "It made me think." The margaritas had done a nice job and Gail felt that comfortable lassitude that came with good drinks and a comfortable person. She realized she rarely wanted to get drunk with Holly, preferring to enjoy her as sober as possible.

And Gail would have left it there but Andy looked at her pleadingly, clearly desperate to hear a love story for once. "If I did that, you'd have hit me."

"I knew she was a lesbian, dumb ass," laughed Gail. "I was asking her stupid questions, like you are now, and I swear to god if you kiss me I will taze you in your ass." That set Andy giggling and they both seemed to agree that the idea of them kissing was stupid.

"Not enough tequila on the continent," agreed Andy. And then she added, "Holly is insanely hot, though. I could see kissing her."

"I have a tazer, McNally," snarled Gail, only to see a smirk from her friend. "Not funny."

"Totally funny," disagreed Andy. "Objectively, she's hot."

"Stop objectifying my girlfriend."

A moment passed, and Andy realized Gail was serious. "Wow, you really like her."
Sighing, Gail closed her eyes. "You have no idea. She changed my whole world, Andy. And ... It's not the sex. I mean, wow, sex, but it's just her. She makes me feel better. About everything. She looks at me like I'm the only person in her universe, she calls me on my bullshit. And she's funny, smart... Sexy." Gail exhaled a long breath and smiled. There was no sound from Andy, and Gail opened her eyes to see her friend, passed out against the table. "Nice talk, McNally."

It took monumental effort to get Andy onto the couch, but once she was there Gail covered her with a blanket and left a note for the boys not to bother her. Almost absently, she cleaned up the drinks, drank a cup of water, and took another to her room. In the past she might have hauled Andy into her room to sleep it off like friends do, but right now having anyone in her bed besides Holly felt wrong. Not that they'd ever had sex in Gail's bed.

Barricaded behind her door, Gail checked her phone. No messages. She quickly tapped one out to Holly, three words, and lay down on her bed.

Instead of thinking about Holly, Gail found herself thinking about work. Her handling of idiot Gerald made Oliver float the idea of being a regular T.O. and taking a rookie when the next batch rolled in. She countered that this was only a special favor because of the Peck name and he pointed out she could use that to train them right.

Her mother agreed with Oliver which didn't help. At the monthly Peck dinner the previous week, with Gail and Steve attending solo by choice, her mother positively oozed pride. In the last four months, Gail had gone from a Pale Fail to the Pride of Pecks. A public commendation for the schwarma thing, a successful training rotation, handling the T.O. job with style, and Gail was well on her way to being a white shirt. Then her mother had let slip that Gail's rookie group was, collectively, up for promotions. This was expected, at least by Gail. For the most part, Chris, Dov, Andy, and herself were damn fine officers and unlikely to cause problems if made constable third class. The only delays were likely to be related to stupid things like Chris leaving for Timmons for a while, Dov dating a suspect and getting rolled for it (and covering for Chris on drugs), or Andy and Gerald... Actually, Chris and Andy probably would be promoted next round, with that in mind. At least Gail's fuck up and suspension was furthest out.

However her mother brought up one last thing that tweaked Gail. There was a Peck Timetable and Gail was on it. She'd driven Steve home and he asked how she was going to handle it. Flippant, Gail replied she'd skip the next three dinners. But it was a problem. The Deal, as she'd called it, was nearly up. Her mother had plied her with information about the detective spot opening up but Gail just wasn't interested in that spot, Guns and Gangs. At least it stopped her father from making veiled remarks about her sexuality. Those were getting old.

Her phone rang, startling her out of work-related angst, and Gail was surprised to see Oliver's name. "I'm too drunk to work, Ollie."

"Too drunk for congratulations?"

"Are you pregnant?"

The man laughed. "You're funny when you're drunk, kid. Brass bumped you to third."

Third? Third rank. Gail blinked, "Why are you telling me this at 11PM, Oliver?" Then she remembered what day it was, "Jesus, did you guys just finish the damn reviews? Please tell me Gerald failed."

"Persnickety Peck, you always know what's going on behind the scenes. No, your rookie did not fail. Sorry, he's a real officer now."
Groaning, Gail bashed the back of her head into the bed. "Who else got bumped?" There was silence and Gail frowned. "Not even Dov?"

"He'll be in the next batch," Oliver said hesitantly. "There was an issue …"

"Which you can't tell me about, I get it. You suck. I'm going to sleep."

"Love you too, sunshine," teased Oliver. "Keep McNally out of trouble."

"She brings it with her, smart ass." Hanging up, Gail rolled to her side and went to sleep.

The information came from Oliver, who made an effort to explain just how important it was and it needed to be special because Gail was Gail and would reject anyone else's attempts to congratulate her. "The first in her class," he repeated for the fifth time, pacing in her office.

"How many others?"

"Seven, but none at Fifteen."

She wasn't really sure what that meant but Oliver had driven across town just to talk to Holly about it. Ergo it was important. "I hate even thinking this," Holly said slowly. "Is it because she's a Peck?"

And that's when Oliver hit her with a thousand watt grin. His open geniality was heartwarming. "No," he grinned. "Not a chance. She earned this. And you have to make sure that sinks in!"

"Me?" Holly almost babbled. "Oliver, I don't know a thing about this! It's all ... Whatever!" She waved her hands in a way Gail did when being dismissive.

"Our little Peck has a thing about deserving good things, Holly." The reply grimace on Holly's face only seemed to confirm what Oliver was saying and he nodded. "Which is why I'm asking you to make sure she knows it's amazing and awesome. I know it is, Fifteen knows it is, but she's going to blow it off."

"Oliver," Holly sighed, wearily. "She's going to tell me I don't know what I'm talking about and blame it on nepotism." That had happened before, with the stupid schwarma thing. Even though Andy had insisted Gail knew what was wrong, Gail argued that Andy's gut instinct was how they'd managed to burst in and surprise the kidnappers. She didn't want the stupid award.

"I know, my Petulant Peck has a chip on her shoulder," he sighed. There was always a paternal feeling from Oliver, like he loved Gail as if she was his own. "I'm giving you this." He handed a print up with names and what looked like votes.

Holly read the paper, confused. "I don't get it." Oliver opened his mouth and Holly stemmed the word vomit. "No, I get it. These are the people who voted for promotions, and yes, I see that her mother recused herself. But ..." All Holly had was horror stories about Elaine from everyone, Peck and not Peck.

"Not a single Peck Crony on that list, Holly. Gail will know. She starts freaking out, you show her that."

It wasn't until after Oliver left that Holly wondered if they'd broken a law.

Her only warning about it from Gail was that she texted to complain about being dragged to the Penny for drinks after work, and would Holly please pick her up absolutely no later than 7. "Make it
special, huh," muttered Holly texting her agreement.

That gave her enough time to go home, make a semi-romantic setup on the dining table, get a real, home made dinner in the oven, shower, get into sexy clothes, and pick up Gail at the Penny at ten after seven. She pulled up out front and texted. A moment later, Gail and her crew burst out of the bar, them singing, her cringing. Gail's people tolerance was about done for the night.

"Hey, hot stuff," smiled Holly, looking out the open window.

"You're late," griped Gail and suffered another hug from a very inebriated Dov. "Okay, see? My chariot awaits, I'm going now."

"But you're the first third fifteen!" That was Andy, sheets to the wind and clearly caring little for it.

"Okay, you're wasted." Gail looked past her drunk friends to where a sober looking Nash nodded. "I'm dumping them on you, Traci!"

"Thanks so much!" Traci laughed however. "Come on, let's go drink for Gail!" Someone cheered, remarking it'd be more fun if Gail wasn't there.

For once, Gail didn't rise to the bait and just slipped into the car. Her brother emerged from nowhere which Holly felt was a skill for such a pale ginger to have. "Congrats, sis," he smiled, holding the door open.

"Come on, Steve. It's embarrassing." Gail clipped herself in. "I'm almost thirty, of course they bumped me first. Herr Peck would have had their asses otherwise."

"Hey, I told you. Gossip chain swears this was all you, little brat." He ruffled her hair and closed the door. When Gail flipped him off, his hands moved in a longer, more eloquent, statement. Gail sighed and replied in a similar way, before telling him to go away.

"What's the party for?" Holly tried to be innocent and pulled the car out. She wanted to know what Steve had said as well, but let that alone for now.

Gail scowled. "Nothing, I got promoted is all."

"And this is bad?"

Somehow Gail slouched impossibly low in the seat. "It's stupid. I'm the first one in the division. From my class."

"Honey, you're gonna have to work with me here. Why is this bad?"

Gail said nothing until they eased into Holly's neighborhood, "I didn't want to be the first. But stupid Andy screwed up being a T.O., Dov killed a kid and dated a suspect and got beat up, and Chris went to rehab, so that leaves me and Traci, and she's a detective, so yaaaay, Peck gets firsties." She sunk further into her seat. "And tomorrow it'll all be how I got it because of my stupid name."

Drumming her fingers on the steering wheel, Holly thought about that. "You took a bunch of training classes, right? When we were being stupid?" Gail grunted a 'yeah,' though she smiled a little at Holly's description of their break up. "And you totally aced Gerald... Duncan... Whatever." Now Gail giggled. "That's your fault, by the way. Everyone at the lab calls him Gerald now, it's like an epitaph. Someone drops a vial, they shout 'Damn it, Gerald!' And we all laugh."

"No way," laughed Gail. She sat up a little, brightening at the story.
"Yes, and you're mean and should stop it." Holly smirked at Gail. "And my point, honey, is that you've done a lot of things at work and you deserve some accolades. You've been an amazing T.O. You were instrumental in solving multiple cases. And your friends need an excuse to get drunk, so you're it."

"Bah," grumped Gail, though she didn't slouch as much. "I don't want a birthday party."

"Duly noted." They pulled in to the garage and Holly pondered her plan and how poorly it was going to work. "Why don't you grab a shower and I'll get food ready?"

But Gail shook her head, "No, I'm gonna face plant when I shower. I just... I wanted to be with you and not people. You're not all pushy and noisy." Gail was out of the car surprisingly quickly. "I'll make a sandwich or something and we can watch one of your sport things..." Gail stopped as she opened the door to the townhouse.

"Surprise?" Holly smiled weakly and stepped up behind Gail, ushering her inside.

Slowly Gail took in the candles (unlit), the red wine (breathing), and the smell of good food. "Who told you?" She paused by the dining table, looking embarrassed again.

"Oliver. He said it was important so I thought I should make it special." She scooted past Gail and pulled the chicken out of the oven. "I even made the potatoes the way you like them."

"God, Holly..." Gail pushed her hair out of her face and Holly realized she was crying.

Cue dramatic Peck Family flashback? Holly cursed Oliver silently and put the pan down. "Oh, god, I'm so sorry. We don't have to do this. It can just be dinner and I'll put the candles away. This was a bad idea right? I should have thought, I mean, your parents and..." Gail stopped her rambling in Holly's favorite way, with a kiss.

Gail's hands were firm on her shoulders, holding Holly still. Oven mitts and all, Holly grabbed Gail's waist and melted into her as much as possible. These kisses, the ones that went right past her brain and lit a fire, were some of Holly's favorite. "No one else does stuff like this for me, baby," she whispered. Her fingers smoothed the fabric of Holly's shirt. "Thank you."

That was entirely depressing to think about and Holly sighed. "You probably scare your friends." Holly smiled and kissed her again, her glasses bumping Gail's face and digging in a little to the bridge of her own nose.

"I meant boyfriends and family." Reaching over, Gail adjusted Holly's glasses. "You're amazing. How are you so amazing? I mean, Jesus, I've known Nick for years and he still forgets I'm allergic to fucking tomatoes!" That had been the subject of an argument outside Holly's lab, when Gail and Nick came by on a case and he brought her a burger with tomatoes in it.

Holly tilted her head. "You also hate eggs and don't do breakfast." She kissed Gail's nose. "But you love chicken and potatoes and I bet you'll like my veggies. And the red wine. It's really good wine. Dinner?"

"Should I shower? I mean, you're all dressed up..." Gail looked Holly up and down, seeming to just now take in the clothes.

"That's up to you, honey." Holly turned back to the chicken and got a knife out to break it down. Behind her, she heard a 'huh' noise and Gail's footsteps fading into the upstairs. By the time she had the chicken separated and plates served, she was staring to wonder if Gail was ever coming downstairs. "Gail? Confirm existence please!"
"Do you have *any* high heels here?" Gail's voice drifted down.

"Don't own any except the boots." The reply was reflex, but Holly blinked and looked at the stairs in curious wonder. Why was Gail asking about shoes? But then Gail came down barefoot, in a casual knit shirt/dress that was a little too short. She'd worn it over jeans a couple times, but this was the first time she'd just worn the dress as a dress.

And Holly suddenly understood why Gail had said the getting dressed part was the best part of a date. "Catching flies there, baby," teased Gail.

The too short dress and bare feet were adorable and sexy, especially given the limited wardrobe Gail had here. The makeup and hair were astounding. Holly was just stunned with how Gail looked, dolled up, making her sexy in a way the uniform or the leather jacket never did. "Okay, wow... How did you do ... That?" Holly waved a finger in a circle around her own face.

"The hair took forever," admitted Gail. "Why is short hair so hard to style?" She had somehow managed to get her unruly cowlick to lie in a curl that would put a 1940s pin up girl to shame. The makeup, which Holly was generally adequate at, was brilliant and made her pale skin radiate health. The red lipstick was perfect and distracting.

Tongue-tied, Holly blurted, "I am *so* gay right now, Gail."

Gail bubbled with laughter. "Well next time warn a girl, and I'll have my sexy lbd on, and shoes." She gave Holly a peck on the cheek before sliding into her seat at the table. "Guess short hair doesn't make the dress look funny, huh?"

It took Holly a moment to get back on track, and she couldn't stop smiling.
Late for Dinner

Chapter Notes

Gail Peck and the very long day. This is the first of two rough days for our girl. Since this is Gail's story, this will be more about her. Oh and the kids question is for .. Like chapter 70 land, so a loooong way out. Don't panic folks.

"Am I allowed to ask personal questions?"

Gail gave Duncan a stern look. "Generally no, but since your sorry ass got me promoted, I will grant you one."

He cleared his throat. "You and Dr. Stewart are dating, right?"

"Are you asking for a purpose?" She paused at the corner and sipped her green smoothie, which was Holly's fault.

Duncan looked down. "Kinda. You keep telling me to pay attention, so I've been trying to. And at the body dump place? She was looking at you." He gestured with one hand, nervously.

They were back at the car, having done a courtesy check on a store. "Hmm. Okay. And do you care?"

"No! I just ... I want to know if I'm seeing things right. Like you and Detective Nash are friends and you kinda want to kill Officer Price a lot... And Collins is totally guilty about something."

She put her smoothie on top to the car. "Collins, huh? That's old news. Ask your stepfather, he was there." Digging into her pockets, Gail pulled out Duncan's phone and the car keys. She didn't have to tell him to choose. He knew.

The rookie pointed at the phone but did not turn it on. He simply put it in his pocket as is. "Thanks, ma'am."

"Today you can call me Peck," she informed him and finished the smoothie. "You should have gotten a smoothie, you know, Moore."

Confused by his elevation, Duncan just nodded and got in the car. "It's fruit and shit, ma'am - Peck."

They'd work on that. "It's good for you." She tossed the smoothie and got into the car.

After a few blocks of silence, Duncan spoke up again, "Why do you keep looking at ambulances?"

Now this question was more awkward than the Holly one. "Because only two times is coincidence."

Duncan hesitated. "The guy with the IV?" When Gail nodded, he frowned and wracked his brain. "Was there more?"

"Remember the kid in the lake? His lover called 911, but the kid never got there."

"That's still coincidence, right?"
So he wasn't useless. Gail smiled thinly. "It is," she agreed. "How many Quebec plates since our last stop." Duncan stammered a count, which wasn't too far off Gail's, winning him a reprieve in that particular training game. The joy on Duncan's face was brief, as the game replaced by a new, harder, one, called Guess Who? Duncan lost three times in a row and sulked most of the day.

Back at the station, Gail was presented with a stack of papers from Chloe, who said someone from the main building came by for her. "I didn't peek, but who'd you upset now?"

"It'll be you and Dov in about ten seconds," growled Gail, and she opened the folder. "Ah crap..."

Chloe peeked over Gail's arm. "You're going for detective? You'd make a great detective. You're smart and you see things and pay attention in all these really impressive ways. I mean, you scare me, not in a grrr way, but like in a smart and capable way. And you scare me the rest of the time, but I don't think you're really mean."

"I most certainly am not going for detective, and sure as hell not in guns and gangs with Steve," snapped Gail, and she dumped the whole folder in recycling. Stomping off to the locker room, she was surprised to be followed by Chloe.

"Uncle Frank keeps asking me about it too," she said quietly, surprising Gail yet again. Chloe put the folder down on the bench between them. "Can I keep this?"

"Sure." Gail opened it again to see if her mother left any snide missives. "Don't do it because they want you to, Chloe." There was, indeed, a letter in the mix and Gail folded it up into her pocket. She'd read it, or not, later.

Taking the folder back, Chloe pulled out the handbook. "I don't know if I want it or not, but ... I want to know." It was nice to sit there quietly. "Uncle Frank's adopting a girl."

"Fostering." The correction came out without Gail really thinking about it. She glanced at Chloe, feeling apologetic and wasn't that a weird way to feel about Chloe? But Chloe was smiling. "What?"

"He said it was your idea and I should ask you about her."

There was a long pause and Gail frowned. "Why aren't you talking a mile a minute?"

Chloe kept her eyes on the folder, but also kept smiling. "Sometimes you keep the bubbly inside, Gail." With that, Chloe quickly hugged Gail and bolted. Gail was partly convinced it was all a set up for the hug, but as she left to go home she saw Chloe reading the papers with interest.

She waited until she was home, locked in her room, to read the letter. The note. It was short and to the point. Here was the latest information on the open spot in the rotation. Here was the type of officer they wanted. Here was who she'd work with. And here was a date, underlined in bold.

The date bewildered Gail until her phone rang. It was Nick.

"No, Nicholas, I will not save you from a blind date."

"I wouldn't dare ask. I just... Wanted to say I was sorry."

Gail frowned and kicked her shoes off. "Why? What did you do this time?"

Now Nick paused. "Wow. I can't tell if you're being a bitch or you honestly forgot." He sounded pained.Forgot? Gail looked at the date on the letter again.
"I could be a bitch if you wanted, but I was really just going to watch TV and crash. What the hell are you talking about?"

More silence. "Christ, I envy you." Now he was angry. "Did it mean nothing?"

"Did what mean nothing- oh. Oh!" The words were the trigger. She'd shouted them at him five years ago over the phone. Because of what happened five years ago from today. The deal.

"Seriously, Gail. How the hell did you forget?"

While Nick was angry, Gail was confused as to why. "Hey, asshole, you left me at the damn altar. With a fucking note in my dressing room. I didn't find out you joined the damn army until Steve hunted you down."

"Did you even look?" He was bitter. And possibly drunk.

"No," admitted Gail, honestly. She tried to remember why the date was so important to Nick, though. He couldn't be mad because she'd moved on. Hell, he liked Holly and Gail together, or so he said.

"You know, I don't know what the hell I was thinking... Never mind, Gail."

"Hey, hang on. What the hell is going on?" Memories of conversations she'd tried to forget rushed to the front of her brain. She hadn't picked the date for the wedding. He did. He picked the date because it was the same date as his parents' death. "Jesus, Nick, can't you just say you're depressed about your parents?"

"I'm not! I just... This was supposed to be our day. And I screwed it up. Twice."

Gail snorted. "Nick, we both screwed it up." Her bald statement stopped him. "I was a crap girlfriend and we would have divorced within a year. You and me, we were bad for each other."

There was a sharp intake of breath. "I didn't mean that..."

"What? That I wasn't girlfriend material? You weren't wrong, Nicholas." She sighed. "I'm sorry I forgot."

"No," he mumbled. "I'm sorry for bringing it up." Then he apologized again and hung up.

Gail fell onto her bed. She couldn't fathom losing her parents. As much as they fought, they were her parents and a part of her still loved them. The paper crinkled and she pulled her mother's missive out to look at it. Ugh. Why was everything so complicated? She crushed the paper into a ball and threw it into the garbage.

Curling up, fully clothed, on her bed, Gail contemplated just going to sleep when her phone rang again. "Goddamn it," she growled, ready to ignore the call until she saw Holly's name on the phone. "Hey."

"Wow, you don't sound happy."

"I'm having a very Peck day," sighed Gail. "The only way it could get better is if Steve showed up or it was the third Thursday." There was silence on the phone. "Please god don't tell me today is the third Thursday of the month..."

"Well..." Holly trailed off. "Is this the monthly dinner?"
"Shit," snarled Gail. That's why her mother underlined the damn date. "I have to get dressed." She scrambled back up, hunting for clean things to wear. "Baby, I'm sorry. I have to go."

"That's fine, we can talk later." Holly sounded a little off and Gail stopped, her hand on a clean shirt. "I'd say have fun but that seems unlikely."

"No kidding. I'm sorry, Holly, I love you."

That brought an honest laugh across the phone, "I love you too."

Gail hung up and stared at her phone. The last thing she really wanted to do was see her parents, but it was Thursday and she had promised. She really wanted to sleep. Or see Holly. Grumbling, Gail wriggled out of her jeans and into a nice dress, to perhaps stave off her father's increasingly pointed remarks. "Dov, get out of the bathroom!" She pounded on the door until he threw it open.

"What the hell is - woah." He was in a towel and Gail quickly pulled him out and popped into the bathroom to get her makeup. "You forget a date with Holly?"

"It's Thursday, I'm late, my parents are going to kill me." Fast makeup was hard to get right, but Gail had mastered it. For all Nick called her high maintenance, she really wasn't. She just liked things the way she liked them.

"You never dressed up that nice when you were dating Chris," Dov remarked, watching the transformation into girl with amazement. Taking a moment to flip Dov off, she stole some of his hair cream to fix her hair. "Hey! That's mine!"

"You can borrow my blush," offered Gail. Satisfied with her look, Gail dashed back to her room, grabbed her shoes and purse, and sprinted for the door, hopping into her heels on the way.

"I can't believe you ditched me and Traci," complained Steve for the hundredth time.

"Seriously, Steven. I'm sorry!"

"I had to lie to mom!"

Holly had been watching the Peck siblings banter most of the night at dinner and the basketball game. The tickets and meal were Gail's apology for abandoning her sibling to the Peck Family Dinner, and a bribe for Holly not to say what had really happened. That didn't stop a blush and smile from crossing her face, though. Seated beside her in the skybox, Gail squeezed her hand.

"Brother mine, let's get drinks okay?"

As Gail hauled her brother off, Traci oozed into a seat. "Okay, spill."

"What? I have no idea how Gail got these seats."

"One of their cousins, probably," Traci waved a hand. "You keep grinning when Gail apologizes."

Holly sighed and glanced out the door. The Pecks were at the bar down the hall so she pulled out her phone and showed Traci a picture of Gail leaning at the counter of a quiet, fancy, restaurant. Gail was in a wine red dress and heels, her hair curled back in a vintage '40s look. Leaning back slightly, she smiled at the camera in a femme fatale sort of way.

"Woah," breathed Traci. "She was going to wear that to dinner with her parents?"
"So she says." Holly had been called, mere minutes after their first phone call that night was aborted. Gail's request had been simple, begging Holly to please meet her for dinner instead of making her suffer with her parents. She then sent Holly that photo. "I swear, I have never gotten dressed so fast in my life."

"I don't blame you." Traci shook her head. "You know, I get so used to her in jeans and those boots, I forget she used to girl it up all the time."

Holly lost her focus, trying to picture a world where Gail was girly all the time. "What happened?"

"She moved in with Dov, after Chris left for Timmons." Traci stopped and looked embarrassed. "You know what, never mind."

The timing snapped Holly back into reality. Moving in with Dov. "After Perik?" When Traci froze Holly added, "She told me."

"Jerry was my fiancé," sighed Traci, looking over at the siblings. Okay, maybe Gail hadn't told her everything. "I don't think she and I would have been friends without that. And without Nick and Andy going undercover." Traci smiled. "It's funny. She's closer to my age than Andy's but it was easier to be friends with Andy first. Gail just never let's people in."

"Well," sighed Holly. "Their parents..."

"Are batshit insane," agreed Traci. "They didn't ask about you once, though. Steve just said she'd had a long day and was probably asleep."

"It was supposed to be my wedding anniversary," Gail announced and Holly blushed. "I told you they were gossiping about us."

"Since when did you learn to speak girl." Steve handed Traci a drink and sat beside her.

"Ass."

"Brat."

They started signing rudely at each other, until Holly grabbed Gail's hand and pulled her over for a kiss. "Wedding?"

"Nick," grumbled Gail, leaning back. "He's a moron for picking the date, too. Same day his parents died."

Many people would have heard that as Gail being uncaring or unfeeling. Holly saw that Gail actually was angry that Nick would set himself up for that kind of pain. She kept hold of Gail's hand and leaned into her shoulder. "Clearly you need to pick the next wedding date."

"Is that a proposal, 'cause it needs work, nerd," laughed Gail, but she let go of Holly's hand to flip the armrest up and drape her arm over her shoulders. Much better, Holly agreed, "What are we watching again?"

As one, everyone replied, "Basketball!"

Discussions of marriage, exes, and slinky dresses were put to the side to watch the game. Holly and Traci knew more about the sport, and Traci confessed that Leo had been upset to learn he wasn't coming. That had surprised Gail who said next time they should bring him, because more people who knew more about sports than she did was just fun. Even Holly wasn't sure if that was a sarcastic
remark but Gail did adore mini-humans, so it might have been serious.

After the game was over Gail tossed them one more surprise and they got to meet the players. Holly was positively gleeful and got her jersey signed by the player himself while Steve simply asked for a signed ball for his girlfriend's son. Gail nudged Traci at that point and said she'd better put out, which resulted in the two giggling.

Back at her place, Holly hung up the jersey reverently. She was going to get it framed but had already sent a selfie of her wearing it to her mother, who was jealous, and wanted to know how she'd gotten that. That was an interesting question. The last her parents heard, Gail was included in the group of friends like Lisa and Rachel. There had been no mention of the relationship status. She just wasn't sure how her parents would take it.

Her mother had taken Holly's sexuality harder than her father, who was pretty much laconic about anything that wasn't science. Once she got over it, Holly's mother had been a confidant for almost all her relationships, including the myriad fiascoes with straight girls. That said, the fallout over Gail had not gone as well as one might hope. The argument over moving to the States went worse. Both of her parents accused her of making impulsive choices and running instead of dealing with thing.

Ironically, that was why she'd 'lip attacked' Gail in interrogation. Deal with things. Deal with the fact that she was still terribly hung up on Gail, in a way she'd never wanted to be. It was supposed to be an easy thing, a friendship that grew into something more and, eventually, love. Love scared the shit out of Holly. That was her own hurdle, though. Gail's was more like relationship self-immolation. If things got too much, or too weird, she broke things as best she could and escaped.

Except… Gail wasn't doing that anymore. At least not now with Holly. And Holly wasn't running from a serious commitment, which was kind of novel after her last serious relationship. Six years ago, she'd been dumped by the woman she thought she'd spend the rest of her life with, because oops, she wasn't gay after all.

Since then, it had been a series of casual, friendly flings. Nothing too deep, in part because she didn't want to get burned again, but also because she just didn't connect with anyone that way. She did with Gail, though. Strange, petulant, sarcastic, outright mean when she wanted to be, Gail. Gail who, by her own admission, was immature and prone to self-destructive relationship patterns.

And who was sitting on her couch right now, having gone an extra mile or ten to treat her girlfriend out to a night at a sporting event she hated. Gail could have just given her brother the tickets, but she knew that Holly would want to go too. So she sucked it up and spent a boring night, just for Holly. Who the hell wouldn't think that was love?

Holly glanced at Gail, feeling incredibly guilty, and asked, "Have you told your parents we're dating again?"

"No," admitted Gail. "Which doesn't mean they don't know."

"Do they really spy on you?" She dropped onto the couch and curled up against Gail, too keyed up to consider sleeping yet.

"Sometimes. Not right now, though, we have a deal." Gail wrapped an arm around Holly and pulled her close to kiss her cheek. "Ever since I moved out we talk less, which if you knew how little we talked when I lived with them, you would be impressed." Gail caressed Holly's face, "But this was you trying to tell me you haven't told your parents yet."

Holly grimaced and pressed her face into Gail's cleavage. "I never should have dated a cop."
"Says the woman with her face in my boobs."

"They're very nice," smiled Holly. "I could live here." Gail laughed and her fingers found Holly's chin, drawing it up so they could kiss. "This is good too." She practically crawled onto Gail, pushing her back into the couch so they could stretch out. "Can you stay tonight?"

"I can," confirmed Gail, drawing her in to kiss again. "If you did my laundry."

"Curiously enough, I may have washed the clothes you left here," Holly grinned. "What about your uniform?"

"If I leave by seven, it'll be fine."

Holly did hate that part of their routine, the scheduling and adjustments. But that said, it meant she had Gail in her bed for another night, and that was worth it.
Unacceptable Behavior

Chapter Notes

My family is far too accepting and tolerant of me and my sexuality, even if it took some people a while. Asking friends what shitty things their parents said about them being gay to write a fic was odd. It became less odd and more depressing when we read things that Michelle Bachmann and Fred Phelps said.

Gail's passcodes are random by intent and she changes them, so if they're different later then it is by intent. Her whole family are cops, it's the only way to keep things secret.

"Dad?" Gail practically bounced off him as she rounded the corner to her car. He was out of uniform for once, which was unexpected. Her father wore his uniform like a shield.

"Hi, kiddo. Can we talk?"

Gail tilted her head and nodded. "Sure." She made no move to go anywhere, nor did he. "Everything okay? I didn't do anything to embarrass Mom again, did I?" She was reasonably sure she'd been under the radar with all things.

Bill Peck stalled. "No. I'm here on my own." He hesitated and looked away. "You're dating a woman. Again."

Technically she was dating the same woman again. Not wanting to get into semantics, Gail just nodded. "I am."

"I don't understand." His hands went into his pockets, grumpily. "Why?"

"Why what? Why a woman?" Now her father nodded. "Because it happened. Same way I decided to date a guy."

"But this isn't a guy, Gail," he sighed. "And I don't understand why women. Why now? You're almost 30, and you're suddenly a- a-"

"Lesbian," Gail filled in. "Dad, it's not a phase. And it's not a choice. This is what it is, okay? I fell in love with a girl, and she's in love with me, and that's just what it is."

Her father looked away. "How could you do this?"

"Do what?" There was no answer from her father and Gail checked the time. "Look, Dad, I have an appointment so I need to go."

Nodding, Bill hesitated and finally said, "I don't like it. It's unnatural and wrong."

Gail flinched. She'd always suspected her father held something like that. Once, he'd called one of her teachers a fairy. But having it aimed at yourself, from your own father, was painful. "I'm sorry you feel that way, Dad." She had no idea where the politeness came from, when all she felt was rage.
"This is just against everything we ever taught you, Gail. It's bad enough we have to cater to the gays, have parades, but now you? This? Did we fail somehow?"

Gail felt like she'd been punched. "Seriously? This is how you want to do it?" Her father looked startled. "What do you want?"

"I want you to stop playing around."

"Is that what you think? Wow." Gail pushed her hands through her hair.

"This rebellion- this is just lashing out. Ever since you were abducted-"

"This has nothing to do with Perik!" Gail's voice was loud enough to grab the attention of the other officers in the vicinity. She swallowed and said more quietly, "Go home, Dad. Tell mom you tried to talk me out of being a lesbian, and I told you to fuck off. I don't care anymore." She jerked her car door open and threw her purse inside, "But I'm the same Gail I've always been. Right? Just failing your expectations every day."

Slamming the door, Gail drove out of the lot faster than she intended. Shit. When she pulled up at the park, she resisted the urge to hit her steering wheel or punch anything. Fuck. How the hell did her father drop that bomb. Gail winced and pulled out her phone to text her brother.

*Our father is a raging homophobe.*

She really hadn't expected him to go there. Nor did she expect Steve to text her right back.

*What did he say?*

*It's unnatural and wrong and did they fail at raising me.*

*Shit. Our father? Was he drunk?*

*Smelled stone cold sober.*

Steve didn't reply to that and Gail flipped her phone to silent, shoving it into her pocket. She stepped out of the car and took a deep breath. Calm. Breathe in, breathe out. People wondered why she had high walls, why she pushed them away. Most people just hurt you, wanted what they wanted, and you weren't a consideration. Most people included her parents it seemed.

She wasn't her parents. Holly wasn't most people. She opened her eyes and looked across the park. Neither was she, decided Gail, and smiled as she saw Sophie playing on the jungle gym with the other foster kids. Pulling the box of donuts from the car, Gail walked over to sit by the social worker, not willing to break up the game.

"You should stop bringing junk food," joked Anne, the social worker.

"Is that a complaint?" Gail grinned and popped the box. It was like catnip. Six kids surrounded them, cheering the donuts, and immediately wolfing them down.

"Not really." Anne cheerfully handed out napkins.

Sophie was watching Gail curiously. "You're having an eat your feelings day."

Kid was perceptive. "Nah, just got into an argument with someone before I came here, sweetie." Maybe a few years ago she'd do that, but it felt wrong now. "How about you? Did you like dinner with just Frank and Noelle?"
"I guess," she mumbled, tearing the napkin.

Gail knew that Sophie had been a little belligerent. "They said you didn't talk much."

Nodding, Sophie asked, "How come you can't adopt me?"

Gail glanced at the social worker, who shook her head. Clearly this was not a leak. "I'd love to, but I can't. They won't let me."

"Is it because you have a girlfriend?"

Sighing, Gail ate the last of her donut before replying. "No, it's not. They don't think I'm ready, that's all."

There were tears in Sophie's eyes. "But I like you best!"

Right. This was why people hugged. Gail pulled Sophie into a gentle hug, "Hey, I like you best too." She sighed, "You know I used to work with Frank and Noelle?" There was a nod. "Well. When I tried to adopt you, they gave me lots of advice and support. And I told Noelle how come I like you so much, and she feels the same way."

"They have a baby they'll like more than me."

"They have a baby they'll like differently than you, sweetie."

Sophie squirmed out of Gail's hug and stared at her. "Tell me why." When Gail didn't answer, Sophie insisted. "Tell me why they said you can't."

Jesus. Gail exhaled and glanced at Anne, silently begging for some space. The other woman led the rest of the kids away, giving the two some privacy. "Okay. A couple years ago I got hurt really badly in a case." She regarded her own knuckles, thinking about how to explain all of this in a way that didn't terrify the child. "Sometimes it comes up at work, and the last time it did I got very angry. So they read my record and decided I wasn't ready yet. That I'm not ... healed."

She really couldn't explain it better than that right now. She didn't want to. It was hard to talk about, and Gail hadn't argued when they'd told her that was the reason either. She knew in her heart it was right. If this was another year from now, maybe it would be different, but it wasn't. It was now, and it was here, and Gail was still damaged.

"Do you have nightmares too?" Sophie's voice was the softest whisper ever.

"Yeah, I do," whispered Gail.

The girl threw her arms around Gail, "If I live with Frank and Noelle, will I still see you?"

"All the time, sweetie. All the time."

There were snuffles and tears, but Sophie finally let go, promising to really talk to Noelle and Frank. And like that, the visit drew to a close. Gail walked the kids back to the van, and one of the other girls dawdled.

"Officer Gail?" She kicked at the dirt, nervously.

Rooting in her brain for the name, Gail was saved when Sophie mouthed it. "Yes, Kate?"

The girl blinked and blushed hearing her name. "Sophie said you had a girlfriend."
Oh dear. The other kids were suddenly silent, paying attention. "I do. Her name is Holly." Gail reached into her pocket for her phone. "Sometimes when I pick up Sophie, she's with me."

"How'd you know?" Jesus, kids just asked things. They were worse than straight chicks.

"Well. When you like someone, you just know." Gail ignored the texts from her brother and opened a photo of her and Holly at the basketball game. "Here. This is me and her and my brother and his girlfriend."

All the kids crowded around to look. They all decided she was pretty, but Sophie announced that Holly was even prettier in person and a doctor. Suddenly Gail's stock went up. It was restorative, having a group of children be so open and accepting of Gail being gay. A total opposite of how her father made her feel. It was bewildering. Gail helped get the kids in the van and was not surprised when Anne pulled her over for a question.

"Do you think Kate..."

"She's eight," Gail pointed out. "And I have no gaydar. But ... Y'know she's talking."

"True." Anne paused. "Would you mind coming over to see her some time? Just her?"

Gail looked at the van of kids and her heart ached. "I can do that." She didn't need to think. Those kids needed someone, and if she could help even a little. Some had been afraid of cops, some hated them, and some needed to see people being people. But this, this feeling of hope in a kid's eyes, knowing that Gail was there and gay, that was how she knew her father was all wrong.

Without thinking much, Gail found herself driving to Holly's instead of her apartment. She circled the block, spotting the office lights on, and pulled around back. Holly had given her a key and a remote for the garage during the great unpacking, insisting Gail could come over any time. It still felt odd to show up unannounced, even though they were sleeping together. It was a small, strange invasion of privacy.

Still, Gail thumbed the remote to open the garage and let herself in. Once the garage closed, and Gail was inside, she heard Holly shout down, "Better be my girlfriend and not an axe murderer."

"¿Por qué no los dos?"

"Spanish. You speak Spanish too?" Holly's head popped over the stair railing, her hair in an adorably messy bun. "Or are you just quoting commercials?"

"Actually I do speak Spanish."

"You never cease to impress me, Gail Peck."

"I've got Russian down now, too," smiled Gail and she made her way up the stairs. "Officer Nemov said I sound like a real Muscovite now."

"Fluent in Russian, when do you learn these languages? Why did you?" Holly shook her head and looped her arms around Gail's neck. "Is there another one you're not telling me about?"

"Just one... I listened to tapes while I was running." Gail kissed her lightly. "Anything and everything to get you out of my head." Resting her hands on Holly's waist, she drew her closer. "Didn't work. I just dreamed about you in Punjabi. It turned into this whole Bollywood thing, where you were dancing with Andy and Chloe as your backups. Very weird."
Holly bubbled a laugh. "Punjabi? Why Punjabi?"

"It's the third most spoken language in Canada," smirked Gail. "I can't read it well yet." Languages just stuck in her head, though. They worked far more than math and science ever had.

Holly shook her head and kissed Gail again, "Give it time." They stood in the hallway, kissing for a while. "Just here for a booty call?"

"Sympathy and cuddles." Gail rested her head on Holly's shoulder.

"Is Sophie still mad about the Bests?" Of course Gail had told her about Sophie's mini tantrum and frustration.

Gail kissed Holly's shoulder. "She was mad because she wanted me to adopt her. I told her I was still kinda messed up." The arms around her tightened and held her close. "Hey, it's okay. They're right. I'm pretty crazy."

"You're not messed up. You're perfectly sane," whispered Holly. "It's just the rest of the world that's crazy."

"Is that your professional opinion?" Gail inhaled, taking in the smell of Holly's skin. While Holly didn't answer, Gail knew it was girlfriend Holly who had spoken. "Sophie's fine. They asked if I could come hang out with another girl."

Holly started to toy with the hair at the back of Gail's neck. "Is that good?"

"They think... She thinks she might be gay, I think. I have no gaydar." In her arms, Holly snickered. "It's not funny! I'm serious!"

"You have no gaydar, really?"

"Okay, that's funny," she allowed. They kissed again and Gail's stomach growled. "I haven't had dinner. You?" Holly leaned away and looked thoughtful. "That's a no. Come on, bookworm, I'll cook."

"Oh you are needy," Holly blinked, letting Gail lead her downstairs.

"There are other reasons to want to cook," muttered Gail, popping open the fridge. "Where did all your tomatoes go?"

Holly blushed, sitting on a stool. "I didn't want to accidentally eat one before you showed up."

Smiling, Gail pulled out avocados and cheese and bread. "Tuna melts? Okay, give. What happened? It can't be this kid, unless you're trying to tell me you want to go into CYAC."

Wincing, Gail shook her head. "No. That'd eat me alive." She pulled her phone out and slid it over. "Passcode's 1383."

"Oooh, we're at this point in our relationship? Should I tell you mine?"

"It's your mother's birthday." Gail smirked and took the can opener out, "And before you ask, I've never used it. Check the texts from Steve."

Holly looked perplexed but did so. Keeping watch of her reflection in the window, Gail watched her face go from confused to surprised to angry. "What did he actually say?" Her voice was low and tense. So Gail recited the conversation, word for word, including the part where she told her father to
"fuck off. "Huh. I thought he was upset about it hurting your career."

"Dad doesn't get my sense of humor either," admitted Gail. "I once told him I'd rather be abducted than go to work with my mother, which actually is a fringe benefit of having been suspended... I'll never work in her department." She side glanced at Holly who was smirking ruefully. Relief washed through her, just seeing that Holly found the joke for what it was.

"You have a dark sense of humor, sweetheart," smiled Holly. "But I think maybe if I'd known you then..."

"They were in New Zealand. I didn't see them for two weeks." She shook her head. "You probably would have done what Traci did, hauled me out of the hospital and made me talk to people." Gail set the cast iron pan on the range to start heating it up.

"I knew I liked Traci." Holly got up and pulled out plates and glasses. "What did your parents do?"

Gail exhaled. "My mother sent me to a therapist way the hell out of town. Made me live at home. Got mad when I started dating Nick again. The usual." Waving a hand, Gail put the bread in the pan to toast it. "They hate Nick. And Chris... Huh. I kinda hoped they'd like you because you're a doctor."

Lips quirking into that adorable side-smile, Holly shook her head, "So you're only into me for my degree."

The bread was flipped and Gail sliced the avocados. "All those big words are a turn on," agreed Gail. "Plus side, I won't be going to any family dinners, so you don't have to worry about them hating you."

"That's a little extreme."

"How did your parents take you coming out?" She sprinkled cheese on the bread and let it start to melt before putting it on plates and adding avocados and tuna.

"Well I was fifteen so ... They caught me making out with my 'best friend' in my room." Gail giggled and Holly looked embarrassed. "Totally cliché, I know. Dad was okay with it, but Mom said she couldn't spend the night and we had the most awkward conversation ever. It wasn't in her mom lexicon, so now it's really funny. At the time, I was freaking out that they'd kick me out or something. But dad just hugged me and said no matter what, he loved me."

The feeling of jealousy tickled her spine and Gail pushed a plate over. "I have no idea how that even feels," sighed Gail. She couldn't find one memory where her parents said that. The closest was her father telling her not to joke about being abducted, but even then he never said he loved her. "Steve calls us trained monkeys."

Holly was silent, eating her sandwich with a rhapsodic expression. "Okay. So I can't fix that, honey," she finally said.

"What? No, I didn't think you could. I just... Needed someone? To talk to, I guess." Gail bit into her sandwich.

They ate quietly for a while. "What did you do before?"

"Get drunk."

"Then this would be better," agreed Holly. "But I do need to finish my report..."
"Can I hang out? I have my iPad." She smiled shyly at Holly, "I just feel safe here. Like everything will be okay, even if I go a little crazy. Or you go crazy." Spinning around on her stool, Gail looked up at the ceiling.

"You need a drawer. And some room in my closet," decided Holly. Gail stopped spinning and blinked at Holly. Did she just say she wanted Gail to have space in her house? "That was pushy? Yeah, that was pushy. Bad timing, too. I just want you, I mean, I like that you feel safe here. I feel safer, better, when you're here. You're the first girl I ever gave my key too, actually. You're, um, the only one who slept over, too. Even before we were dating, unless you count my mom, and I really don't."

Gail slid off her stool and kissed Holly to stop her rambling, "I want a big drawer. And room for shoes."

"A big drawer. You want to leave a uniform here too?"

"No, you'd just want me to wear it 'cause I'm sexy in my uniform." When Holly blushed, Gail kissed her again, "This is a step up from me just leaving things here when I'm late."

Holly smiled and made a pleased sound, "I may have put your things in a drawer already."

"Aw, I liked my pile."

After dinner, they ended up in the office, Holly working at her big desk and Gail reading up on the other kids in Sophie's foster group, sprawled on the sofa. While she certainly appreciated the work CYAC did, she knew that kind of job would eat her alive. Scratching one more possible future off her list, Gail flipped to a doc her mother had sent with a list of all potential jobs. She had been lazy before, reluctant to invest in her career, but now having trained Gerald she had an itch to do more. Was this how it started for everyone?

"You look very serious," remarked Holly.

The thought came out of her mouth, unhindered by the remark. "I think Noelle's coming back to Fifteen soon."

Holly turned around in her chair, resting her arms on the back. "That's not what you were reading."

"Oh, no. I was thinking about the whole T.O. thing. Training Officer. Since Gerald's probably gonna pass. Finally. And I can't be Ollie's partner anymore, and I really don't want to get stuck with anyone else ..." She sighed and tossed the iPad to the foot of the couch. "It's silly."

"No it's not." Holly kicked her chair and wheeled over to pick up the iPad. She lingered over the lock screen before taping in four digits and frowning. "Seriously, who uses different codes on their devices?"

"The same people who use random number generators to make them in the first place. 7643."

Holly tapped in that code and read the app Gail had left open. "You highlight your ebooks? And I'm the nerd?" Not replying, Gail scrunched down on the couch and put her feet up. "This is from your mother?"

"Yup." She popped the p loudly out of habit. "Lots of options. Except every one where my family is involved."

"Do those even exist?"
"Not really, no." Gail closed her eyes and recited off the various positions her relatives had, until Holly stopped her by covering Gail's mouth with her hand. "Sorry," she mumbled.

"You know, I don't understand something," Holly decided, putting the iPad on Gail's stomach. "You're smart. I mean, insanely gifted smart. You could do anything in the world. You practically inhale languages and I know you actually understand all the crap I like to spout out about medicine." Holly sighed, "So how come you always act like you expect to fail?"

Oh. That. Gail opened her eyes and looked up at Holly quietly. "My nickname growing up was Gail the Fail. Actually it's Garbage Pail Gail the Pale Fail." She folded her arms under her head, turning her face away to look at the ceiling. "My cousins, Steve, they're all better at cop stuff. Better detectives, stronger, faster... They'd pick on me, since I'm the youngest, until I'd cry and my mother would tell me I wasn't being a Peck. Dad'd just have this look... I'm absolute crap at sports too. which pissed him off, though it's funny now since he's having the stupid homo-hissy fit."

Holly's hand rested on her thigh, "Sweetheart, you don't have to be strong."

"No, I have to be tough. Don't let things like that get to me, don't let Perik get to me. My mother was angry I was in therapy that long." She exhaled an angry breath. She hadn't actually told the, she'd gone back to therapy. "Being smarter didn't seem to matter. If I got an A, I should have gotten an A+. I got the highest score on the police exam for my class, but that's just what I was supposed to get. And I didn't the highest score ever, so I got shit for that."

"I see why you call then ex-Peck-tations," grumbled Holly. "But Gail, that's like saying you're not a good swimmer because you're not Michael Phelps!"

Which was something Gail had known. "Yeah." She pushed herself up on her elbows. "Unattainable goals. So I stopped trying to be the cop they wanted me to be." Holly just looked at her, saying nothing. "I just don't know what I want to be yet, Holly."

After a long moment, Holly got out of the chair and nudged Gail over so she could curl up against her on the couch, face to face. "I don't mind how long you take, if you don't mind how long it takes me to get back to where I was."

"How's that going?" Gail stroked Holly's back gently. She'd been aware of the complications Holly had faced, taking her job back at a pay cut and a decrease of responsibilities. The amount of scut work, as Holly put it, had increased, though she'd still had to work on as many articles as before.

Holly made a grumbling noise and pressed her face into Gail's shoulder. "You got demoted once, didn't you?"

"Kind of. Pay cut, suspension." She scooted over and Holly draped a leg over her own, nestling in. "Guy died because I didn't search him." There was a soft 'oh' from Holly. "Little different." They lay there quietly for a while. "I'll still love you if you become a mortician," decided Gail.

Holly giggled. "I'll love you when you become a mall cop."

Let the future be what it will be.
Sophie deserves a family. Oh and I love watching The Fosters. Steph and Lena are adorable. This was delayed because I got the flu.

Being swamped and doing the grunt work at 25 was a lot easier than at 36. It was worse at 36 when you had a serious relationship with a woman who was working hard to advocate for a child's fostering, and wanted you involved. Talking to the therapist about it had been weird, and while Holly was feeling better about that, she really wanted to talk to Lisa and Rachel. The problem was that they didn't know about Sophie, and Holly wasn't sure it was her place to tell them. Not to mention they hadn't been as close since the move that wasn't.

So when she came home to find Gail on the desk, grilling burgers and drinking beer with Lisa and Rachel, it was strange. "Gail, how insane are you?" Holly accepted the beer and eyed the group.

"Pretty nuts, but you said you were missing girl time. So..." Gail gestured.

"But you said you're working tonight."

"Yes," nodded Gail, hoisting her drink which was actually just a soda. "Exactly right. I have to leave in an hour and Rachel will grill the meat."

"If that's another straight joke, Blondie," drawled Rachel, mock warningly.

The bantering between Gail and Rachel seemed practically natural and weird. They were talking about Gail and Nick's wedding, or lack there of, in Las Vegas. Gail was arguing that she had nothing to do with any of the planning, nor was it running away. Her parents had actually been there. Rachel was fascinated by the idea of the wedding in Las Vegas and Gail was surprisingly tolerant (for Gail) about the retelling. It was nothing Holly didn't know.

"I'm a bad friend," announced Lisa abruptly, catching Holly by surprise.

"No arguments here." Gail lifted her drink in mock salute which Lisa met, chagrined.

Holly picked up her own beer, feeling rather perplexed. "Why are you a bad friend?"

When Lisa hesitated it was Rachel and Gail who said, as one, "BitchTits is happy you didn't leave Canada."

Beer did not shoot out Holly's nose, but it was a near thing. "I'm sorry I didn't talk to you guys..."

"I'm more mad you were going to ask blondie to run away with you."

Rachel nodded, agreeing with Lisa. "Seriously, that was stupid impulse Holly who slept with her roommate."

Lisa added, "Or who fell madly in love with her straight TA."
"Okay!" Holly waved her hands. "God, yes. I know it was stupid and crazy, but." She looked at Gail, sheepishly, and saw the blonde smiling. "I'm really in love with her."

"I can't believe you were going to give her up," grumbled Lisa and Holly startled. She certainly hadn't mentioned that Gail had let her go while still helping pack.

"I can't leave Toronto right now." Gail sipped her beer. "And at the time, I was trying to adopt."

That shut both Lisa and Rachel up. "Adopt?" Lisa almost stuttered.

"Gail, Holly doesn't want kids." Rachel looked between them, confounded.

And Gail just nodded. "I am aware of this."

"We talked," Holly noted and kicked the railing. "I offered the long distance thing."

"Yeah, that was just going to make one of us hate the other, baby." Gail leaned around and kissed Holly gently.

Lisa made a face, "Stop being cute. And stop being right. I liked it better when I though you were uneducated and blue collar."

"I liked you better when you were a lopsided boob job, so we're even."

For a moment Holly worried the two would argue but she saw a glimmer of delight in Gail's eyes, matched by Lisa's. Oh dear god. "When did you two decide to be friends?"

"We're not!" The two women shouted at once.

"I think she's an elitist ass," snarled Gail.

Lisa nodded, "And she's a stuck up ice princess. Go back to the adoption. Holly was moving to the US and you were going to adopt a kid."

"It's a Peck thing," sighed Gail. "When you have something complicated, make it more complicated." Gail perched on the railing and tugged Holly into her arms, though she continued to talk to Lisa. "Her name is Sophie and they turned me down for a couple reasons."

"Single lesbian?" Rachel looked over from the grill. "Or cop things?"

"Cop things. My record had ups and downs."

There was a pause and Lisa noted, "I was suspended for conduct once." When Gail looked interested she added, "I slept with a teacher at the hospital."

"I thought you slept with a teacher's wife." Gail sounded amused.

"That too." Lisa looked embarrassed and Gail laughed. "I don't like how I'm the only one with a horrible nickname."

Holly snorted and pointed at Lisa, Rachel, and herself in turn. "BitchTits, ManEater, ImpulseSex."

Eyes sparking, Gail whispered 'ImpulseSex?' into Holly's ear as Rachel asked if Gail had a nickname. "Ah, Ice Queen or Frigid Bitch is what it usually get."

"Yeah," acknowledged Rachel, "but what do your friends call you?"
"Peck. It's a name and an epitaph," smiled Gail. "Or an insult. It's really a wonderful multifaceted, love/hate name."

Rachel grinned and the friendly banter continued until Gail pulled herself away to go to the station. She lingered with Holly in the house for a moment, kissing her and promising to come back after work. Back on the deck, Rachel handed her a burger. "Did you know she went to college?"

"Lisa? It's still in doubt that she graduated, but I do recall her in our classes."

Rolling her eyes, Rachel gestured towards the house, "Gail!"

"I didn't the first time you met her," smiled Holly. "Criminal Justice." Holly also knew Gail had taken some business management classes to 'prep her for a white shirt,' per her parents, but had not officially minored in it because it was 'stupid.'

"Why is she a beat cop?"

"Patrol officer," corrected Holly. Not that 'beat cop' was necessarily insulting, it just usually was meant that way. "You should ask her, Rachel. It's complicated."

Lisa sighed, "She did. Exactly how many Pecks are there in police, Holls? I get the feeling she was downplaying exactly how blue her blood is, and I mean that in every way possible."

Holly hesitated. "Her mother's in charge of internal affairs, her father's the head Inspector of her Division, her godfather's the chief of police, and there's basically at least one Peck or a blood relative in every division, every department. So ... Yeah."

Both her friends looked flabbergasted. "Shit," muttered Lisa. "I asked her about how crazy that was and your cop hottie told us about the kid." Of all things possible, Lisa looked sympathetic. "Holly, she's going to want to be a parent one day."

Getting another beer, Holly sat on her bench. "Yeah, I know. And she's amazing with them. They love her." Even mature, sorting her shit out, Gail was a child at heart.

"You don't want kids," Lisa pointed out. "You've never wanted kids the whole time I've known you. That was why you broke up with the accountant whatever her name was."

Holly sipped her beer. "Melissa and can I call parlay?"

It was an old joke, calling parlay. The friends had used it since the first pirate movie as a way to agree to let each other say what they were thinking without judgement. Had Holly been thinking, she'd have called it when she announced her move. At the time she'd been sure Rachel and Lisa would be supportive. Now she wasn't. Parlay also had come to mean a time when you could say things that weren't well thought out, but spoken from the heart.

"Of course," promised Rachel. A moment later Lisa muttered her agreement.

Holly closed her eyes. "I'm in love with Gail. And I spend a lot of time with her and... She's good with kids. So I'm around them more. I was never around kids before. We don't really hang with them." This won quiet murmurs of agreement. "I see Gail with kids and I think she's amazing and I like the kids and ... Maybe I do want them and I just never had the right person to want them with. I maybe kind of want them with her." She opened one eye and screwed her face up at her friends. "I'm crazy huh?"

"You're our crazy." Lisa, of all people, sat next to her on the bench and hugged her. This was why
Lisa was her friend. When her parents had argued about the last second switch to forensics, Lisa stood by her and helped her figure out how to survive without her parents' money. Even if she didn't always agree, Lisa would help. "No having babies right away. You should try living with her first."

"They'd have adorable babies, though," mused Rachel, who had been vocal about her biological clock ticking lately. "What's Gail's real hair color? And does she have a brother?"

"Kinda what you saw tonight. She stopped dying it when we broke up." Holly leaned into Lisa and sighed. "Her brother's a ginger and not single. Also ew? I'm not having a baby."

Rachel rolled her eyes. "You would have amazingly cute little babies, I'm just saying." Squeezing in on the other side, Rachel wrapped her arms around Lisa and Holly and hugged them both. "I'm glad you stayed in Canada, Impulse Girl."

"I'm kind of glad I didn't move too, but ... God I wish I knew why."

She spent the rest of the evening talking about regular things with her friends, like movies and their dates. Rachel had a new boy who was possibly serious and wanted them, including Gail, to meet him. When Lisa joked Gail could run a background check, Rachel looked worried and Holly had to promise that Gail wouldn't.

When she woke up in the morning, Gail was in bed with her, hair still damp from a shower, sound asleep. Holly knew better than to surprise Gail, so she just turned around and curled up into her, getting that extra precious hour in her company rather than sleeping or running. Early on, Gail would invariably wake up when Holly did that, the sound and movement startling her out of sleep. That didn't mean she'd get up. On the contrary, Gail often burrowed back under the covers and looked grumpy.

Recently though, Gail had started sleeping through Holly getting up and dressed. Holly had not yet asked her about it, fearing the answer a little. Downstairs, the coffee machine was set up for her and Gail had left a note.

*Dinner with Sophie at 7. She wants you to come if you're not working. I have the day off so send me on errands after noon. Love you.*

Holly smiled and flipped it over to leave her answer (yes), a list of two errands (dry cleaning and groceries), and a confirmation of adoration.

This part of life was currently her favorite. The little things with Gail, spending time with her and having normal life moments. Even more than that were the moments where they did little things for each other. Gail gassed up Holly's car without being asked, Holly took Gail's dress uniform to the cleaners when she noticed it had a small stain after a funeral for a retired officer, and they both just shared random chores.

At seven, Gail drove them over to Sophie's foster home and Holly found herself the surprise focus of a couple other girls. They demanded to know if she was *really* a doctor, and when they found out she was a 'dead people doctor,' their fascination grew. Sophie was delighted to brag and tell them that she knew all about Holly's job, and explained in slightly more gory detail than Holly would have, but she did nod and confirm that, indeed, Sophie was right.

At dinner, though, Sophie had a more important topic to discuss. The fostering with the Bests was a go, and she'd be moving in with them in a week, but as soon as Gail stepped away to the bathroom, Sophie had her moment, "You like Gail a lot. Why doesn't she live with you and not the stinky boys."
Holly blinked. "We haven't talked about it," she said slowly. "Sophie, do you know what it means, me and Gail dating?"

The girl nodded. "You're girlfriends. You kiss and hold hands and probably have c-e-x." She looked pleased when Holly startled and blushed.

It was not a conversation she really was comfortable having, with or without Gail present. "It's s-e-x and ... Okay, you do know. Um..." Now what?

"So why doesn't she live with you? Do you have stinky boy roommates?"

"No," Holly said slowly. "I have a house. Townhouse. It's, um." She frowned and wondered where this was going. "You can come over, if you want."

Sophie took another piece of bread. "Okay. Next week?"

"If I don't have to, um, work. Sure." What the hell was she doing? How did a child railroad her like that?

Thankfully, Gail returned and paused to kiss Holly's cheek before sitting down, "Sophie, don't interrogate Holly. And if you fill up on bread, you will be very grumpy about desert."

The magic word distracted Sophie for a second, but not enough for Holly's sanity. "Holly said I could come over next week."

"Oh did she?" Gail looked interested. "You know next week is the last week, kiddo."

Sophie grinned ear to ear. "I know. And if you move in with Holly, then I can sleep over when you babysit me."

Gail blinked and looks at Holly. "Well. That's for us to figure out, Sophie." The little girl fixed Gail with a look that clearly asked if Gail thought she was being serious. "Hey, I told you..." She paused and looked at Holly.

"Told her what?" Holly smiled, hoping Sophie saw it as amused and Gail saw it as a girlfriend threat. "That we hadn't talking about it at all, and ... Um. Hey, look! Dinner."

Holly and Sophie eyed each other but let it go. The rest of dinner passed uneventfully. Holly and Gail got big hugs before Sophie would let them go home.

"You want to stay over tonight?" Holly asked the question lightly as Gail turned onto the road.

"Want, yes, but I have to meet with Oliver early tomorrow." She made a face. "Stupid training officer training."

"How early?"

"I'd have to get up and out the door by six. And I need a clean uniform."

Holly sighed. "You should leave a uniform at my place." She'd made the suggestion before but been blown off with a joke about how Holly found the uniform too sexy.

After a moment of silence, Gail nodded, "Yeah."

Blinking, Holly looked at her girlfriend. "Yes?"
"Yes. You're right. I was going to get another spare anyway." Gail's thumbs bounced on the steering wheel. Apparently she wasn't going to bring up the idea of moving in either. Of course, it wasn't like Holly had a hell of a lot of experience with that herself. That was why she bought her home on her own. It was just easier.

That said, Gail was the only girlfriend who'd ever stayed over regularly. Actually or at all, now that Holly thought about it, Gail was the only other person to have slept in that bed. She wasn't sure how to approach the topic. So she went another way.

"Sophie says we probably have c-e-x," Holly said casually.

"What?" Gail spelled the word back and laughed. "Did you correct her spelling?"

"I may have."

"That's my nerd." Gail didn't seem bothered by it in the least. She pulled up to the front of the house and parked, looking at Holly fondly. "Next week is her last week in the group home."

Holly pondered that. "Should we throw a party?"

"No... Maybe. I'll ask her I guess." Gail sighed and leaned on the steering wheel, resting her arms and head on it. "I was just thinking ..."

"Dangerous pastime," teased Holly, reaching over to fluff Gail's hair. "I like it shorter."

Smirking, Gail closed her eyes to the touch. "I know you do." She sighed, happily. "I was thinking about us. And how incredibly lucky I am. Like how everything had to absolutely wrong to get us here, and I wouldn't trade it for anything."

"Really? Even the part with you walking out of the Penny and me leaving mean voicemails?"

"Really," confirmed Gail. "Because without that, I wouldn't have changed enough. I still would have been childish, bratty, immature." She opened her eyes and smiled at Holly. "You deserve that. Grown up Gail."

Those blue eyes did her in and Holly smiled. "She is remarkably attractive." She rested two fingers under Gail's chin. "You're not coming in, are you." It wasn't a question. She knew.

"No." There was a sigh. "Want to, shouldn't. Grown up Gail has to be a grown up." She picked her head up and leaned across the gearshift to kiss Holly lightly. "If I walk you to the door, I will not make it home tonight," she whispered.

"There's no point. I'm here."

Holly sighed and nodded, giving Gail one last kiss before sliding out of the car. "Gail," she chewed her lip before closing the door. "You're the only person I've ever had spend the night here." The surprise on Gail's face was obvious. "You're the only person I want to spend the night. Even when we broke up. I can't see anyone here but you. I just want to be with you, and here and... I love you."

When there was no reply, Holly bit her lip, wondering if she'd said too much. The slow smile on Gail's face made he feel relieved. "I made Andy sleep on the couch the other week. Because you're the only person I want in bed with me."

They looked at each other through the car for a moment and finally Holly closed the door. She made a careful sign with her hands and, after a heartbeat, Gail laughed. The window rolled down, "You just asked me to summon you, you nerd." She made the proper sign back.
"You knew what I meant," huffed Holly. "Call me." And she went inside her home, grinning.

The party was quietish and rowdy at the same time. Gail and Steve had Sophie and Leo on their shoulders, playing some game they made up on the fly in the pool, while Holly was trapped by Noelle and Traci and baby Olivia. The wrestling match between Leo and Sophie was complicated by the fact that Gail was smaller than her brother, though not much shorter, and was struggling to keep up.

"Frank, for god's sake, take over," shouted Oliver. All three of his daughters were over as well, the youngest being the same age as Leo and Sophie, making for a trifecta of second graders.

"You should take Winny in there, Dad," suggested Izzy with a smirk. Gail might just have to treat her to lunch for saving her from drowning.

After a moment, Frank pulled off his shirt. "All right you Pale Pecktective, try taking on someone your own size."

Sophie cheered and happily clambered onto Frank's broader shoulders, while Oliver and Winny joined the fray. Gail made her escape to the deep end, far from the fighters. "What on earth are they playing?" Celery's hand extended to haul Gail out of the pool, as did Izzy's.

"I think it's called 'Drown Gail,'" muttered Gail, planting her feet on the pool wall and hauling both of her helpers in with her.

The whoops of laughter came from everywhere and Gail hopped out of the pool, smirking. Holly shook her head, "I'd offer you a towel, but you might get me wet."

"Holly! Not in front of the kids," joked Gail, making an L with one hand and brushing it under her chin. It took a moment, but Holly apparently remembered that sign and threw a towel at Gail.

Izzy clambered out of the pool, leaving Celery to enjoy it for a moment. "You're mean, Aunt Gail."

"You're a delinquent and have no room to talk," she smiled at the teenager, but picked up a towel. "And you need to get in the shade before you turn pink." Gail too was aiming for the shade and fell onto Holly's lounge chair. "Hey cutie," she grinned at Olivia and was rewarded with a beaming smile.

Snorting, Izzy sat down beside them. "So if it's not boning then what is it?"

Watching Holly nearly spit-take her beer was worth the price of admission. But Gail went with a demure answer, "Dating." But she signed the letters s-e-x.

Traci smirked. "Sophie was correcting Leo's spelling earlier. Apparently he thought you spelled it with a C."

"So did Sophie," noted Gail. "Holly corrected her spelling." Holly, still blushing, muttered that this was far too frank a discussion to be having. Sitting up, Gail kissed her cheek, "Izzy is 17. She's old enough to hear about stuff she's probably doing, or thinking about doing. And I'm pretty sure Olivia doesn't understand any of this yet."

"What Olivia understands is nap time," smiled Noelle. "I'm going to get her settled and grill."

As Noelle left, they all looked at the squealing eight year-olds in the pool and their father figures. Then Gail checked Oliver's middle daughter, thirteen and sullen, with her headphones on. "She hates
everyone,” Izzy said of her sister with a sigh.

"I remember you at that age,” teased Gail. "Oh wait, that was last week.” Izzy rolled her eyes. "How's she holding up?"

"She wants to stay with mom and Daryl." While Izzy was, generally, skeptical of Celery after that whole fertility thing (Gail understood it to be less fertility to have a baby and more something boring about aligning your uterus with the moon bullshit), she outright despised her mother's boyfriend. "He wants to move in."

This caused Gail to glance at Traci. Steve had made noises about the idea to Gail, mostly suggesting she move in with Holly so he could ask Traci about it. "Big step," muttered Gail.

Traci exhaled and echoed Gail's thoughts, "Leo likes Steve, but I don't know what he'd think about living with him." She tugged at the towel's edge. "After Jerry, I'm scared to even think about it."

Almost absently, Holly's hand landed on her knee. Gail covered it with her own, worming her fingers between Holly's. She was not ignorant of the hints Holly had been dropping, broadly, about being more than sleepover buddies. "What about Celery?" Gail kept her voice low, watching Celery swim and cheer on the kids.

"She's weird," sighed Izzy, "But she really loves Dad." The teenager looked at the woman as well. "Dad's getting an actual house. He asked if I wanted to move in."

"Do you?" Gail pitched her voice casually. She already knew about it from Oliver, who'd talked to her over a lunch.

Izzy shrugged and then nodded. "I like her better than Daryl, I guess." Clearly a ringing endorsement. "What would you do?"

"Well, I don't even like my parents, but I lived at home until I was 27, so you really can't ask me." Gail glanced at Traci and Holly for support.

"I lived at home until I was a cop," noted Traci. "But I was raising Leo and my mom helped."

"I moved out during college." Holly sipped her beer. "Me and a bunch of friends got a crappy apartment, kind of like yours." She squeezed Gail's knee.

"Hey," smarted Gail. "My apartment is perfectly clean and uncrappy." The apartment was, currently, spotless. One of the ways she'd devised to help keep Chris sober was to make him clean with her, run with her, go to the gym with her, and cook with her. The last one terrified Dov until he found, with shock, that Gail could cook just fine. She'd even caught Dov telling Nick that he knew nothing about Gail, and waved the fresh baked bread in his face.

Holly grinned and leaned in to kiss Gail again, "I meant with the stinky boy roommates and one bathroom." There was another kiss, followed by a gagging sound from Izzy. "She lives in a closet," explained Holly, innocently.

There was stifled laughter from Traci and Izzy. Gail watched Holly's expression shift as she caught on to what she had just said. "Nerd." Gail let go and grabbed the sunblock. "Just for that, you can do my back."

"You do live in the tiniest room known to man, Gail," teased Traci.

"It was a den thing." She had lived in Chris's room until his return from Timmons, with Denise and
Christian in tow. Then, in a burst of kindness, she'd taken her dresser into the smaller non-room with the sliding, pocket door and picked up a small Ikea bed. The smaller room suited her. Less crap to cling to, more light at night even with the dark red walls, and more privacy. It barely fit her bed and dresser, but that made it feel safer.

By contrast, Holly's house was open and airy. Light. Staying there felt like living in the sky, with the tall ceilings and warm colors. She even had a corner of a closet and two dresser drawers. She sighed as Holly started to work the ultra strength sunblock into her back and shoulders.

Izzy grumbled. "I want my own room." Gail was aware that she shared with her sisters at the moment. "Dad would give me my own room."

"See? Sounds like a good choice!" Traci grinned. "Gail, does Steve sunburn like you?"

"No, that ass has all the melanin." She received a slap on her shoulder from Holly for cursing. "Oh come on, Izzy knows that word!"

"Grinding?" Izzy's comment came out of left field and the adults stopped talking for a moment. "I get why boning is inaccurate. But what is the right vulgarity?" The teenager had twinkling eyes.

Gail smirked, "You can do that with guys too, kid." Point scored, Izzy looked blank and then blushed, Traci laughed and Holly groaned. That done, Gail mentally made a note to snag Izzy next time she was around for some actual educational talk. It was clear that Oliver was not going to be asked the awkward sex questions, and Izzy didn't feel comfortable asking Celery or her mother.

The boys eventually clambered out of the pool, waterlogged and pink, with the children arguing about who was champion of the world. No one complained when the talk moved to food, and Gail found herself being Frank's grilling assistant.

"Listen, Gail... I want to say thank you," he said softly. "For this. Sophie."

Oh. Gail smiled and looked at the girl, complaining as Noelle put sunblock on her. "You're welcome." She did still wish she had been able to adopt, and this felt like such a fallback plan, but it worked in a different way. Suddenly Sophie had a good man as a father figure, something she'd never had before, and wouldn't have had with Gail.

"I'm proud of you, Gail. You grew up."

"It was bound to happen eventually," she laughed, disparagingly.

"Have you thought about the other thing?"

Gail nodded. "A lot. But Oliver needs a T.O. who won't get IA involved every time."

Nodding back, Frank flipped a burger. "Three months. Maybe six."

They had both been involved in policing for so long it was easy to skip around in conversations. "Give me time to prep," she joked. "Take a class or three."

"Ace another T.O. run and and you won't need any." However he did start talking about useful courses she could take at the police college. Some were technically closed off to non-white shirts, but they both knew if a Peck applied, a Peck would get in.

At least it might make her mother happy.
Chapter Notes

The Toronto Policing College has continuing education. Also it's July now in the fic. Holly and Gail got back together in very early Spring, which is not my fault. Season Five was very short and started in Winter. A lot gets pushed into a small timeframe.

School was a laudable thing. Adults continuing their learning, never ceasing, was a thing of beauty. Girlfriends who were taking training courses in pretty much all their free time were positively frustrating. Either Gail was at work, in a class, with Sophie, with another foster kid as a big sister, or asleep. Now, half the time asleep meant at Holly's, but rarely had it been more than kissing before Gail conked out.

Normal people took time off from work to do those things. Training Officer Peck did not. She spent a full day with her new rookie, having finally gotten Duncan trained enough that she felt he could work well without her every day. Of course, Noelle had come back, so Oliver devilishly assigned her as Duncan's new primary partner. Gail had cackled with glee, telling Holly that Duncan said Noelle was easy after Gail, and Noelle had been torn between horror and pride.

The new rookie was a young woman who was painfully shy and earnest. It was a trial for Gail, who did better with the sort you had to tamp down, but she seemed to be making it work. Already the rookie, Samantha Gagnon, had the nickname Snowflake and Holly heard it from Nick before anyone else. Of all Gail's friends, Nick avoided Holly the most. Even though Gail swore they were friends, Nick looked horribly awkward and uncomfortable around Holly. He hadn't noticed her at the scene when he radio'd Gail, asking if she and the Snowflake were at the other scene.

When pressed, Gail said that the rookie told her that was the nickname she'd had growing up, so Gail just used that. And she took news of Nick's attitude in stride, saying she'd talk to him. That Gail was able to remain friends with her ex-boyfriends was not weird to Holly. She was still friends with some of her own ex-girlfriends. But she didn't see them daily.

Holly first met Snowflake the day before Pride Week began. Gail, already in her civvies, was giving her a firm talking to about listening to everything McNally told her, and to do what she was told. Listening in, Holly was amused to hear the lecture. "She's really good at it," sighed Andy, popping up beside Holly.

"So I see. How come you're taking over?"

"Pride Week. The Commissioner asked for Gail to be on the float."

Holly blinked and stared at Andy, "What? When did that happen?"

"About ten minutes ago. Congrats, you get Grumpy Gail."

But as Gail wrapped up her instructions, she broke into a huge grin when she spotted Holly. "One minute, then we bounce." Turning to Andy, Gail said one final sentence. "Do not fuck this up, McNally."
"I know, use Noelle and follow the Peck Rules." Oddly Andy did not seem hurt or offended. It was almost with relief that she replied to Gail. "It's a week. I can do this."

Gail nodded and picked up her bag. "Good! I'm out. See you fools from the easy seats." As soon as they walked out of the station, Gail groaned. "Please tell me Andy spilled so I can start without explaining this is not my fault."

"She did," sighed Holly. "Have you even been to Pride Week before?"

"I usually avoid it," admitted Gail. "It's filled with noisy, happy, people. And no one wants to do regular patrol, or desk. They all want the show, so ... I stay."

They had not actually made Pride Week plans. Holly rarely did the parade thing now that she was looking at forty a lot closer. It had been fun in her early twenties, but like many things she'd outgrown the need to be so in-your-face about it. And also the desire to go and get drunk around thousands of lesbians in the hope of getting lucky. "And now you get to be on the float." She giggled at the idea. Maybe she'd go with Lisa and Rachel.

"Worse. I get to go with everyone to the parties, in uniform." She rolled her eyes. "My father is going to shit bricks."

The reminder of Gail's parents and their lack of acceptance slapped Holly out of her amusement. "Not your mother?"

"No," sighed Gail. "Apparently she's okay with it. I officially give up trying to understand her."

Holly laced her fingers with Gail's, walking to the parking lot and Gail's car. Her father was, clearly, anti-gay. Her mother was clearly pro-career. The talks at home had to be interesting. "Wait, isn't next week a dinner week?"

"Oh, like hell I'm going," laughed Gail. "I legit have to work a gay people with uniforms thing." She glanced at Holly and then, shyly, asked, "Would you be my plus one?"

"I did say forever, didn't I?" Holly smiled and leaned into Gail as they walked. "Your parents won't be there, will they?"

"Uncle Al says no, they're not invited. One Peck is enough."

They got into the car and as Gail eased out of the lot, Holly asked, "What about your classes?"

"On break for two weeks, thank god. This crap is running me thin! I haven't been to the Penny in three weeks!" Nor had they had enough time together, thought Holly. "When was the last time we went on a date?"

"Um, just us? A month ago."

"Yeah, that's no good." Gail checked traffic and turned the car away from Holly's house. "We need dinner, out, you and me. Pan Asian? There's a new place, Octopus Grill. Chloe swears by it."

Holly laughed, "Right now?"

"Unless you have other plans..."

Smiling, Holly watched Gail's face. "No," she admitted.

"Right. Dinner, then I take you home and spend the night. It's Friday, I have a weekend free of
homework and rookies ..." She trailed off, arching an eyebrow.

So Gail wasn't too tired. Holly blushed. They got to the restaurant, which was packed, but Gail quickly got a table through the simple foresight of having made a reservation.

Holly quirked a smile as Gail muttered it was a surprise. "It's a nice surprise, but how did you know?"

"Well if we'd have missed it, I was going to give the spot to Dov or Andy. They don't seem to comprehend planning."

"I do. And I love it. I get cranky when I don't see enough of you."

"It shows," confirmed Gail. "I didn't know about the whole Pride thing, this was really just supposed to be an apology for being work-on-a-holiday Gail. She's annoying, by the way. I didn't know she even existed." Gail huffed. "Usually I cram things into my brain when I'm trying to avoid problems. Now I'm doing it and making problems. Is that grown up?"

"Not sure," Holly replied slowly. "Are you avoiding anything?"

"Just my mother. She's starting to email me again. Wants to know why I'm taking classes."

"Why are you taking classes?" There was an uncomfortable silence across the table that surprised Holly. "Something wrong?"

"No, just complicated." Gail ran her finger around the base of her wine glass. "I don't want to be a beat cop forever."

Holly blinked and then smiled. "Oh." She reached across the table and covered Gail's fingers with her own. "Honey, when I called you that, I was kind of being irrational and angry."

"I know. That was a shitty day." Gail waited and when Holly said nothing more, looked surprised. "That's it?"

"Well. I think I know why, but if you're nervous and don't want to tell me, I'll get it out of you later. We tell each other stuff." Holly grinned and leaned back as their salads arrived. "Eventually."

Gail exhaled and tucked her napkin into place. "Can I spend the weekend at your place?" She sounded so shy, Holly laughed. "Or not, geeze."

"You can always spend your free time with me."

Rolling her eyes, Gail pointed at Holly with her fork. "Sometimes you have to work."

"Not this weekend," promised Holly. "But you can stay even if I have to work."

They smiled at each other and ate the salads. When the main courses arrived, Gail finally asked her real question. "What's the Parade really like?"

Watching Holly was the best part of the awkward dinner. Gail hadn't realized how many police officers were gay until that night, and they hadn't known she was until the Commissioner introduced her. Officer Jen Luck was there of course, surprising Gail not a bit, though Luck did a double take when she realized Gail was there with Holly.

"Wish you'd told me that before, Peck."
"Bad luck, eh?" That won her a smirk from Luck, who graciously welcomed her to the club and introduced her around.

But every time she glanced at Holly, she caught her girlfriend eyeing her. "Your woman's checking out your ass," confirmed Jen, who insisted on being called that.

"She hasn't seen me in my dress uniform before," replied Gail. "I'm damn hot."

Jen snorted. "Swelled head. So how do you like it?" When Gail didn't reply, Jen gestured at the room. "The big gay dinner?"


"Oh is that why you've skipped the parade all these years?"

Gail frowned and eyed Jen, "Yes." What was the woman getting at? She rummaged through her head, trying to remember who Jen worked for and that was when the clue dropped. "Ah, I get it." Smiling, she patted Jen's shoulder. "You can stop quizzing me. Tell him I'm very much committed to my girlfriend, he'll tell my mother, and we can all stop playing spy."

"Him?" Jen tried to look innocent, but it came out sheepish.

"Your Staff Sergeant is one of my mother's minions," sighed Gail, rescuing two flutes of champagne from a waiter. "I've been playing this game since before you knew how to spell cop, Jen. Don't even bother."

With that, Gail wove through the crowd to where Holly was talking to an RMCP fellow. She slipped into the conversation by handing Holly a drink. "Oh, and this is my girlfriend, Officer Peck."

The man smiled and introduced himself, his accent marvelously thick. Gail replied in French and they cheerfully chatted about their work for a moment. It did not escape Gail's notice that Holly was positively beaming. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Dr. Stewart, Officer Peck," smiled the officer, shaking their hands and leaving to go meet new people.

Gail turned to Holly and tilted her head. "He's okay."

But Holly just devoured Gail with her eyes. "You hate it here," she said softly.

"True," allowed Gail, smiling. She sipped her champagne and tried for an innocent look. "They're all too happy."

Holly reached over to straighten Gail's lapel, and then let the hand trail down Gail's arm to her clasp her fingers. "I would like to be happy right now." Her voice was barely above a whisper. "Can we leave?"

Glancing at the group, Gail caught the eye of her godfather and gave him a slight wave. He looked at Holly, then Gail, and smirked. He really was much nicer than her parents, in many ways. With the sole important goodbye completed, Gail laced her fingers through Holly's and led her out a side door.

The next morning, Gail yawned her way through meetings and glad hands. She ran into Jen again, who held out a coffee. "Peace?"

"If you want to fake spy to keep your cover I won't tell." Gail was too tired to want to fight.

Jen snorted. "Nah, I told him you were stupid in love with the doc." Now Gail was awake and she
glared. "Woah, okay no jokes about the doctor. Yikes." Jen shoved her hands in her pockets. "This is your first gay rodeo, huh?"

"If you're still poking the bear, I will break your fingers," growled Gail.

But Jen laughed. "I meant Pride Week. I know she's your first girlfriend." Gail did not want to know how Jen knew that but nodded. "So listen, I've been out since I was born, practically. I've been doing the parade, marching, since I was sixteen. The float's no big deal. We sit and wave at people, they shoot water guns at us and cheer. You can get out and walk if you want. Usually we get the highest ranker to do it, but you being a Peck might make the font page."

"And ruin my chances of undercover work," grumbled Gail. Though she doubted that people would recognize her. Rarely did anyone pay attention anymore.

"With that face, I'm surprised more people don't recognize you daily."

Was Jen still hitting on her? Weird. "I don't try to be noticed." Gail pushed her hair out of her face. "S'good coffee."

"Gail!" The strident voice of her godfather broke through the room.

"Commissioner Santana," she smiled back.

"Officer Peck." He smiled more. "I saw you and your young lady skip out early. You've never liked those parties." When Gail shrugged, he squeezed her shoulder. "Your mother said you haven't been around lately."

Gail winced a little. "Can you blame me?"

"Ah, Bill. He's very traditional." The Commissioner frowned, "Maybe we should have a side dinner one of these days. You barely know my wife, and I'd like to know your young lady. A doctor, even."

"You freaked Holly out a little, last time."

"Hmm, well. Thank you for that." He was sincere and Gail just nodded. "Ah! Officer Luck. You'll show Gail the ropes?"

Truthfully, Gail had forgotten Jen was standing there and grinned when she saw the confusion on the other officer's face. "Sir! Yes, of course, sir."

The Commissioner clapped Gail on the shoulder. "Good. Learn it all, Gail. I'll need you to take over in a few years." She'd expected that and nodded. The hand on her shoulder squeezed and the chief walked away.

"What the fuck?" Jen hissed at Gail. "The Commissioner invited you over for dinner? With your girlfriend?"

Gail finished the coffee. "It's not a big deal, Jen." The glare from the other officer was actually amusing. "He's my godfather." He was also her mother's T.O. and Gail was actually named for Al's first wife. The other Gail, also a cop, had died in uniform, hit by a car at a routine traffic check when Steve was in diapers.

The rest of the personal drama was more than she cared to get into with a relative stranger. That Gail had called the chief 'Uncle Al' until she entered the academy was not anyone else's business.
"How did I not know that?"

"Same way you didn't know you were being pushed by my mom to spy on me, Jen. You're a good cop." She smiled thinly, and walked past Jen, fairly sure that the implication might never be caught. Jen was a good cop, she'd never be a great cop.

When Pride Week was finally over, Gail was relieved to get back to her normal routine. She'd managed to avoid a sunburn on the float and hadn't run into her parents once. Practically a perfect event, if you ignored the fact that she spent half the day on a float surrounded by thousands of happy people.

Holly and Traci had come to cheer her on, as had Steve, and before Gail realized it, it became an affair with all the 'grown ups' of Fifteen. She wondered when that had happened, that she had more in common with the Old Guard and less with her classmates. Maybe it was Holly, but more likely it was just that unlike Chris, Dov, or Andy, she could see her future and went for it.

So she grinned and waved at her girlfriend, her friends, and indeed, Sophie, who was perched on Frank's shoulder, cheering. Gail threw beads at Holly, smirking, but ended up with quite a lot herself from various attendees. While all the officers were invited to parties all night long, Gail bounced between three before getting a ride back to fifteen with a cruiser and going to Holly's to fall face first on the bed. And not in the fun way.

But now it was back to work, and Gail and her rookie Samantha the Snowflake had the beginnings of an easy day, monitoring speed traps. It was boring, but she needed a dull day after the week of super gayness. They were the first car on the line, and Gail had Snowflake on the scanner while she radio'd Noelle and Gerald down the line.

"This really help?" Snowflake was clearly getting bored.

"Boosts numbers and tickets, which makes Ollie look good. And what do we think about Oliver?"

"Oliver's the best boss we could ever have. We do anything for Oliver. He loves all of us. Even me." The recitation felt more honest than the first few times she'd made the rookie say it, and Gail smiled. "He can't like Duncan, though. I mean, he screwed up and taped Andy. That's breaking the code."

"It was," agreed Gail. "But he understands why now." Gail sipped her soda, "Why do you know about that?"

"Oh! Everyone knows. We all got warned how not to get in trouble. Duncan's the poster boy for how to screw up."

Gail sighed and made a note to warn Ollie and Noelle later. "He's learned."

The rookie glanced back at her, "Yes ma'am, you taught him. That's why I'm really happy you're my T.O." The what now? She made a noise and Snowflake focused on the scanner. "Everyone said you're the best, ma'am. You're tough, but you can make people great cops."

Well, that was alright, decided Gail, and she smiled. "You can drive back, rookie," she informed Snowflake and sat on the hood of the car.

They called in a couple speedsters before a car pulled up beside them and rolled down the window. An older man, maybe her father's age, leaned over. "Hey, how come you aren't at the rolled over ambulance?"

"Sorry, what?" Gail popped to her feet and listened carefully to the man before nodding. It wasn't too
far away. "Sir, do you mind pulling over here and walking with me?" He did not and as he pulled in, Gail tapped Snowflake's shoulder. "You keep doing this. Keep the radio on, do to anything Officer Williams tells you. Got it?" Her rookie nodded and Gail called in her check to the group.

They walked through the hillside beside the check point, cutting around the normal traffic, until they were almost out of sight of Snowflake. Gail casually rested her hand by her weapon, and looked around. "S'right there," the man pointed, and walked in front of her.

Habit. Gail checked the surrounding area before following his gaze to an ambulance, lying on it's side. "Well shit," she muttered. "Dispatch, 8727. I have an ambulance rollover, no plates. We lose one?"

"Copy 8727. What's the number?"

"429. It's the neon yellow, green vomit color."

There was a pause. "8727, can you confirm the numbers are four, two, niner?"

"Confirm, requesting backup." She turned to the man, "Sir, I'm going to need you to stand up there where my partner can see you." He nodded and Gail pinged her rookie. "Gagnon, can you see our Samaritan?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good. Eyes on him until I tell you otherwise, even if replacements come." Gail turned down her radio and drew her gun. Very slowly she walked up to the ambulance. A pause. She heard nothing and walked closer until she could see in the driver's window. Empty. The keys dangled in the ignition and the dash was a mess from the rolling. "Cab is empty," she said softly into her radio and stepped to the back. "Rear door is ajar."

Very slowly, very calmly, Gail eased the door open. Nothing. She pulled out her flashlight and held it up to her gun before looking in. What a mess. There was medical equipment everywhere, all over the damn interior. She sighed and carefully checked every visible corner until she saw a head. "Shit!" Gail jumped back and waited for movement but, seeing none, stepped forward and took a closer look. Maybe it was a mannequin.

The congealed blood was real, though, and Gail swore. "Dispatch, I need that backup and tell forensics to bring a doctor. There's a body in the back."

"Copy that. Confirm he's dead?"

Gail looked at the interior and carefully moved the gurney, only to have the head roll off to the side, completely disconnected from the body. "Yep," she replied drolly. "He's dead."

While she knew Gail gave a special talk to the rookies on their first day, a talk she'd inherited and evolved from Oliver, Holly was interested in the one they got in the morgue even more. Gail'd told her about the first day talk and Holly found it entertaining. This one just had more to do with her, so she lingered outside the room to listen.

"Do you remember our talk, Samantha?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"It's our job to make this city safe, and when we fail, we come here. This place means we've failed,
and all we can do is bring closure to someone. Out there, I'm in charge. Here, the doctors and lab techs are your boss. Whatever they tell you to do, you do without question. You touch nothing unless told to, you treat everyone with respect, including the dead. They're humans, and never forget that. If you're here alone, you sit in a corner and keep out of trouble, which will not happen until you make it through an autopsy without puking or passing out. You do not speak until spoken to, and above all, you remember that you are a police officer and our job is to listen and learn here." Gail huffed. "And remember. Do as I say, not as I do. I have more privileges here than you do."

That was her Gail and Holly smiled. She bumped the door open with her hip, "Officer Peck, Officer ..."

"Gagnon, ma'am. Doctor. Ma'am."

"Doctor Stewart," corrected Holly. She hadn't officially met Samantha yet and Gail rarely talked about her. "Gagnon... That's Québécois?"

The girl, practically a child, nodded. "My father. He's from Val-d'Or."

While Holly could translate it she had no idea about the town and glanced at Gail. "It's about as far up as Timmins. North of Réserve faunique La Vérendrye." The rookie gaped at Gail and Holly hid a smile. "Meanwhile, back in Ontario."

"The head was removed postmortem," noted Holly, pulling on her gloves.

"I figured," replied Gail. She turned to her rookie, "Lack of blood at the scene. He was probably dead and beheaded before the ambulance was rolled down the ravine." The rookie nodded, her face set but her eyes wide.

Settling her face guard in place, Holly gave Gail a look and the officer stepped back, tugging her rookie with her. "Is the detective coming?" Holly pulled over the tools and prepared for the Y-incision.

"They asked us to watch, since it's my head." Gail shot her a toothy grin, the one of the cop who was delighted in her finding. She smiled like that when shopping for shoes, or guns weirdly enough, and when just plain happy. Holly would melt over that grin and move mountains to see it again.

Trying not to smile, Holly nodded. "So I heard." She pressed the scalpel to the skin and heard a noise from the side.

"Out. Turn left. Third door," instructed Gail, and the thudding steps of her rookie left the room. "Puking. Not a single one of them pass a first autopsy."

"Oh and you did?"

"Of course," sighed Gail, perching on her favorite stool. "My first in uniform wasn't anything new."

Holly glanced over at her girlfriend and sighed a little. "Your mother..." And Gail shrugged a little. "Didn't you have an ambulance theory?"

"Nah," laughed Gail. "I have an ambulance coincidence, that's all." Gail spun the stool around, "Headless guy in a junky only ambulance. Old gloves, too," she added. "Box said with cornstarch." Gail was looking up at the lights. When Holly hadn't known Gail as well, she thought the behavior nothing more than a feckless, childish, flash of ADD. In the year she'd known and worked with Gail, Holly came to realize her brain was always working, always whirling.
The anger against stupid people and childishness was nothing more than a lack of understanding. The aloofness was an inability to connect. And the distractions were some odd attempt of Gail to seem less off. But Holly had noticed the less Gail tried, the more she fit in with people. And the less she drank, the faster she thought in general. Once Holly suggested Gail just be herself all the time, and Gail had looked rather terrified.

So Holly had come to where she let Gail talk freely in this way, just as Gail gave her space and silence when she needed it. "That's familiar," she replied, cracking the chest open.

"Creeps me out, though. Doctors and serial deaths with ambulances." Gail stopped spinning and looked at Holly. "Are you busy tonight?"

"Depends how long this takes me." She regarded the body curiously. "No marks except a really bad tattoo? I think it's a dog. No gunshot, no stabbing, no wounds of any kind."

"Except around the neck region," joked Gail. "Which was ipso post dead-o."

Holly smirked and rolled her eyes. "Funny. I'm leaning towards..." Holly stopped and stared at the body.

When she said nothing, Gail hopped off the stool and leaned over to look. "Pink."

"Cyanide."

"Cyanide?" Gail pulled her phone out and starting typing, "Can I send Steve a photo?"

Holly exhaled slowly. "I think you'd better. What the hell? Who beheads a poison victim? They had to know we'd autopsy!"

"It really makes no sense," agreed Gail. Her tone clearly showed she thought this was great.

Their semi-private conversation ceased when Snowflake returned, pale and shaking. She opened her mouth to speak and Gail held up a hand. "Nuh uh." She pointed to the stool and, as Snowflake walked by, she glanced at the body.

Neither Gail nor Holly were surprised by the thud of her hitting the floor.
It is time for Holly to meet Elaine Peck in person. This will not go well. Does anyone remember those dangling plot threads? You will in a minute. All temperatures are in Celsius.

The flu was no joke. When Holly called her and asked if Gail could take her home, of course Gail had rushed over. Finding Holly sweating and looking miserable, she was momentarily terrified. Taking down crazy gunmen was easy. A sick girlfriend was new territory, and Gail's instinct when faced with illness was to run the other way. But … Holly. Holly's assistant pointed out the fever was 39.3 degrees and Gail quickly hauled Holly home, showered, medicated, and in bed.

While Holly was asleep, Gail made (not bought) chicken soup and even managed to feed her girlfriend a bowl in-between naps. When Holly went right back to bed without a complaint, Gail downloaded a new book on her iPad and settled in the bed to read and babysit.

After hours of silence, Gail was startled out of her book by Holly asking her a question. "What did you want to be when you grew up?" Holly was half asleep when she asked it and Gail looked at her girlfriend with surprise.

"A cop, Holly, go back to sleep."

Holly opened her eyes and sighed. "I wanted to be a fire engine."

"I think you mean fireman, baby." Gail put the ebook down and caressed Holly's hair. Her skin felt less hot, but not normal. "You want me to check your temperature again?" That got a little nod from Holly and Gail went to get the thermometer.

Leave it to Holly to have an in-ear sensor. She let the doctor press it in and waited for the beep. "I don't want to put on my glasses."

"38 and change ... More fever reducers for you." Holly sighed and told Gail exactly what bottles to get and what pills. She took the thermometer back to the bathroom, cleaned it off, and came back with pills. Two were painkillers, two were cold and flu specialties Gail had never heard of. "You're such a hypochondriac, I swear you have pills for everything."

"You can catch everything in my job," noted Holly and she popped the four pills in one go.

"Water?"

"Bottle on the nightstand."

Holly chugged half and sighed. "Did you make me soup?"

Sitting on the bed, Gail nodded. "You had a whole bowl."

"Must be why I feel better." She looked a little better, but absolutely drained. "I meant fire engine," added Holly. "I wanted to drive around and do cool things. Then I wanted to be a baseball player, or a hockey star... God, your Peckspectations suck."
Gail raised her eyebrows. "Ex-Peck-tations. They're not all bad."

"I don't know any that aren't crappy and overbearing." Holly lay back down. "They take away all your decisions and get mad when you don't make the right ones. Emotionally stunted."

"You," sighed Gail, "sound drunk."

"Fever. Stops my brain from editing what I say."

Oh dear. "You mean you're always like this when you're sick?"

"Mnhmm. Another reason I was single. Too honest." Holly looked forlorn. "I think you're brave."

Gail laughed and stretched out beside Holly. "Oh really?" It was strangely fun to listen to unfiltered thoughts from her girlfriend.

"And strong. And really, really, bad at sports." Holly smiled. "What happened to the headless dumped man?"

"We've been running down the tattoo, but it's a dead end." Gail and Snowflake, who was a pretty decent rookie as they went, had visited all the tattoo parlors in the area, and faxed it to other divisions, but it was no good. "Steve's making me go through the cyanide poisoning cases."

"Steve's mean. He sides with your mom."

Gail smiled tiredly. Her brother wanted Gail to start coming to the family dinners again. "He didn't side with mother. He just doesn't understand... It's fine."

"It's not." Holly reached over to grab Gail's hand. "It's not fine."

The hand was hot and Gail frowned. "Holly, should I get you an ice pack or ... Something? A cool bath?"

Holly sighed and rolled to her back, touching her own head. "Can you turn the fan on?"

"Of course." Gail hopped out of bed and set it on low before getting a glass of ice and a bottle of coconut water. "Want to try something else?"

It took a little work to get Holly to sit up again, but she obediently sipped the cool coconut water. When Gail had asked why she had it at all, Holly confessed to being a marathon runner and it was good for electrolyte and potassium. Running was not really Gail's cup of tea, she left that distance to Holly. Of course, in their time dating, Gail had learned far more about sports than she'd ever intended. She'd actually gotten good at softball much to Oliver's delight, and been conscripted to the division's team. Holly had called it a psychological problem.

But the food and the diet had all changed. They made healthy food, ate differently after a run, and more differently before and after the long ones. Gail was tricked into longer distances just by that goofy side smile, and complained the whole way but ran anyway because she'd do anything for that smile. She practically lived at Holly's and any night she was at her apartment she wished she wasn't.

And because of all that time here, with the most amazing person in her life, Gail knew why you ate bananas and toast when sick and why the coconut water would help Holly get in nutrients she wasn't up for eating just then. As Holly drank, she leaned into Gail's arm which easily wrapped around the doctor, and Gail went back to her book.
"You gonna be a detective you think?" Holly held the empty drink bottle in her lap, eyes closed, looking like the act of drinking was all she had energy for.

The way Holly asked it was so unassuming, without pressure and just wondering, that it was easy to answer. "Probably." When Gail's mother asked the same question, it was always with a bite, or a push. The more her mother pushed, the less Gail wanted to decide. It was one of the few methods of rebellion she had left.

"Why's Steve a detective?"

"He likes drug busts and gun running." Holly made a 'huh' sound. "It's in the Organized Crime Enforcement group, and it's kinda the boring stuff. He has to sit and watch losers a lot. Our father's there too, in ROPE."

"Rope?" Holly sounded sleepy. "Ties people up?" Taking the bottle away from her girlfriend, Gail nudged her to lie down. There was no argument and the sleepy eyed doctor just waited to hear what ROPE meant.

"Repeat Offenders Parole Enforcement. Catches people who break parole. So ... Yeah, he ties people up. It's a lot of boring work, though, reading papers and talking to people about why they did stupid things like drive to Niagara Falls when their parole said they had to stay in North Bay." As if the answer of 'Because North Bay!' wasn't enough.

Holly made a 'huh' sound. "Isn't driving around all day boring?"

"Sometimes. But stakeouts are more boring, just sitting there watching people. And I don't like being shot at enough to try ETF." Gail looked at the wall absently. "I used to say I wanted a cushy desk job, but I'm just really lazy. I like using my head, seeing stuff. I think faster than lots of people, and ... It's silly, but I had this idea about it. Work on the big crimes, with lots of impact. So I can't hide behind my name anymore, it'd all be public. And I could get a little of everything, too, so guns and death but not so much the oogy sex crimes or kids." Gail paused and waited to hear if Holly had a thought. Silence. Gail looked down and smiled to see Holly sound asleep. "But it can wait."

Gail turned off the lights and got under the covers. It would keep.

"So you don't like it when I come to your work but it's okay to come to mine and escort me here," teased Holly, walking down the hallway with Gail.

"We have crazy people here." Gail carried the box, out of some odd moment of chivalry that she had been unable to explain. "Besides, brother mine ordered me to get the information from the lab."

Holly humphed. "As opposed to dead bodies. I promised to stay in the lab if there were reports of anything dangerous."

"So pretty much all the time then." Gail smirked and Holly smacked her arm with the folder in her hand.

As they dropped off the box and folder on Steve's desk, Gail stole her brother's chair and readjusted it. "You do that all the time?"

"Nah, just often enough to piss him off. Hey, I get off shift at 6. Want to come by the Penny for trivia night?" Gail gave her a puppy dog smile, the kind Holly had a hard time saying no to.

"You really want me to hang with your friends," sighed Holly.
"Hey, I sucked it up with BitchTits and Co." That won a smile. Gail had also hauled them over to Holly's house to hang out. "Look, your friends are like family to you, right? Well... I like mine better than my family, but if you tell them that, I'll tell them all about how you drool in your sleep."

That was a solid threat. "Woah, okay, no admitting that Gail has feelings. I get it."

Gail's voice dropped a little, sounding more like the private Gail that Holly liked. "You can say no. I understand." Then she added, "I promise not to get drunk."

"Oh well there's an offer." When she laughed, Gail's face lit up and Holly knew that her girlfriend really wanted her to come. "Okay, fine, trivia. And finish up, your brother's coming with some brass." Maybe she could beat the others at trivia and get Gail to her place early-ish before she had to get back to that article.

When Gail glanced over to see her brother, her pale skin went even more white. Holly hadn't known that was possible. "Shit... Why is she here." Popping to her feet, she looked around the room in a mild state of panic. It was totally different than the time she chopped off her hair too.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Holly touched her arm and Gail went stiff. This wasn't good at all, and Holly backed off. They both watched Steve walk in with a woman in uniform. A fancy uniform. With insignia Holly knew she was supposed to recognize... and a name tag... Oh. Shit.

"Superintendent Peck," said Gail, her face the tightest Holly had ever seen, her voice even and flat in a way Holly recognized as deadly.

"Constable Peck." The reply was equally taut.

Holly looked between the two women. Gail's mother, Elaine, had the same pale skin as her children, but looked more like Steve. Her hair was red, clearly bottled which made Gail's snide remark about the crap she got for her hair dye to be rather amusing. Elaine had a somewhat gentler face than Gail. Maybe that was because Holly found Gail so striking that the shorter, older, woman just looked off. She looked fake, and the word stuck in Holly's mind strangely.

Behind the Superintendent, Steve was giving Holly a look that implied she should run while she still could. He was also moving his hands, signing at Gail. Did their mother not know ASL?

"Gail," sighed the Pecks' mother. She was smiling at Gail, and for a moment Holly wondered if Gail had just been over-exaggerating everything. "Sweetheart." Wow. That was a tone Holly had heard before. Sickeningly sweet and entirely insincere. Lisa did that voice wonderfully. Well that explained a lot about Gail. "What's this?" Her eyes flicked in Holly's direction.

For a moment, Holly thought she meant her, but Gail tapped the box. "Delivery from forensics. All the cyanid poisonings in the last decade, Detective." The last word was clearly aimed at Steve. "It's probably as much a dead end as the tattoo."

Superintendent Peck eyed her daughter. "Playing errand girl, Gail?"

"I'm assisting guns and gangs with the dead body found in the ambulance. The one with his head cut off."

"A dead end case? Surely you could come up with a better use of your time than these pointless cases, Gail." Wincing, Holly tried not to be noticed. Weren't the dead end cases the ones that nagged you the most? Gail did not reply, she just looked at her mother who in turn looked at Holly. Uh oh. "Excuse me... I don't believe we've met."
As she met Elaine's eyes, Holly saw there was no smile within them. The one on her lips was a smile for camera and interviews, where people couldn't see the lack of warmth. Holly felt a chill run down her spine. "Dr. Stewart. Forensics." She smiled sincerely, trying to pretend nothing was abnormal about this moment. Except now she understood why Gail had no wish to hang out with her own mother. People said Gail was cold. They clearly had no idea how icy her mother could be.

There was no offer of a handshake, just a nod. The older woman looked back at her children, effector ignoring Holly. "Is there someplace we can talk more ... Privately?"

Gail looked like she was about to snap out one of her more caustic remarks, but Steve cut in, "Sgt. Shaw's office... Or interrogation. It's the whole open floor plan." Of course other than the Pecks only Holly was in the bullpen.

"Actually, I'm done, Detective, unless you need anything else." Holly gestured, pointing at the door. "I'll let you know, thanks." Steve really looked sincerely grateful, and Holly scooted out of the room. Gail's face didn't change an inch through that, she just kept fixing her mother with a blank, level, gaze. The invisible wall between Gail and Elaine was terrifying. The walls around Gail were locked and unbreachable.

As Holly rounded the corner, she was not surprised to find Dov and Chloe listening in. "Is the Darth Vader theme louder if you stand next to her," asked Chloe, sotto voice, her eyes wide. Dov hushed her and pulled Holly around the corner to hide with them.

"She was nice the last time she was here. All smiles. Called Gail 'sweetheart,' and everything." Dov's voice was barely above a breath. "Freaked Gail out."

For the third time, Elaine Peck repeated her daughter's name. "Gail." There was a pause. "I was starting to forget what you looked like. Your hair has grown."

"It does that."

"You stopped dying it."

"I did." Terse, Gail was clearly not giving an inch to her mother.

"You didn't come by for dinner."

"I didn't want to." Gail's voice was tight and while Holly picked out anger in the tone, she didn't actually snap. Gail was pissed. "I didn't feel like hearing that crap from Dad again."

"Is that how you want to do this?" Disappointment dripped off Superintendent Peck's voice.

Gail had a short laugh, "Do what? I don't even know why you're here."

"Five years, Gail." The words hit like a bomb and Holly frowned. There was no reason that should have scared her, but she found herself tense and worried. "You asked for five years and I respected that. But it's time to stop this."

Steve's voice cut in, "Mom, there's nothing wrong with:

"A Peck isn't going to stay a blue-shirt for another five years." This was not a suggestion, this was an order. Everyone shuddered.

"She's a constable third class, Mom," continued Steve. It was very odd to not hear Gail say anything.
"She was the first from this division for that."

Beside her, Dov muttered, "By a month." This time, Chloe shushed him.

"Yes, but she can't stay that forever. Now. There is an opening for a new sergeant at 27—"

"No." Gail's voice was still even, as if that could imply she was calm. Holly felt otherwise. Her girlfriend wanted to shout at her own mother. "I'm not going to apply for the sergeants exam. I don't want it and ... God." She laughed a little. "I'd be horrible at it. Epstein, he'd be good and you like him."

Dov stiffened beside Holly. "Me?" Now both Chloe and Holly shushed him.

"Epstein is as ready as that Craig boy," dismissed Elaine.

"She means Chris," whispered Dov. No one hushed him this time.

Gail snorted. "I'm not ready either."

"You should be ready. What else are all those classes for?"

There was a pause. "My future," Gail spoke and Holly swore it was through gritted teeth.

"Yes, your usual hodgepodge of unrelated courses. Interrogation, advanced driving. A forensics refresher. What are you thinking?" When Gail did not reply, Elaine scoffed. "What were you doing all this time? Fooling around and playing with friends?"

Holly wished she could see Gail's face, especially when the too sweet reply came. "I was getting my shit together, Mother."

The stifled laugh had to be Steve. "You were... What?" Her mother sounded confused, as if the conversation had taken an abrupt and unexpected turn.

"Wow, I guess hands-off was code for 'ignore everything your daughter has to say.' Good to know," groused Gail in her most bitter. "Did you just completely ignore everything that's gone on in my life for the last two years?"

"Not ... Everything."

"You sure? I thought I made it pretty clear I didn't want to be a white shirt. And sure as hell not by your call. If Oliver asked me, that's different, but you don't even know what kind of cop I am. At least he knows what crap I've gone through."

"I trust we're not just talking about Perik."

"No, we're not." Gail still didn't sound angry, which was probably good, but talking about Perik and the kidnapping was still a tough topic. That she'd managed to talk about it to Holly once was astounding. When Holly mentioned that to Steve, he pointed out Gail never talked to him about it. "I fell in love."

Now it was Chloe who made a noise and Dov covered her mouth with his hand.

"That's hardly a reason-"

"With a woman." And the silence was suddenly heavy. "I wasn't kidding and it's not a phase. All- all that crap I'm working through? Nearly lost her because I wasn't dealing with it. So I did, and you
know I *know* I'm a damn good cop. But I don't want to look back in 30 years and regret missing a single moment with her, because I was too busy with my career."

Holly was a little impressed. "Wow," she whispered. She wasn't sure how she, personally, felt about being prioritized like that. It was odd to hear out loud, since Gail rarely talked about her dreams for her career.

"You don't have goals, Gail."

"You don't even know what I want."

"You haven't made a single move towards a career beyond patrol."

"Excuse me, but I've busted my ass in classes, *and* rocked being a training officer."

"And applied for nothing, so I'm making arrangements-"

"Oh, right. Because I'm a Peck, and I'll do what I'm told? No."

"Stop being so naive. You haven't even introduced us and here you are making declarations that *love* is a reason to bury ambition. That's as intelligent as your adoption plan."

What now? Holly blinked and tried to figure out what her mother meant. Was she saying that Gail couldn't possibly have a career and a relationship at family at the same time?

"Why would I introduce you to her? Dad thinks I'm torpedoing my life with the lesbian thing, and you seem to think its a phase. Nice that you actually care about anything but your own dreams."

"That isn't what I said, sweetie." Elaine sounded weary.

"No, you said when I work girls out of my system, you'd introduce me to some appropriate men." Now Gail's tone was bitter. "I told you, I told dad. I'm a lesbian."

There was silence. "Alright. You're serious?" There was no verbal reply. "Gail... What are we going to do with you?"

"Asking if my girlfriend is nice would have been a great start. Asking me why I wanted to adopt Sophie would have worked. Or maybe even talking to me about what kind of cop I *want* to be, instead of making me do what you and Dad want just because my last name is Peck." Gail sighed loudly, "But hey, I'm going to figure that out myself. You're not even this division's Super since you took over Professional Standards, *Staff* Superintendent. This is not your business. Butt. Out."

The aforementioned Superintendent said something low, which made Gail laugh in a very snippy way. "I would like to talk to you about this... As your mother."

"Sure, let me know when you figure out how to do that instead of being a Peck."

Dov abruptly grabbed Holly and Chloe by the upper arm, "Quick!" He tugged them away and down the hall. "Act casual. Holly, tell me something scieny." When Holly looked blank, he added, "Work related? Cool bodies?"

"Um. Oh, did you hear about the frozen body that 27 found? He was in a deep cooler in a BBQ shop, so we've been running samples on pretty much everything for human trace."

"That ... Is disgusting," Chloe cringed. "Find anything cool?"
"Human teeth in the chili. Nearly made Officer Luck puke." Normally Holly would entertain Gail with these sorts of stories. It was the oddest pillow talk ever, but they both found the macabre to be entertaining. Officer Jen Luck tended to flirt with Holly, and that only would make Gail annoyed. Holly knew Jen knew about her and Gail, but that didn't seem to make much difference to the other officer. She was just the sort who flirted, Holly had explained. Gail remarked she'd just be the sort who got punched.

The Superintendent walked past them, storming, pulling her phone out, and looking entirely pissed off. Holly hesitated and Dov prompted her, "Teeth in chili? That's not very edible."

Teeth! "Well that's for the detectives to sort out, really. They said the owner confessed. But what really broke my brain was when we found cat and dog remains."

"It's official. I'm never eating BBQ again," sighed Dov. They watched Gail's mother leave the area and Dov nudged Holly, "Go."

"Yeah... I'm not sure I should," sighed Holly, glancing back towards the detective bullpen. They could see Steve and Gail, sitting side by side on Steve's desk, not saying anything. Their hands were moving, which meant they were probably signing to each other. Girlfriend Holly wanted to check on Gail, but Dr. Stewart would have been livid if her mother had done something like that at work. Gail likely needed time to cool down.

Dov looked after Elaine Peck. "She was way nicer last time. Wow. It's like, the two faces of a super villain."

"Maybe she was always like this," suggested Chloe, chewing her thumbnail. "It would explain a lot about Gail. And why Uncle Frank gets so weird about her. The Superintendent, not Gail. Uncle Frank likes Gail, he thinks she's really turned out amazing, which I guess he didn't know what to expect."

"Chloe, please shut up," snapped Holly and she turned away from them, heading to the parking lot. Chloe had no idea of what Gail had been through, dragged herself through, to get to this place. Perhaps Dov knew and could help explain, but Holly would be too cruel just then. She knew Gail would call her. They were definitely at that point in the relationship. But this was not where one pushed one's girlfriend.

"Dr. Stewart." The voice scared the hell out of her, and she spun around to look at Superintendent Peck. "I admit, you don't look like I thought you would. Photographs don't do you justice."

Holly had no idea how to react. "I'm ... Sorry?" Though her back brain noted that nearly all of Gail's friends and family seemed to think her more attractive in person, and she should ask Gail about that.

"You don't really think I don't know who my daughter's dating, especially when she works here, do you?" The expression was the same Gail wore when stating the obvious. The implication was that Holly was in the slow lane. Of course, when Gail made that face to Holly, she was always smiling and there was no rancor behind it. With Elaine Peck, Holly wasn't so sure. Elaine held her hand out to Holly now, "Elaine Peck."

Holly had no idea how to react. "I'm ... Sorry?" Though her back brain noted that nearly all of Gail's friends and family seemed to think her more attractive in person, and she should ask Gail about that.

"Holly Stewart." They shook hands. Holly really wasn't surprised that Elaine knew, but she couldn't help but feel offended that she had just been ignored and asked to leave. If Elaine knew, why not let Holly stay? Though that also meant that Gail had never told her mother who was coming to the family dinner, and just that she was bringing her girlfriend. That sounded like Gail, alright. "I thought you were staying out of Gail's life."
"For five years, which was technically up when she was promoted."

Holly remembered that night, just a few months ago, though not for reasons she'd want to share with Gail's mother. "Not very nice though." Glancing at the door back to the station, Holly asked, "Why do you try to make her do what you want?"

Elaine Peck looked at Holly and frowned. "You're dating her. She care barely bestir herself to make a decision about her life. She'd still be kicking around the world with black hair, moping, if we hadn't enrolled her in the academy." Elaine shook her head, "She's bratty, immature, and ... Frankly I'm surprised you and she are still seeing each other, given how she loves to destroy anything serious."

Yeah, no wonder Gail had issues. "I think she referred to that as 'working through her shit.' And maybe," Holly replied, "that's because you never ask her about what she wants." Of course Gail wasn't perfect, but she was working very hard not to be the immature brat she had been.

"Well, I suppose it's for the best that you stayed in Canada," said the older woman, dismissively. Holly heard warning bells but couldn't place why. "Gail is still impulsive. Look at her foolhardy idea to adopt."

"Wow. You really haven't seen Gail change at all. You just see what you want to see and try to make her be what you want. She'll be a great parent one day, no thanks to your shining example." Holly thumbed her car's unlock button. "Excuse me, I have work waiting for me at the lab. If you want to talk more, I suggest starting by listening to your daughter."

As she drove back to her lab, Holly couldn't help but feel Gail would be livid about the conversation more than the eavesdropping.
I want to answer a big question first that many of you have been asking. The title of this chapter gives it away to the astute.

"Of course you were listening," Gail noted. She wasn't surprised or upset, which seemed to weird Holly out.

"Really?"

"Really, it's fine. I may kill Dov and Chloe."

"That would be messy," sighed Holly.

Really, Gail had expected Holly to eavesdrop, as well anyone else who was in earshot, and had kept some of her thoughts out of the conversation with her mother with that in mind. She and Holly were holding hands, walking down the street to the Penny when Holly confessed to being a bad spy. And to being waylaid by Elaine. "Sorry about Superintendent Mom, though." That annoyed Gail more than anything else. And Holly's recap of the conversation worried her. Why would her mother bring up Sophie? Or Holly moving to the States?

Holly stopped at the corner and chewed her lip. "Is this weird? This is weird, your mom is weird and pushy and ... Wow, no wonder you're saying you're messed up. If that's what the family dinners are like, I don't think I ever want to go. She just pushes you and- I'm rambling."

It was adorable. "Yeah. You're cute when you do that." She grinned at Holly, but that faded as she reflected on her mother. "It is weird. It's weirder that ... I think I'm okay with it. I mean, I actually do have a clue what I want to be as a cop." Gail took Holly's other hand and swung them. It was stupid, but the idea had hit her watching her brother organize drug stings, and then again when Holly had been freaking out about Gail getting hurt at work. They were all aiming too low. She'd been kicking it around for months, though Gail had forgotten about the five year deal with her mother.

Brightening, Holly beamed at her. While she hadn't been pushy about it, she had been interested in Gail's future outside of them. Even if you discounted the time Holly had been sick, they'd talked around it a few times. "You do? That's great! I mean, if you want to stay a patrol cop forever, I'll still love you, but..."

"But goals are good and blah blah maturity?" Gail smirked as Holly blushed. Bingo. "Organized Crime." She'd nearly mentioned it to Holly before, though never in those words.

That stopped Holly's giddy, nervous rambling, "Mobsters?"

"More like major crimes. Lots of cool losers to bust. Little undercover now and then... I could stay in 15 too." She tried to read Holly's expression and failed. "It's less dangerous than patrol cop, in a different way... Steve's in a subdivision of it, and so's our Dad, but it's the way more fun stuff. Interesting stuff, lots of different crimes."
"You could be Sharon Raydor!"

Gail paused. "What? Who's that?"

"Mary McDonnell, total hottie. I'd frack her... She was the president of the colonies and then took over The Closer from Kyra Sedgwick." Was Holly talking about TV shows? Before she could ask, Holly sighed, explosively. "That's cool."

"I did not expect that reaction," muttered Gail, but Holly leaned in to kiss her. "So you're okay with that idea?"

There was another kiss and Holly leaned back so their noses were touching. "You're excited about it."

"It covers biker gangs too," grinned Gail, going in for another kiss.

Holly made a throaty growl type sound. "Oh, now that's a sexy idea." They kissed again and probably would have continued had someone not wolf whistled.

Breaking apart, and ready to break someone's face, Gail saw Nick smirking at them from across the street. "Asshole!" She shook a fist at him and laughed.

Sighing, Holly leaned into Gail's shoulder. "Let's talk about that later," Holly whispered. "Anything I can do to help..."

Gail smiled and kissed her cheek. "You're probably better at studying."

"One of us finished medical school."

Dodging traffic, Nick ran across the road to join them. "Jaywalking's a crime, Collins," smiled Gail. "Who're you teaming with tonight?"

"Oh, you're bringing in a ringer on sci-fi night?"

Looking indignant, Holly dropped Gail's hand. "You want me to help rip off your friends!" She didn't sound actually mad and there was a smile on the edge of her lips. "I could be at home working on my article."

"Or," drawled Gail, walking past Holly towards the bar, "You could help me hustle all of them and become a living legend and co-champion of the universe." She knew Holly would follow her.

They indeed proceeded to clean up the trivia night. While Dov and Chloe each took the time to apologize for eavesdropping, Gail actually enjoyed the game for a change. When they did retire, Champion Team of the World, Holly was all giggles. "Okay, you were right. That was fun."

"I know, who knew those losers would be fun?" She caught Holly's arm and looped it through her own. "Dork games." Holly had cleaned the floor with them, even correcting one of the cards and proving it. Gail held her own, answering a question about Hobbits and making Holly blush.

"You say that, but you had fun too." Holly leaned in and sighed. "They're nice people." Gail didn't reply, but had to agree. In so far as people went. "You going to walk me to my car?"

Gail glanced down the road to where her apartment was. It was entirely unappealing. "Can I stay over?" She rarely asked that question, not wanting to invade Holly's space or push her too much.

With a soft groan, Holly shook her head. "Honey, I have to finish the article."
"I know, I just..." Gail sighed. "I like being with you. And we don't have to have sex every time I stay over." Blushing a little, Holly leaned into her more, giving in. "Is that a yes?"

"Fine." She sighed and kissed Gail softly. "I meant to leave earlier."

Gail smirked, "Oh you wanted a booty call. Let's swing by my place so I can get stuff for tomorrow."

"It would be easier if you just kept more things at my place," lamented Holly, turning towards her car.

Without thinking, Gail replied, "It'd be a lot easier if I moved in with you." There was silence as soon as she said it. Whoops. That probably wasn't very funny. "Sorry that was—"

"That's not an overreaction because your mother's insane, is it?"

Gail blinked and shook her head. "Wasn't even thinking about her." She hesitated. Okay, great, now she was thinking about how her mother might react. Poorly, no doubt.

"Do you want to?" Holly sounded incredibly thoughtful.

"Do you want me to?"

"Oh no, we're not doing that one, Gail," laughed Holly. "Are you serious?"

"About us? Yes, incredibly serious, would do anything for you serious." She tilted her head, "About moving in with you? Um, it's ... scary." Holly looked at Gail with a strange, questioning expression on her face. "I've never actually lived with anyone I've been dating," admitted Gail. "I always wanted an out. Kept stuff at home. But I don't feel like I need a fall back escape or anything with you. I just ... I just want to be with you more, and not have to go sleep in an empty bed all the time if our shifts are different." The longer Holly watched her, making that thoughtful face, the more every single, possible, excuse fell away. "Holly, can I move in with you?"

And Holly leaned in to kiss her softly, "Gail Peck, yes, you may move in with me."

"Well if you're going to be all grammar snobby about it ..."

Watching Gail study was cute. She was sprawled on Holly's living room floor with three glasses of drinks (water, ice coffee, juice), odd snack foods (cheesy puffs, untouched), multiple books and a laptop. Gail would read for a while, switch to the laptop to write something, and then go back. Every once in a while she'd stop and do yoga poses, which Holly hadn't quite sorted out yet. A detective Holly barely knew, Rosati, had dropped off piles of information for Gail to study, and mentioned a promise of babysitting. Which Holly had yet to ask about.

But as Gail often gave her room when working on an article, Holly just quietly went about her day, avoiding interfering with Gail. Most of Holly's day was sorting out where to move things so Gail would have enough room. It had been a good excuse to get rid of clothes she never wore, and to finally clean out the garage. Gail insisted on helping with the heavy lifting, saying it would clear her brain.

It wasn't a study pattern Holly would have used, but when she quizzed Gail at dinner one night (at Gail's request), she'd been impressed. Her girlfriend was pretty damn sharp. As Holly dropped the last box of donations in the foyer, her stomach growled. It had to be feeding time.
"I heard that, baby," Gail remarked, typing away. "Lemme finish this paragraph."

"Okay." Holly washed up and when she came back, Gail was at the kitchen island eyeing her phone as if it was evil. "That doesn't look good. Did you get called in to work."

"Checking Yelp reviews. Is there anywhere good we haven't eaten at yet?"

"On the planet? I hear there are amazing restaurants in Paris."

"Steve's French sucks," remarked Gail. "But I was thinking in this area." She made a circle with one finger. "I mean, I should know more than the Vietnamese place you didn't know about if I'm gonna live here."

There it was again. Holly smiled a dopey smile. At Gail's suggestion they started with a couple longer sleepovers. First a weekend, then a whole week, and as of today four weeks, with Gail having a shift change in the middle. It wasn't a stupid idea, Holly realized after the first call in Gail had. While her girlfriend had a schedule, there were strange aspects of it that she hadn't really anticipated. There had been a couple fights, arguments really about who was doing what and sharing what, but they'd been mild. The worst part was Gail coming home banged up, but they'd been working on that for a while.

"Did we pass all your tests?" Holly poked her head over Gail's shoulder to study the Yelp list of restaurants.

"Yep, told the boys I'm moving out at the end of the month. Hey, this Greek place looks okay." She pulled up a listing.

Holly vetoed. "They have an open salad bar." She refused to eat at those.

"You don't have to have salad, baby," sighed Gail. They'd had the argument before, though. Any restaurant that was lazy enough to have a salad bar, and worse an open one with no sneeze guard, could not possibly be sanitary. "I don't want Asian... Burgers? Gourmet joint just opened."

Holly eyed Gail. "Honey, look at me. Do I look like gourmet dinner is on my list?" She was sweaty, filthy, and tired. "And damn it, now I want a burger."

Smiling, Gail handed her phone over. "Tell me what you want, I'll get it to go and feed you."

"You," sighed Holly, "are the best girlfriend ever." She skimmed the menu until she hit a burger with turkey bacon, crushed avocado, green sprouts, and Parmesan cheese. "What on god's green earth is Poutine Style?"

"Hell if I know, but I'm having that on the beer battered bacon with smoked salt onions." Gail took her phone back and made the order online. "Thirty minutes says the text." She beamed at Holly. "Just enough time."

"For ...?" They'd had quickies before, but thirty minutes was not enough time for Holly and Gail to shower, have sex, and then go get dinner.

"For cleaning up all my crap?" Gail claimed to be a slob but was insanely immaculate at Holly's. Actually her room was clean at her apartment. Gail also claimed to be lazy and hated exercise, but went running every morning. She hated working out, but had been going to the cop gym three to four times a week. The only thing that was accurate was Gail's absolute ineptitude at organized sports. Anything she could do solo, like golf or skiing, where the other person competed without her right there, she was amazingly good. Holly told her it was psychological.
She watched Gail put the books and laptop in a pile, clean up her glasses, and put the cheese puffs back in the cabinet. "I cleared off the smaller desk in the office," she noted.

"Cool. I'll put this up there." When Gail came back down, she was confused. "You emptied the desk."

"I thought you might need it."

Gail snorted, "Only if I pass and get the job." Holly knew she would but didn't press. "Okay, burgers, anything else? Drinks?"

"We're good." Holly went to get her purse, to give Gail money, but the blonde was already out the door and the garage was opening. That was another conversation that they needed to have. While Gail was gone, Holly showered and changed and got dishes ready.

They hadn't talked about money before. When they went out to eat as friends, things had been traded back and forth, with no thoughts given to who paid what. As they transitioned into dating, that hadn't changed. Holly had originally borne the opinion that Gail lived with the boys to save money, but when later she learned it was for sanity and safety, she'd managed to never rethink the idea that Gail was of moderate income.

But... She had expensive hobbies as a kid. Shooting. Horseback riding. Competitive at that. It was possible her family had struggled to make ends meet for that, but given the dearth of familial love, Holly doubted that. That all implied that Gail came from some moderate to well off people.

It wasn't long before Gail was back, announcing herself with an expletive. "Holy shit. You are lucky I love you, Lunchbox. This stuff smells so good." The smell was intense, and Holly shelved her thoughts about money to dig in.

"Oh my god..." She stared at Gail, mouth partly crammed with burger. "This is amazing!"

"Yours too?" They traded bites, unable to determine who had a better meal. Gail had actually not gone for Poutine style, instead getting a serving of traditional Poutine fries to split. There was even something for desert.

Holly groaned. "You're trying to kill me."

"We go running every morning," argued Gail, having no problem chowing down.

"I don't have your metabolism!" She looked at the second half of her burger in agony. She wanted it. But if she left it in the fridge Gail would eat it. Leftovers were, as Gail argued, fair game to whomever was hungry. The first time Gail had come back at three AM, Holly learned that her leftovers were not her own anymore. They'd fought, since Holly planned to eat the gourmet mac and cheese for lunch, but Gail won by pointing out the food wasn't labeled.

Holly smiled evilly and got a Tupperware box for her leftovers. Then she got a sticky note and a marker, writing 'Holly Stewart's Lunch' in bold letters. "I get the point," laughed Gail. She had actually finished her burger, but split out half the fries in another container. Kissing Holly's cheek, Gail stacked the boxes together. "Dr. Stewart's lunch shall not be touched."

That was interesting, in a good way. Holly watched as Gail started to clean the dishes when her eyes fell on the receipt. "Hey, honey, can I ask you something awkward."

Gail glanced over, loading the dishwasher. "Sure. But if it's about the underpants, I wear those cause they don't ride up when I'm chasing perps."
“No, I figured the boring shorts had a reason. It's about money.” Looking slightly perplexed, Gail closed and started the dishwasher, but waited patiently. "I don't... You know I own this place, right?" And Gail nodded. "And, you're paying rent with the guys."

"Oh, yeah, I meant to ask you about that." Gail did not sound distressed or awkward. "I was thinking it'd make sense to just split it down the middle, but then I realized if you're still paying the loan, I could match that and then you'd be done twice as fast." She beamed, clearly delighted by her idea.

"Gail... How... That's a lot of money."

"Can't be," scoffed Gail. "You wouldn't be paying more than two grand a month on your mortgage. You're too smart." That was true, thought Holly. "Baby, are you trying to find out if I can afford living with you?"

Holly exhaled, "God! Yes. I have no idea. This is not a fun conversation."

"I make $76 a year," remarked Gail and Holly stared. "Good insurance too, because cop. I'll get a bump if I transfer. Add in my trust fund, I think we'll be okay."

"Your trust fund."

"Yeah, oodles of money. In my name too, so Mother can't get at me through it. It's all invested and shit. I don't touch it, except to buy my car. Didn't really want to get stuck with a loan." Gail did not drive an ostentatious car either. It was a modest Kia that Gail had bought shortly before they'd starting dating the first time but after they'd met.

Holly felt her voice go a little thin, "Oodles." She sat on the couch and tried to reassess her judgements. She was as bad as Lisa had been, assuming Gail was average. How stupid was that?

With a sigh, Gail sat down next to Holly. "What's wrong?"

"I think I'm an elitist ass." Gail side-eyed Holly, incredulous. "Because you thought your house was out of my price range?" Holly nodded, guiltily. "Geeze, and here I was feeling weird because I thought you'd be all funny about not having my name on the lease or something..."

"I... Okay, there's that too."

"Baby, I'm just moving in." She patted Holly's leg. "Tell you what, if we're still here, doing good, in six months, we can talk about that and joint bank accounts and all the grown up stuff. I'll write you a check, you tell me how much, and we can have lots of sex."

Holly blustered, "Sex."

"Sex. Like the thing we could be doing right now." Gail smiled winningly. "No stinky boy roommates, no work tomorrow..."

She couldn't help but smile at Gail. "You need a shower."

"Okay," agreed Gail. "But I expect you to be naked and on that bed when I'm done."

Getting Sophie not to play the video games was hard. Until Chris sobered up enough for Gail's taste, Gail had flat out refused to bring Sophie over and saved their 'home' hangouts to Holly's place. That just became a thing they did, and Sophie simply asked when Gail was going to stay forever. When
she told Sophie that she'd be moving in with Holly, the girl had cheered and ran through her own home to tell Noelle and Frank. Then she demanded getting to help Gail pack.

Somehow Gail managed to negotiate that to unpacking of select items. Not that Gail had much of anything the kid wouldn't be okay seeing (maybe the vibrator...), but there were limits to how familiar she wanted any child to be with her underthings. Also snooping in the bedroom might turn out to be to a little too educational.

That left them downstairs or in the office, putting Gail's books away and sorting her video games. At this rate, Gail wasn't going to have much to move over. Instead of unpacking, this time Sophie was helping Gail frame pictures of herself and put them up in the office and hallway. It was Sophie's idea, saying that for every picture of Holly and her family, there should be one of Gail and hers.

"You and Holly and my friends are my family, kiddo!"

While Sophie was delighted to hear that, she was still skeptical of Gail's lack of parental photos. "Then you have to have one of me and my new family." The fostering was going well, thank god, and Gail happily framed a photo of the bemused Frank and his three girls.

The photo of Gail at graduation, with Steve, was also put up, next to the one of Holly and her mother at her college graduation. "Look at him, such a dork."

"You look all stiff."

"I was scared," she admitted. "My parents are really important police officers."

Sophie looked up, surprised. "How come you don't talk about them?"

"That's a big question, Sophie." Gail walked into the kitchen, where all the photos were strewn. "My parents care a lot about how I make them look, because they're so important."

Screwing up her face, Sophie sat down at the table. "I don't get it," she finally said.

"I don't either, most of the time." But Gail sat with her. How could she explain this simply? "My whole family are cops, Sophie. And being a cop, a Peck cop, is really important to them. So my whole life, I was always going to be a cop. And that was more important to them than me doing what I wanted."

"Oh." Sophie looked at the photos and frowned. "But you always tell me I should be what I want to be. So does Noelle."

Gail made a mental note to ask Frank what he was saying. Probably whatever Noelle said. "Because we want you to be happy."

"I thought you liked being a cop?"

"I do. I love it," Gail smiled, honestly certain she could never be anything else. "But I didn't want to be a cop as a kid, I had to be one." The puzzlement on Sophie's face was somewhat heartening. "It's confusing, I know. My mother and I don't get along. She's really nice when we're in public, but when it's just family, she tells me everything I'm doing wrong. A lot."

And now Sophie scowled, "She's mean."

"Yeah, she is."
The girl scooted out of her chair and hugged Gail tightly. "I'm sorry."

It took a lot not to cry, "Thanks." That was all she trusted her voice with.

"What about your dad?" Sophie wasn't budging from her spot, and she wasn't letting go of Gail just yet.

"My father. Doesn't like the fact that I'm dating Holly. He doesn't like it when boys date boys, or girls date girls."

Sophie loosened her hold and looked up at Gail, absolutely stunned. "How come you're so nice if they're mean and dumb?"

The laughter bubbled out, unexpectedly. "Oh, cutie, if anyone else heard you say that." She squeezed Sophie close. "Come on. Help me find the best picture of me with black hair, and we'll put it some place to surprise Holly."

Holly was absolutely terrified. "What do I do?"

"You hold him," Gail repeated, pulling on her coat. "Sweetheart, I'll be fifteen minutes okay? Stop panicking."

"But- what do I do if he starts crying?" On cue, the creature started making noises.

Crossing the room, Gail moved Holly's arms. "He's a baby, not a monster. You're holding him too far away, Holly. One hand there, the other here, okay, now lean him against your chest."

Very slowly, the baby was settled into Holly's body. She felt her heart pounding but the baby just nestled in and yawned. "Now what?"

"Now you go back to reading. You'll be fine, Holly," Gail kissed her lips lightly, stroked the baby's cheek, and bounced out the front door to run to the store.

And Holly was terrified. They had handed her a baby. Jo Rosati, a detective Gail enlisted to help her prepare for the detective test, was still on maternity leave and had agreed to help Gail in exchange for babysitting. Of course Gail had agreed, but that had ended up with them running out of diapers and Gail running out to the store, with Holly holding the baby.

Why was Holly holding the baby at all? She didn't have any idea what to so with one?! They were small and fragile and didn't speak. Holly had enough problems understanding people who could talk, let alone infants. But Gail swore it would be fine and since Holly had the baby on her lap at the moment anyway, she'd just pop out. It was better than Holly taking an hour to figure out the right brand. Since Gail had also put the baby in Holly's arms after the diaper change, Holly suspected it was actually a setup.

Damn it.

The baby yawned and squirmed a little, beginning to fuss. "Okay, um, what do I do?" The fussing stopped. When Holly didn't say anything else, it picked up again. "Oh, okay. Right. Talk to the baby. Um. Do you like forensics? I'm reading about rehydrating tissues." The baby made a noise, a gurgle, that wasn't upset. So Holly started reading the article aloud.

Fifteen minutes later, when Gail arrived back with diapers, Holly was cradling the baby in one arm and reading. "You teaching him forensics?" laughed Gail.
"He fussed. I didn't know what else to do." Holly bit her lip. "Is this okay?"

"It's perfect, baby." Gail scooted Holly until she could sit behind her, making a trio of spoons. "See? Fits just fine." Her arms looped around Holly's waist, one hand caressing the baby's face. "And he's about to conk out."

"How can you tell?" Studying the tiny face in her arm, all Holly saw was a miniature Winston Churchill, looking a little grumpy.

"Keep reading, you'll see."

So Holly kept reading, and was startled to hear soft snores coming from the baby in mere moments. "Now what?"

"Now we relax, Holly. Lean back."

The soft weight of the baby was comforting, in the same way a kitten or a puppy could be, and Holly felt her eyes close. She could hear Gail's heartbeat and let that soothe her into a doze. It was, she reflected later, the best nap she'd had in years.

Chapter End Notes

Somewhere out there Jo Rosati married and had a kid. The bit players flow in and out of your life, so why not Jo too? She has a name, though. So I wouldn't kill her. Would I? Maybe. She did not marry Luke, by the way. And he comes back later on for an epically terrible date night that involves everything that could possibly go wrong.
We'll address those suspicions you have about Elaine now.

There were two ways to tell her parents she was moving in with Holly and Gail didn't really like either. One was less stressful now, the other later. Gail sighed and picked up the phone. "This is Gail Peck. Is my mother in?" Not Officer Peck asking for the Staff Superintendent. Gail wanted her mother right now, deal with the stress now.

She waited on hold for a short while, before her mother's voice picked up. "Constable."

Of course, "Mother." There was no reply. Right. "I thought you should know I'm moving."

"You're moving. Out of the apartment with those boys?"

"Yes." She hesitated and got up, walking the length of the deck. "I'm moving in with Holly." There, that was said.

Her mother was quiet for a moment. "I see." This time, Gail waited her out. "Have you given thought to how this may impact your life?"

"I did." She had, actually, talked to Holly and Oliver about it. "I thought this was dad's beef."

Her mother snorted. "Your father is exceedingly nearsighted when it comes to the impact of your sexuality on your career. Your sexuality is not an issue. A lesbian staff officer would give Toronto the diversity it needs."

Gail cringed. Great. She'd have to fight about that later when they got into jobs, no doubt. "Then what's the problem?"

"Do you remember nothing we've talked about? Pecks don't move in with lovers."

Oh. That. The whole reason she was supposed to marry. "That worked out so well with Nicholas," she sighed.

"Having children out of-"

"Woah! One of us needs to go back to school, cause I'm pretty sure Holly can't knock me up." Her mother paused and Gail realized how much of her mother's advice ran on Peck-auto-pilot. "Do you even care, as my mother, how I feel about any of this?" She didn't let her voice rise or get angry. She didn't feel angry.

The hesitation on the phone spoke volumes. "You haven't talked to me about how you feel in years."

Gail looked out over the city. "You never asked." There was more silence. Clearly her mother wasn't going to start now. Gail could easily fall into her old patterns and be a brat or attack. Instead, she changed tactics. "Why did you marry Dad?"
Her mother hesitated. "Bill was reasonably attractive, nice, and I saw him as a way to further my career." The brutally honest answer was not very surprising when Gail gave it a thought. "The Peck name is more powerful than Armstrong in political circles."

The money in Gail's life came from her mother's side, the Armstongs. Her mother's ambitions had always been naked to the family, though. Police Chief if possible, though as she aged that was becoming less likely, so a staff position and then the mayorship. She couldn't be worse than Rob Ford, Steve had quipped once. Elaine had always said that power through service was more sustainable than through money.

When Gail didn't reply, her mother asked, "Does that sound cold to you?"

To lie or to be honest. "Yes," she decided. Honesty won. "Dad knows?"

"Your father knows. It was part of our agreement. He lacks the investigative abilities you and your brother are graced with and saw it as a way to provide for the Peck future."

Backhanded compliments? Par for the course. Of course she and Steve were investments. "I don't feel about Holly that way." Holly was an investment in happiness.

She could hear her mother's teeth gritting. "How ... How do you feel about her?"

Words she never expected to hear for her mother, and Gail smirked. "She makes me a better person. More human." She sat down and stretched out her legs. Gail was still the same caustic person, but softer, which conversely made her feel like she was doing her job better. That said, she didn't think her mother would understand.

"She makes you feel human."

"Shockingly, yes." Gail sighed.

"And. How does ... How do you think she feel about this?"

Part of Gail was having way too much fun with making her mother uncomfortable. "As strange a concept as this may be, mother dearest, we talk. She's nervous, for good reasons. My job scares her sometimes." She sighed. They had talked, argued, about the dangers. That Gail had talked Holly into therapy was both good and horrid. She felt guilty about being the reason Holly had a therapist.

"Dating someone who isn't a police officer is difficult. They won't understand, dear, and they won't be alright with you being in danger-"

"Really? You're okay with me being shot at, even though I'm you're daughter, just because you're a cop?" Utter silence. The fact that her mother had to even think about the answer was enough. "Right. This is why we don't talk."

Her mother exhaled loudly, "Don't be unreasonable."

"You don't worry about me getting hurt."

"You're a police office."

"I'm a person. I'm your daughter."

Now her mother snapped. "You're a Peck."

"Oh good, here it comes. Do what your told. Don't embarrass the Peck name."
"That isn't what this is about at all, Gail."

Huffing, Gail asked the obvious, "Then tell me. What is this about?"

Elaine was quiet for a moment, "You're our future. Toronto's future." Gail squeezed her eyes shut. "Your antipathy at your own career, your insistence at chasing cheap thrills over something of useful substance is ruining any chance you could have. And hitching your life to a woman who nearly left the country, without you I may add, is the same thing as Nicholas all over again."

The words stuck in Gail's head for a reason and she felt her blood run cold. "Did you tell Nick to join the army?"

"Suggested," demurred her mother. "He already had the idea."

"And the job in San Francisco, Holly's miracle job. Did you find that or- or did you kill her Visa?" Both options were horrible.

"I had nothing to do with her job offer."

This time, Gail was silent for a while. Her mother, her mother got Holly's Visa spiked. "What the hell? Why the hell would you do that!? What the hell did Holly ever do to you?"

There was a pause and her mother sighed. "Dr. Stewart doesn't want children. I admit I didn't see this happening."

Squeezing her eyes shut, everything started to make sense. Her mother wanted Holly to talk Gail out of fostering. But when Holly staying hadn't changed Gail's mind, Elaine made damn sure social services would reject her. Hell, she probably made Gail look worse. Gail tried not to shout, "You don't — Do you have any idea how messed up that is, Mother? You don't want me to have a kid and you don't want me to be with Holly, so you screw up both our futures and … what? Are you shocked we looked to each other for comfort? That I'd look to anyone for that? You wanted me to run back to your arms like I did after Perik? 'Cause look at how good that worked out for us."

"Gail, you're being unreasonable. I think Dr. Stewart is a nice woman, but you won't last. You're too different."

Gail's mind was spinning. Her mother had gone far beyond what even Gail would consider tolerable. "I have decided something," she said firmly, sadly. "You don't care about what I want, or how I feel. And I actually don't care what you think about this. I don't care what you think about anything, but you can stay the hell out of my personal life." Gail stabbed at the hang-up button, wishing for a handset to slam down.

She wasn't disappointed. You had to have some expectations before you could have them crushed. That her mother had no idea about her life was expected. She was the little Peck Monkey who should play her cymbals and dance appropriately. And Gail ... Wasn't going to play that game. But holy hell, that Elaine had done this much and gone so far... Could she even tell Holly?

Absently she sent a text to her brother, warning him to run to the hills.

Instead of waiting for a reply, Gail switched her phone to silent and lay down on the bench. She wanted to say she loved her parents, but she really wasn't sure at all. She did what they wanted, behaved as they said, and they were disappointed. Then she she everything but what they wanted, and got the same reaction.

She remembered too clearly sitting in the bridal suite, having some relative stranger help her out of
her wedding dress, when her mother walked in to inform her that it wasn't too late to join the academy. They didn't even need to pull strings, Gail could simply apply and let the Peck Power take it's course.

Out of nowhere, Gail asked for five years. No more pressure, no more orders. She'd go to the academy, she'd become a police officer, and for five years her mother would step out and let her find her place. And they did, albeit unwillingly, and not without slip ups. She'd known the time was nearly up when her mother started setting up blind dates. Desperate enough for happiness, Gail allowed it, but in opening up her mind to the possibilities, she'd found Holly. The joke was on Elaine there.

"Gail, are you out here?" Holly's voice drifted out as she stepped onto the deck.

"Yep," sighed Gail, raising one hand.

She heard a door close, and Holly's voice was nearer. "Steve said you had a bad day?"

The footsteps were soft on the wood deck and Gail turned her head to look at Holly's feet. "You have cute toes," she informed her girlfriend's bare feet.

Holly sighed. "Are you drunk?"

"That would be more fun, and probably more maudlin." She looked up at Holly's concerned face. "I have informed my mother than we will be cohabiting lesbians."

Holly's face softened. "Pick up your head, honey." When Gail did, Holly scooted in so her lap could serve as a pillow. She played with Gail's hair as the sun started to set. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Decision time. Gail decided not to tell her about the Visa until she was sure. "She said being gay would make me desirable for the brass. Good PR to have a lesbo on staff." The bitterness she felt was starting to show. "Mostly she just reminded me why we don't talk." Holly was silent. She'd clearly been learning from Gail, who had told her the best way to get someone to crack was to wait. "She doesn't care."

"Gail, that can't be right." Holly's voice was filled with disbelief.

Reaching up, Gail took Holly's hand. "I am a means to an end. So's Steve." She looked at Holly's hand carefully. "I'm a Peck, but I'm not going to be like them." Kissing Holly's hand she said, firmly, "I love you."

"I love you too," sighed Holly, stroking Gail's hair. "I'm sorry."

"Me too." Gail closed her eyes. "On the plus side, no more family dinners for me!" Holly's hand twitched, squeezing Gail's. She didn't say anything, but then again she didn't have to.

For all Gail had so few boxes, she had a lot of beer and friends. "Honey, you have more people than things to move." Holly stared at the bevy of police officers in her home, their home, with growing dismay.

"That's why we ordered pizza, baby," grinned Gail. She held a beer out to Holly, apologetically.

Well. At least Gail did have friends willing to help her move. Holly sighed and kissed her girlfriend. It had only taken one trip with Chris's truck to move Gail in, since none of the furniture came with her. The bed and dresser in Gail's room were handed down to Oliver's eldest, who was getting her
own room at Oliver's. The cookware was left with the boys, though Gail swore they'd never use it. That left boxes of books, clothes, and weapons. And video games. Apparently the video games at the apartment had been Gail's, which made sense when she thought about Gail's sleeping problems.

Even when Gail stayed over, there were nights that Holly would wake up and find Gail sitting in the living room, watching the TV on low, or reading a book. The first time it happened, Holly asked if everything was okay and Gail had brushed it off. By the fourth time, they talked about how sometimes Gail's brain just didn't turn off. After that, Holly established a routine. If she woke up without Gail in bed she'd go downstairs, get a drink of water, and tell Gail she was going back to bed. Most of the time Gail would get up right away and go with her back upstairs to sleep. Any time she didn't, Holly would sit with Gail and either talk or just be there. Most of the time it was talking these days.

Of all the people she met, though, Holly liked Celery the most. She was funny, smart, and while she was a total health freak and Wiccan, she actually understood what she was talking about. They chatted about food and exercise while Oliver and Gail played some game that involved shooting each other. Chloe and Chris were cheering on Oliver, and Nick and Dov were arguing about sports while finishing the last of the pizza.

The first to leave had been Frank, Noelle, Sophie and baby Olivia. Sophie had run around with Leo for most of the day, the two hogging the video games. They'd had enough joint play days with Gail to be friendly enough, and both wanted Gail's attention the whole time they were there. It was the first time all of Gail's friends had seen her that that wrapped up in children. Noelle plied Holly with Olivia, insisting she hold the year old baby all day. Normally Gail confiscated the child but Holly gave it a whirl.

Andy had come and gone, leaving Holly with a warning that Gail walked around other people's homes in the buff. Gail pointed out it was once, from the shower to the couch, and normal people provided their guests with towels. Also Holly had already seen her naked, and there were no complaints. Steve and Traci had also left, hauling a sound asleep Leo. Steve brought them a housewarming gift of tickets to the ballet and a garbage pail. Always surprising, Gail confessed she'd wanted to see the show.

Still, the hordes were getting wearing and Holly mentioned as much to Celery. In turn, Celery whispered to Oliver and he quickly died in the game. "Okay, my Petulant Peck! It's time for us to get out of here! Come on everyone, clean up before you make forensics worry about crime scene contamination."

The group cleaned up, even taking the trash with them, remarkably fast. "Thanks, Oliver," smiled Gail. She had a strange fondness for the man who then hugged her. Holly could not imagine Gail allowing that from anyone else.

"Anything for you, darling. You're serious, huh?" He held her at arms length, studying her face. Holly blinked. He was asking Gail if she was serious about Holly after they moved in together?

"I think I'll be good at it." The answer didn't match what Holly thought the question was, and she frowned. They must be talking about the job.

"No, you'll be great at it." He clapped her shoulders. "Holly! Keep her home till Wednesday. Then we have work and excellence to create." There was another hug.

This time Gail laughed, "You're going to make me proofread your letter, aren't you?"

"Yes, because you write prettier. Okay! I'm out."
The last to leave were Dov and Chris. "So." Dov looked around. "I'm actually going to miss you around the apartment."

"Oh shut up," replied Gail. It wasn't quite snappish. "Like I've even been there lately."

"Can I hug you?" Chris was wistful.

"Jesus, it's not like I won't see you on Wednesday, idiots." And of all things, Gail grabbed both boys around their necks and hugged them. "Thanks," she said, incredibly quietly. "I know." Before Dov or Chris could reply, she knocked their heads together. "Now go away." Gail closed the door behind her friends and made a frustrated noise. "Oh my god, they're gone."

Holly smirked. "So? You sound very excited."

Leaning against the door, Gail looked giddy. "I don't have to go anywhere." She bounced. "I can walk around in my underpants and not have to think about what time it is, and if I should go back early to do laundry because my uniforms are all here and clean."

"You're excited about your laundry?"

"Come with me to the laundromat and you would be too."

"No," laughed Holly. "I'm going to think about you wandering around in your underpants."

Gail got a cocky look on her face, "I have five days off. You have four."

"What will you do with yourself that last day," teased Holly. Gail didn't answer. She simply locked the door and smiled. Without a word, Gail walked past Holly, pulling her shirt off on the way. "Oh," blinked Holly, watching Gail step out of her shorts and, in nothing but underwear, climb the steps. This living together stuff had it's benefits.

The idea of getting drunk was so, so appealing to Gail right now. Still, she nursed her first Jack and Coke at the bar and confused the hell out of the bartender by not asking for shots. "Hey, stranger!" Dov dropped onto the stool beside her. "Where's your better half?"

"Out," muttered Gail, carefully sipping the drink. Dov ordered a drink and Gail felt him staring at her. "What?" she snapped.

"I'm trying to figure what you did."

Groaning, Gail put her head on the counter. "I'm in the doghouse."

"Come on, it couldn't be that bad."

"Her mother's in town."

"This sounds like a table conversation," announced Dov, and he took Gail by the arm over to one of their regular tables. "Do I need to call Andy or Traci?"

Gail scowled at Dov, but sat down, "You're girly enough for me." They shared an awkward look, and Gail wondered if Dov remembered when he was high on painkillers and confessed his feelings to her. Really, she probably would have been happy with Dov, on many levels. And then killed him in his sleep for being Dov.
"I'll take that as a compliment," decided Dov. "What's her mom like? Or is that the problem?"

"She's awesome. The opposite of Superintendent Mom. Funny, smart..." Holly's mother was very much like Holly. Not a people doctor, Lily Stewart was a PhD in botany who worked in biotechnology. She had come to visit the Toronto Botanical Gardens, and used the business trip as an excuse to meet her daughter's live in girlfriend.

So Gail recounted the story of the lunch, and how Lily had been fun to talk to until she started making veiled comments about kids. "You guys don't want kids?" Dov's question was innocent.

"Holly kinda doesn't." Maybe. They still talked around and about it a little, but Gail agreed to not press the matter until she turned thirty. She wanted kids very much but was alright with borrowing Leo or Sophie or the baby. And Holly was still super-hesitant about the idea. It was okay to give it time. "And it was getting... You know how parents push?"

Dov was about as close with his parents as Gail and Chris were (and that was much of why the three had lasted so long as roommates). "Yeah, especially when they don't understand."

"Right so ... I ... Was me."

"Yikes." Dov had once told her she made a horrible first impression and he wasn't wrong. "What did you say?"

Gail sighed. "She started it." She knew it was petulant. "She asked when Holly was going to have a baby, since my job was too high risk. So ... I said I was trying my hardest but it hadn't stuck yet."

The damned thing was Holly had smirked. The second half of the joke was the problem, as while the first part was amusing the second was crass. She told Dov the rest of the joke. He winced.

"You make a joke about dildos to your girlfriend's mother?"

"I might be insane." Gail sipped the Jack and Coke again. She didn't want to actually get drunk, as that would probably end with a very unhappy Holly when she went home. "Holly suggested dinner should be just her and her mother with ... She has this look."

Dov scratched his chin. "Need to crash at my place?"

"No, I'm not climbing trees again." While Dov didn't get the joke he nodded. "I'm waiting to hear the all clear so I can go home and not embarrass my girlfriend anymore." Thank god Lily was staying at a hotel.

They both drank slowly. Dov finally got out the trivia cards and they played one on one for a little while until he stopped and jerked his chin. "Hey, go apologize."

Gail glanced over her shoulder and blinked as Holly, sans mother, was walking towards them. "Maybe I can melt into the table." The look on Holly's face was firm. Muttering he was out, Dov left the cards on the table and vanished. "You chicken shit," growled Gail at his back.

Without asking, Holly sat down in Dov's seat. "How many?" She pointed at the glass in Gail's hand, which still had some remnants.

"Just this." She slid the glass away, not interested anymore. "Your mom at the hotel?" Holly nodded.

The cop in Gail was patient. She knew to wait. The girlfriend wanted to grovel. "My mother," sighed Holly, "asked me if you were satisfying me." Gail blinked and Holly added, "In bed.
"God I hope so," Gail replied, not thinking before the words came out of her mouth. Holly quirked a grin. "Wait. Does that mean I'm not in trouble for the not-funny joke?"

"Not with her, no," admitted Holly. Gail sighed and started to form an apology about how she knew it was inappropriate. "I, on the other hand, am." All the words died on her lips and Gail stared at her girlfriend. "I... May not have previously mentioned I was your first girlfriend."

A series of emotions went through Gail's mind, from horror to amusement and back to embarrassment. "Wait a second. You told your mother I was a- a-" Gail lowered her voice, "You told her I was a lesbian virgin?"

"Not in so many words," cringed Holly. "She figured you were nervous, and I said she was the first parent that you'd met." That much was true. The meeting with Nick's parents had been non-existent, as they were dead long before the wedding, though nothing yet topped a wedding reception dinner with your very angry family and no one else. Steve still counted it as the worst family dinner ever.

"That could mean a lot of things."

Holly sighed, "Saying you hadn't had a girlfriend before was a give away." Looking at the table, Holly grumbled, "She led me right into her trap. Sneaky parents."

"I suppose that could be worse," Gail sighed and signaled the bartender to bring Holly her usual. "Is your mom mad about all the other straight girls you dated?" Only one had been really serious, or so Holly said. The morose nod made Gail feel a lot better.

Holly ran her finger around the rim of Gail's empty glass. "It's like Lisa and Rachel, you know? She doesn't want me to get hurt. And from her perspective, it's sudden. I was all elated about you, then I didn't talk about you, then I wanted you to run away with me, and now we moved in together..."

"When you put it that way, I sound like a terrible idea," agreed Gail. The waitress brought two drinks but Gail's had a cherry. Roy Rogers. Perfect. "On the bright side, she doesn't live here."

Avoiding Gail's mother was relatively easy, since she worked in the big building and neither Gail nor Holly did. "Man, I was worried she'd be mad about the cop thing."

Smiling, Holly sipped her drink. "Oh there's that too." She ticked off the issues on her fingers, "I've allowed a previously straight cop to live with me, who broke up with me once, and while you are very sweet, you are a disaster waiting to happen."

No one called Gail 'sweet' except Holly, and generally that was after sex, but she snorted. "Joke's on her. I'm already a disaster."

"Well, you're my disaster." Holly wore that awkward half smile. She leaned in and kissed Gail. "I told her she didn't have to come by if she didn't like you."

Gail winced. "Holly-"

"And she apologized, said I was a grown up, and then asked about the sex thing."

"I have no reference to this, Holly ... Is that good?" Parents, in Gail's experience, were not to be joked with.

"It is." Holly leaned across the drinks and kissed Gail. "We're having dinner again tomorrow, at home. No sex jokes. No baby talk."
Gail chewed her lip. "I thought you wanted to watch the game tomorrow."

Holly looked perplexed. "I do. You don't think I got my love of sports from my dad, do you?"
Sleep Is For The Week

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

There was a luxurious feeling to waking up late, when the sun was already closer to its peak than the beginning. When Holly had a lazy, slow, roll into consciousness and her awareness first touched on the little, soft, things in life. The mornings when first color Holly's eyes saw was the various shades of blonde that topped the head of the most complicated and wonderful person in her life. When she felt warm skin against her own and the soft air of someone else's breath. A start where Holly could observe the sleeping form of her girlfriend in absolute relaxation and calm, and Gail looked delicate and gentle.

This was not one of those mornings.

This was the fifth morning in a row where Gail had been gone when Holly woke up. Perhaps the better way was to say Gail was not yet back. More accurate at least. She'd been stuck working a case with Dov, a sting operation that the two were apparently good at. Holly vaguely remembered Gail doing that before, in the time when they were just friends, but it hadn't bothered her as much as it did now.

When the person you spent your nights with was absent, it was strange and uncomfortable. Sounds you'd ignore with her there were startling and distressing. The bed was colder and needed an extra blanket. Worst, you had to be extra quiet the rest of the day, when she was home, so she could sleep.

So there she lay, far too early to want to be up, listening to the rain and thunder pounding the house and thinking about her girlfriend. The rest of the visit with her mother had actually gone well. Holly had been terrified since the last girlfriend who met her parents was straight now. She had made a choice not to mention that Gail had never dated women before Holly, only to have her mother wheedle it out the way that mothers did.

Gail didn't really mind, but then again, Holly hadn't given her the details of her serious ex-girlfriends. At the dinner with just her and her mother, Holly had divulged the whole story, including the part with her Visa and how Gail had been the only friend to help her and support her on both ends of that move.

Her mother, sternly, had informed her that Gail was in love and under no circumstances was Holly to run away. Lily knew her too well. There had been other, lesser relationships in the last six years, but none had lasted past the other woman falling in love. Always the other woman, never Holly. Holly kept herself away from that investment.

So she told her mother the truth. She was in love with Gail and had said so to her. Holly Stewart was growing, trying new things, and self-honesty about emotions was one of them. That didn't stop her mother from taking her emotional temperature, but it did mean Lily was more inclined to listen and believe her. That this time felt different and special and she was in it for the long haul.

Which was when her mother asked if the straight girl was good in bed. Because mothers. Holly blurted the answer (yes) and felt insanely embarrassed to even have that conversation at all.

The storm picked up, distracting Holly. The rain was up to pouring and the lightning made it seem like midday. Then there was the thunder. Ugh. Holly curled up under the blankets and wished Gail was there. While she wasn't afraid of the storm, having a soft, warm body to curl up with while it
raged was one of the most peaceful things in the universe. Instead, she was stuck inside, alone, listening to the tree branches shake and the windows rattle.

Atop those sounds, the familiar one of the garage door rumbled through the house. Holly glanced at the clock and was surprised to see it was four in the morning. The garage rumbled again and she closed her eyes to concentrate on the noises. A door opened and closed, Gail coughed and took off her boots. A moment of silence passed and then the softer sound of socked feet could be heard. Gail went right for the office and then bathroom, only coming into the bedroom after a rather long shower.

When Gail sat heavily on the bed, Holly opened her eyes and saw Gail's entire body looking exhausted. "Hey," she said softly, reaching over to touch Gail's bare back.

"Hey," Gail sounded surprised and turned around to smile at her. That wonderfully goofy smile, incredibly soft and tender, gave Holly a thrill. "Did I wake you up?"

"No, storm did." Holly ran her fingers over Gail's back and side. "I like this look," she grinned.

Gail looked down, confused. "Oh, I was trying to remember what comes next," she sighed.

"Shirt, underpants. Or not."

Smiling, Gail got up and dug in her dresser for underpants and then raided Holly's for a sports shirt. "I'm way too tired, Holly."

When Gail joined her under the covers, Holly wrapped herself around the blonde. "I only meant I don't care what you wear, as long as you're here." She closed her eyes and settled in, listening to Gail's breathing.

"Romantic," yawned Gail, her body relaxing quickly.

Storm or not, it was much easier to fall asleep for two more hours now than it should be and Holly woke up hours later to Gail's alarm and a cursing Gail. There was much slapping at the nightstand before the sound stopped and Gail lay still on her stomach. "Honey," whispered Holly.

"Fuck no." The words were clear and pained and tired and Ice Queen. Holly ran a soothing hand over Gail's back. "Do you have to get up?"

"No," she replied, surly, her back tense with frustration. Holly smiled and rubbed Gail's back. It was more of a caress, intending to be soothing. As Gail's back loosened, Holly stretched out and rested her cheek on Gail's shoulder blade.

Trusting her girlfriend not to skip work, Holly assumed Gail had the afternoon off and closed her eyes to breath in the scent of the woman she used as a pillow. "I love you," she said softly, barely above a breath.

She felt, more than heard, Gail's reply. "Me too."

"Good." Holly smiled and let herself fall into a light doze.

When she drifted back into awareness, the storm had gotten louder and Gail was moving in her sleep. After a moment, Holly recognized the motions. They were tight and controlled. Gail was just barely moving her arms, the hands clenching and loosening, her mouth opening. This was not the first time Holly had seen the beginnings of Gail reacting to her dreams.
She shifted, still draped over Gail's side, and squeezed her gently. "It's Holly," she said, in as clear a voice as she could muster. Gail stiffened and Holly repeated herself. "Gail, it's me, Holly."

It was Holly's therapist who had come up with the idea. At Gail's request, the two therapists had compared notes when Holly had asked about what would actually help when Gail had a nightmare. The directions were simple. If they were already touching, deepen it. Otherwise, don't try to touch her. In either case, tell Gail she was there, she was Holly, and where they were. Thankfully, Gail wasn't prone to lashing out when she had a nightmare. Like so many other things, Gail just kept her pain bottled up inside.

"Gail, wake up." Holly moved slowly, easing her weight off of Gail but keeping her hand in place. "You're at home with me. It's just a dream."

Gail stopped moving and her eyes opened. "Oh," she sighed and scrunched her face up. "What... What time is it?"

"Little after eight."

Nodding, Gail pushed herself up. "Well. Shit, there goes catching up on sleep." She sat cross legged and stared at the windows above the bed. "Did you get any sleep?"

"Some," yawned Holly. "Do you remember what you were dreaming?"

"No." Sometimes she did, sometimes she didn't. To Gail, the ones she didn't remember were the most annoying. "I'm okay."

Taking Gail at her word, Holly nodded. "Breakfast." She swung her legs out of bed, stretching as she sat up. Gail's hand on her shoulder stayed her. "It's Saturday, honey."

"I know." Gail moved around and sat behind Holly, resting her head on the shoulder with her hand. "Thanks for waking me up." Her free hand wrapped around Holly's waist.

Holly pressed her weight against Gail, trying to be comforting. "Do you have to work today?"

"No, we made the bust last night. Right before the rain started." Gail didn't let her go though. "Why did you stay with me that night?"

"Which night?"

"The first time. When I was on Oxy and freaked out in your guest room."

Squeezing Gail's hand, Holly sighed. "Because you shouldn't be alone."

Gail made a soft noise into her shoulder. "I used to never want to touch anyone. After a nightmare." Her voice was quiet but not a whisper. "I wanted everyone to leave me alone and... When we were not dating, all I wanted was for you to be there." She paused, "That sounds really needy."

"It's allowed, honey."

"Not a fairytale," sighed Gail.

Smiling, Holly turned her head so her cheek pressed against Gail. "Still. We're pretty beautiful."

There was a mirthful laugh into her shoulder and Gail kissed it. "Come on, I'll make french toast."

With one more kiss, Gail let go and followed Holly downstairs. "I'll make coffee. Lots of coffee."

There was flash of light and the house seemed to shudder a second later when the thunder echoed.
"Shut up, no one asked you," she growled at the weather and Holly laughed.

"If you manage control over the weather, I'll be impressed," she teased her girlfriend. "I have a proposal." Starting the coffees, Gail just made a noise to indicate a question. "After breakfast, we curl up on the couch and watch a movie, or read, or something horribly mundane that everyone else will think is boring."

She glanced over at Gail who looked thoughtful. "That's the best offer I've had all week, Holly."

Drunk people were annoying. The less Gail drank, the more annoying drunk people had become. So Nick, who could be very annoying on the best of times, was rubbing her last nerve at the Penny. The only reason she hadn't gone over and popped him one was that Chloe and Traci were bracketing her, keeping her trapped.

"Can I just go home?" Gail really didn't want to be there, hanging out with her cop family, on a Friday night.

"No," smiled Traci. "Because you will just go home and mope."

Growling, Gail sipped her beer. "I will not. I'm a grown woman."

"She means she'll watch reality TV." Chloe winked and Gail begrudged her a smile. "When's Holly back?"

Gail sighed. "Thursday." Seven days. Seven days of kicking around Holly's house alone. Okay, their house. Gail paid rent, as it were, but she still felt like it was Holly's. And with Holly in Victoria for a conference, the house was all Gail. And she disliked it.

Chloe tapped her glass. "I think we should go to Gail's and drink where there are no stupid boys."

And without Gail actually having a say in the matter, she found herself drinking beers in her own living room with Chloe and Traci and no stupid boys. The last part of that was okay by Gail, but she was less keen on a hen party. When Holly called, Gail went to the stairs for some privacy.

"Hi, how's Victoria?"

"Wet. I don't think it's stopped raining since I got here," grumped Holly. They'd texted when Holly was in transit, but had not had the chance to talk.

"I don't think I'm going to like this," Gail admitted.

That got a laugh from her girlfriend, the weird laugh when Holly felt multiple emotions but couldn't express any in words. "Well." Holly cleared her throat. "I just got out of the shower and I'm naked."

Gail's mouth went dry. "Jesus, Holly, no we can't do that." She closed her eyes, picturing naked Holly on their bed.

"Gail," sighed Holly, exasperated.

Quickly, Gail cut in. "No, I mean not tonight." The idea of phone sex was curiously appealing. She tried to picture it with Nick and almost gagged.

"Why? I don't have anything till brunch tomorrow, and I know you're off till second-"

"Traci and Chloe are here, drinking all our beer." Silence. "Right. So I could go to the bedroom, but
that would be, um ...

"Rude and crass."

"Yeah." Gail exhaled loudly. "I didn't know you were in to that," she teased.

"Neither did I." There was a breathless laugh. "I don't know if I am, but hey, I'm all about new experiences." Both women paused and then laughed. "Why are you entertaining guests? Everything okay?"

"Yeah, just Nick being a dick. He was digging me about being bi and got all weird when I said I wasn't."

"Honey, you did date men."

"Sure, so did you. I'm not bi," Gail said firmly. And she knew in her heart she wasn't. There was just no way she was bisexual because men, even men she'd slept with, stopped looking attractive. No. That wasn't it. Nick and Chris, for example, looked exactly as attractive as they always had. They just didn't turn her on.

Once Holly had kissed her in the coat room, Gail started thinking about what it meant. As their friendship grew, Gail realized how much Holly meant to her in a way no one else had. It was that silly setup Holly had at the Penny that told Gail what she needed to know on no uncertain terms. Since that moment, men stopped being attractive in the same way. They looked nice, but they didn't flip her switches. The idea of kissing them didn't make her feel warm inside.

When they'd broken up, Gail had been so loathe to admit it that she still never looked at anyone else. She wanted Holly and for once it was just that simple. Why couldn't everyone else see that?

"I didn't get engaged to men," joked Holly.

"Hey." She wasn't really annoyed that Holly gave her crap about Nick. Holly did not like Nick very much, though she tolerated his existence as well as Gail tolerated Lisa. She liked Rachel, Rachel was cool. Lisa was shallow and elitist and bitchy and reflected most of Holly's worst traits. Rachel was an overprotective momma bear friend, like Traci. "No more men. This is a man free body," she informed Holly, firmly.

"That is good to know." There was a rustle of cloth and Holly's voice was muffled, "There's a dinner tomorrow. It's over at nine."

Which meant midnight in Toronto. "Call me anyway, okay? I want to hear your voice." Gail was glad she was sitting away from her friends and they could neither hear her voice nor see her blush.

"I will. I love you, honey. Don't stay up all night with the girls."

"Don't try to make it sound fun, Chloe's here." That made Holly laugh softly. "I love you too, you nerd. Night."

After hanging up, Gail sat in the dark for a moment more. She could hear Traci and Chloe laughing about something and sighed. There was a funny ache in her chest, a hole where Holly usually sat. Even though they were just apart for a week, it was painful. She wanted Holly to just be around. But instead she had friends in the living room and Gail hauled herself to her feet to join them.

"Hey, she's back," cheered Chloe. "How's Holly?"
"Fine." Gail dropped onto the easy chair. 

With a glance at Gail, Chloe turned to Traci, "Is she always like this? Or is it just me?"

"Pretty much always," Traci confirmed. "She's sulky when she can't have what she wants. Wait till you're on a stakeout with her and there's no coffee."

Gail picked up her beer, joining the conversation. "I'm cutting down on coffee."

Both her friends stared at her. "You?" Traci was agog. "Wow, Holly's totally got you whipped."

Actually her therapist had suggested she cut down on the coffee, to try and sleep more. Or better. The list of things she was supposed to do was long and crazy and impossible. One of the items was to go to bed and get up at the same time every day. That wasn't possible given her job. So she started with cutting out hard alcohol and back on coffee.

"She doesn't drink hard liquor anymore either," pointed out Chloe.

Ever the shrewd one, Traci didn't say why out loud but asked, "Doing okay?" Gail shrugged and nodded. "Holly's good for you."

Gail looked down at her hands and sighed, "I think so."

"She's cute like this," Chloe remarked. "Are you still jealous?"

Rewinding multiple conversations in her head, Gail found the right one when she'd told Chloe she was jealous of being able to be herself all the time. "Less. You just know, though, and it's really annoying. Not fake."

"Thank you." They clinked their beer bottles together. "Do I get to ask personal questions? I mean, I'm kind of drunk in your living room and Traci's your friend..."

Gail rolled her eyes. "Whatever." She wasn't about to tell Chloe that she thought of her as a friend as well.

Traci was amused, "Its so cute, you're making friends." When Gail shook her fist, Traci laughed. "At least Andy's not here. She has this pathological obsession with 'I Never' and Gail threatened to use pepper spray on her if she brought it up again."

"Never have I ever used pepper spray on McNally's person. Intentionally." Hoisting her bottle, Gail smirked and took a sip.

"See that isn't fair! I sprayed her when we were cadets," complained Traci.

"We're not playing!" They all laughed though. "How're things with Steve?"

Traci's skin darkened. "Fine," she said too quickly. "Good... Gail I don't want to talk to you about your brother!"

"So I shouldn't ask if he's pleasing you-" Traci launched over from the couch and covered Gail's mouth, shrieking a no. Not that Gail and Steve talked about sex, ever. Pecks didn't. Gail wasn't even sure other Pecks actually had sex, except there were enough of them around to assure that they must.

Once the tussle was over, and Gail promised not to talk about Steve, Chloe remarked that Steve was cute. "But if I was going to date a Peck, it'd be Gail."
Silence. Both Traci and Gail stared at Chloe. "Me?"

"Gail?"

Chloe looked between them. "Well. Yeah. You're hot, Gail. That skin and the hair. And I bet you're great in bed."

"Ooooooookay, how drunk are you?" Gail forced herself to laugh, as if Chloe had said the most ridiculous thing ever.

"Not that drunk," grinned Chloe. "Besides, just because you're a lesbian doesn't mean I'm not allowed to be bi."

Gail blinked. "Oh." She thought about it for a moment and decided it made some sense. "Well. Dov is practically a woman," she allowed. "But I'm not drunk enough to talk about your sex life either, Princess." They moved on to other topics thankfully.

The second night on her own, Gail was presented with Chris, Dov, and pizza. They played video games for hours, which was fun enough. When Holly called at two AM, Gail was too sleepy to hold up her own conversation and they promised to call earlier on Sunday. That didn't happen, as Gail was called in to cover when the flu ran through the division. She ended up working doubles and collapsing in the bed at the end of the day.

At least the sheer exhaustion kept the nightmares at bay, even though she broke the rule about no more than three cups of coffee a day.

Tuesday night was different. Her phone rang at nine and Gail brightened to see Holly was FaceTiming her. "Hello, sexy," she grinned, turning off the TV. Holly's face was free of makeup, clearly freshly showered.

"Hello yourself. You look like you slept."

"I did." Gail felt any tension she'd had leftover from covering shifts drift away as she studied the tiny, pixelated face of the woman she lived with. "God, you're beautiful, Holly," Gail exhaled.

"You're just saying that because I'm thousands of miles away."

"I'm saying it because it's true." Gail rubbed her thumb along the side of her phone, wishing she could touch and kiss Holly right now.

There must have been something in her face making that obvious as Holly blushed. "Stop looking at me like that, honey. I'm supposed to go back out."

"Sorry." She wasn't sorry at all but in deference to Holly's plans, Gail changed the subject. "This place is weird without you here."

Holly laughed softly. "I feel the same way when you're working the night shift."

"I need to stop that," sighed Gail. "I like being a cop. You just make me want to stop screwing around."

With a smirk, Holly asked, "You sure about that?"

"I'm not screwing around with you, Stewart," laughed Gail. "Wouldn't mind some sweet lady loving, though."
Holly burst out laughing. "Who said that?"

"Bisexual Chloe Price, who says I'm hotter than my brother. She's just leapfrogged over Andy and Chris on my friend list."

Still laughing, Holly asked, "You rank them?"

"Of course. Ollie, Traci, Dov, Chloe, Chris, Andy."

"What about me, Steve, and Nick?"

Gail stuck her tongue out. "You are my best friend and my girlfriend. You aren't on the list. Steve is right up there with Oliver, and Nicholas can fuck himself. He's being weird again."

"That's never a good sign. Did he break up with that IA woman?"

"I'm not sure they we're actually dating," Gail grumbled. "Tonight, tomorrow, and tomorrow."

"Technically I'll be home before Thursday night. I have a direct flight."

"I know, I may have to pick you up in the cruiser."

"Kinky," smile Holly. "I could take a..." Her voice trailed off and her face fell.

"Taxi, Holly, you can say the word, but snowball in hell you're taking a taxi when I'm around." She knew on an intellectual level that Holly had taken a taxi to the hotel from the airport, but she didn't really want to think about it. It had been Holly's idea to turn on the 'Find My Friends' apps on their phone and track each other that way. That had helped as long as she didn't think about the phone not being with her.

Holly studied Gail's face in the phone. "I'm fine, honey. Don't worry." When Gail scowled Holly looked guilty. "Tall order. I know. Sorry."

"Stop being so Canadian," smiled Gail. "I love you."

They talked for an hour before Gail started to yawn and Holly ordered her to bed. Wednesday was Holly's turn to be drained, having spent the day running around Victoria meeting people. But Thursday...

Oliver got both edges of Gail's tongue at its sharpest when he asked her to stay later. As soon as the words 'pick up Holly' left her mouth, he relented but said he'd need her tomorrow. That wasn't Gail's plan. Her plan, her careful plan, was for picking up her girlfriend, eating, and then having three days where the world could take care of itself for a change. But Oliver made her a deal. She worked Friday, she stayed on days for the next two weeks instead of second shift.

That was a deal and Gail took it with both hands. There wasn't enough time to change after the argument, so Gail chucked her gear into the trunk and picked up Holly still wearing her uniform. The look on Holly's face seeing Gail in the uniform was worth the drive. Between the short hair and the uniform, Holly's buttons were clearly pushed in all the right ways.

Holly wanted to leave the luggage in the car, but Gail pointed out they both needed showers. That just made Holly complain she wasn't going to get to undress Gail, but she agreed to at least bring the luggage into the house. Food waited though. Definitely. Gail knew it was a little crazy, missing someone so much and craving their touch so much after just a week. But everything about this, about them, felt so right when they were together that the week dragged painfully.
Sweaty and satiated, Gail let her head rest on Holly's chest. Their legs were still threaded together, the sheets an absolute mess.

"I missed you too," Holly exhaled into Gail's hair, her hands lightly drifting up and down Gail's back. "I used to love those trips. See new places, eat new foods."

"Have sex with random people?" Holly pinched her side and Gail laughed, sliding off to lie on her side. "I'm kidding." She kissed Holly's arm, then shoulder, and then neck. With a pleased sigh, Holly slipped her arm under Gail and pulled her close.

Gail didn't care about who Holly had slept with before. They both had pasts and histories, but right now they had each other. And being here, being happy with her personal life, was still wonderful and novel to Gail. She never wanted to let it, or Holly, go.

Chapter End Notes

That's the end of Part 3 folks! Part 4 is Peck vs Peck. It's about to get really bad for people.

If you missed it, the chapter number got bumped to 80. That means part seven is complete and will be published. No it's not Ebola, that's part eight and yes it's also done. I don't know if you'll like where they go. But settle in, we have a long road!
Part 4: Peck vs Peck

I said there was a reason why the adoption was turned and the Visa was revoked. There was, as you learned, a Peck reason. But if you think that's the end of that situation, remember that Gail has not yet explained all that to Holly. And you may want to worry that Elaine may have more plans. Also, what's up with Bill?

Somewhat unrelated, if you have any thoughts about a crossover story with the folks from Motive, go to my blog and let me know at What's the Motive for a Crossover? Or just leave a review. I read them all!

"Hey, officers ..." Holly glanced over at her uniformed girlfriend, who was busy giving her rookie a short dress down about how to properly clear a scene. When Gail didn't answer, Holly checked again. Yep. "Officer Peck, can you call an ambulance?"

That got Gail's attention, "Dispatch, Peck 8727. We need an ambulance on scene."

"Copy. Status?"

At the reply, Gail looked at Holly, clearly lost. "This one's alive," Holly explained, pointing to the second body.

"Son of a ... Damn it, Gerald! Again?" She snarled and slapped her radio, "Dispatch, looks like one of our DBs is still alive. Dr. Stewart's on scene."

Even Holly could hear the laugh from dispatch. "Copy. We have Officer Moore's call at clearing the scene."

"Yeah, he missed one," snarled Gail. "You are really pissing me off, Gerald."

Even Holly knew the kid's name was Duncan, but Gail only called him that when he did something right. Which meant very rarely. It had become a joke at the lab, with everyone blaming 'Gerald' for all sorts of mishaps. "His pulse is very slow, Gail," demurred Holly, as Gail squatted beside her.

Gail pulled off her leather gloves and pulled on a rubber one to check the pulse herself. "Wow, okay, Duncan, it's not that bad." She had to move her hand around twice, and finally put an ear to his chest.

"He's not not-dead?" The rookie (Gail insisted he would always be a rookie, even if he was out of probation and a real, full, officer) walked up, confused.

"The word is alive, you moron," Gail corrected. "He's alive, but his heart and breathing are low..." She trailed off and stared at the younger man.

"Oh! He was probably drugged!"
A smile crossed Gail's face. "Better. Okay, you can pick lunch. Sandwiches or burgers?"

"Aren't burgers a sandwich, ma'am?"

Holly covered her mouth as Gail explained, laboriously, that they were not at all the same. While she chastised Duncan, Gail's attention remained on the not-dead guy, keeping track of his pulse and respiratory reactions.

The EMTs did not take overly long, in fact, they were surprisingly fast. They quickly loaded up the guy into their ambulance, entirely non chatty. Holly gave them all the information she could think of and was delighted (and turned on a bit) when Gail recited his vital stats. "Impressive, Officer," she smiled at Gail.

But Gail was staring at the EMTs. She'd gotten that way before at crime scenes, sometimes just when dealing with people. It was never her gut, Gail would tell Holly repeatedly, it was her observation skills. "Counting's easy," replied Gail, eyes on the ambulance. "Duncan, ask dispatch what number was the ambulance they sent."

The younger officer, fear of Gail well and truly placed in his heart, did so. "What's wrong," asked Holly, stepping behind Gail out of reflex.

"How do you load a body into an ambulance, Dr. Stewart? Head or feet first?"

What? The question was odd. "Head first. All the equipment is up there."

"Right." Her hand went to her gun. "Duncan."

"Ambulance 1321." All three looked at the ambulance. 973. Duncan reached for his gun, but Gail stayed him with a hand. "Do I ... Am I backup?"

"Yes. And you are staying with Dr. Stewart and her nerds, who are going to go behind their van until I draw my gun. If any one of them gets hurt, I will take it out on you personally. If anyone hits the ground, cuff them." Without looking back, without drawing her gun, Gail walked up to the ambulance. The driver's door was open. "Hey, quick question," she said, smiling far too brightly.

Beside her, Duncan called in a request for backup, stumbling over an explanation that the ambulance on scene was not the one sent. "License plate," Holly whispered, and he quickly read that off.

"Doctor ma'am, you need to go back to your van," he said, carefully. Duncan was slow to learn, but he was also terrified of Gail.

Stepping back, slowly, Holly looked at the ambulance and saw Gail's hand wrap slowly around the handle of her gun. Oh dear god. She inched back to forensics. "Everyone needs to step behind the van," she said, as calmly as possible.

When Gail's very loud cop voice cut into the air, everyone moved. "Hands. On your head. Now!"

Holly couldn't help but watch as Gail, gun out, was shouting at the driver. She was a step away from the door, out of his arm's reach, and he lunged to close the door. Gail was faster, jamming her shoulder in and lashing out with her left hand. It was over in an instant. Gail threw the man twice her size out of the ambulance and onto the ground. Her partner did as he'd been told and grabbed the man and cuffed him. Holly knew it was all momentum and angles, but damn it was impressive.

Gail was in the ambulance, gun still out, before Holly could blink. "Don't even think about it. Hands up." The keys flew out of the van. "Open the back. Hands on your head. That's it. Step out easy..."
The second fake EMT laboriously climbed out of the ambulance. "On your knees." He complied, and a moment later, Gail emerged from the back of the ambulance to cuff him.

It was amazing.

That night, after making sure Gail was physically fine, Holly intended to shower her with what she decided was 'appreciation sex.' After a while of kissing rather frantically on the bed, Gail trapped Holly in a hug, "Hey, baby, I'm not knocking the sex, but hang on a minute." She exhaled, catching her breath. "You okay?"

Holly put her head on Gail's chest. "I'm not freaking out," she promised. "I... Wasn't scared at all. You had everything under control. It was..." Holly looked up. "You are a fucking bad ass, Gail Peck!"

"Oh. Yes." Gail looked like this was anything but news to her.

Holly swatted Gail's arm. "Moron. I mean you were amazing. You saw everything! You got Duncan to do the right things, which is a miracle, and you arrested those guys! It's crazy!" She squirmed until she could sit up on Gail's thighs. "My girlfriend is a hero."

"You're not scared because you saw me be a cop?" Gail sounded incredulous.

"Well. Yes. No. I'm scared in a different way, I guess." Holly tried to take measure of her thoughts. "Parlay."

Gail screwed up her face. "Are we pirates?"

Right, she'd not used that with Gail before. "I'm going to think this out loud, okay, so don't freak out and climb up a tree."

Dryly, Gail pointed out the obvious. "You're sitting on my legs, Holly. No trees."

"Hush." Holly smiled and pushed her hair back. "Parlay means I get to talk without you judging me or interrupting. And you have to let me work it out, out loud, without getting mad." Gail quirked her eyebrows but nodded. "Okay. I was... I am afraid of you getting hurt. I'm afraid of you ending up in the hospital or dying. You have an insanely dangerous job. But." Holly exhaled. "You are careful. You're meticulous. You think things through, you make plans, and you achieve goals. I've never seen anyone sort out things like that, especially crime like that. You saw what was wrong, you fixed it. It was amazing and smart and I'm not afraid of you doing something stupid." She paused and added, "Now Duncan..."

"Gerald has the IQ of a turnip," grumbled Gail.

"That's unkind to turnips." They giggled. "Seeing you be a cop makes me less worried about you being a cop."

Gail rubbed her hands on Holly's thighs, looking thoughtful. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Yeah, okay. I get it." She smiled and reached up to grab Holly's shirt. "I am a fucking badass cop who is super smart, and you think it's sexy. Just wait'll I'm in Major Crimes."

Holly let herself be pulled onto Gail. "But I like how you look in your uniform," she faux pouted, moving her hands up Gail's shirt.
"I like you in your glasses," Gail noted, and took them off Holly's face. "But I like you out of them too."

"There's a problem," Oliver said slowly. "You can't go."

"I failed?" Gail was horrified and angry. There was no way she possibly failed. She studied her ass off. She'd scored her second highest personal score on the damn target shoot. She'd nailed the stupid skills assessment where she had to pretend the fake situation was real, and she did it without using her gun.

"No!" Oliver held up his hands. "Are you kidding? Darling, I watched your practical test. Everyone said you were amazing!"

Gail growled, "For a Peck, I bet." That caused Oliver to hesitate. "I'd change my damn name if that would do anything." According to her family, anything less than perfect was a failure.

"No, no. They ... You. Okay, don't hit me." He fidgeted with the paper on his desk. "They said you were better than the other Pecks and wondered if you guys have a mock up at home."

That was different. "Yes, Oliver." She kept her voice deadpan. "I built a smaller version in the bathroom." God, people were idiots. "So what's actually wrong?"

"I'm not supposed to have this so you never saw it, alright?" He held out the paper. Pending review... What the hell? Gail's eyes went to the letterhead and she felt her blood pressure rise. From the desk of Peck. Her mother's desk. Her mother was calling for a review of personal skills. "Now, Gail, don't do something reckless." She didn't. She stared at the letter and re-read it again. "I already called her office and her secretary will get her to call me back-"

"Not until at least two. Probably later." It was one PM, on Wednesday. Elaine was in the staff meeting with the west side stations. She put the paper down on Oliver's desk. After the meetings, Elaine was going to have a late lunch at her desk and catch up, remembered Gail. She'd be in her office until a quarter after two, unless something came up. Then Elaine had meetings until four.

"Thank you."

"Darling, I know you want this. You'll get it. Don't worry, I'm in your corner."

"It's fine, Oliver." She could feel her walls growing taller. But yelling at Oliver wouldn't help. Gail pushed her hair out of her face. "Can I go? Price is waiting for me."

"Are you sure you're alright?"

"Yeah, fine, it'll get sorted out," she tried to put an acceptable smile on her face and walked out, forming her plan. She would start after shift.

There was a text from Oliver, which she hadn't been able to answer let alone read, and another from Gail (ditto), which really demonstrated how busy she was today. So when someone knocked on the door, Holly felt her snap should have been excused. "If you're here about the Crenshaw case, I am still processing the bodies, and no, I cannot possibly make it go any faster."

The male voice replied, "I'm not here about a case."

That was weird enough that Holly looked up at the man. An officer. No, an Inspector. Her eyes drifted to his name tag. Peck. Oh shit. She looked up and saw a hauntingly familiar facial shape.
Unlike Elaine, this man was entirely soft. Craggier, with beard and hair already gone to grey, she saw Gail at her tiredest in this man's face. That said, Holly hoped she'd never see Gail look as distant as her father looked now.

She cleared her voice. "Inspector Peck." Bill. William H. Peck. She knew his name. His middle name, even, was Harold.

"Dr. Stewart." Unlike Elaine, Bill wore his discomfort openly. He did not wish to be here and had no interest in befriending Holly or getting to know her. Holly had never seen anyone look that soft and that aloof before. "I'll make this brief. This Thursday is our normal family dinner. It would be ... good if you could perhaps persuade Gail to come." He paused. "With you."

Every time Holly thought she understood Peck drama they went and changed it. That was impressively awkward. "Uh huh, that's not... Why are you asking me this?" It was surprisingly hard not to call him 'sir' but Holly had no intention of deferring to this man. Not now.

"Because my daughter hasn't replied to my phone calls since she moved in with you." How he managed to make that sound like an insult, Holly had no idea. It was a skill Gail shared, turning the mundane into something bitchy, but never like this. Gail was crabby and snarky, but you got the impression she was entertained by everything. Her father looked like he quite honestly hated everyone.

But Gail had coached Holly on dealing with her parents, telling her to be firm and tell them she wasn't getting involved. Elaine was power hungry, Bill was angry at not living up to his ex-Peck-tations (sometimes called Peckspectations), and both should be avoided. Gail's advice, which Steve supported, was to let the Pecks be Pecks and not pick a fight.

Of course, Gail wasn't the only one who didn't follow orders well. "Then maybe you'd better hunt her down. I'm not your errand girl." It was possible that Gail would be elated at the comeback. Holly knew Gail wasn't talking to her parents at the moment, and said she wouldn't until they apologized and accepted her making her own life choices.

Inspector Peck huffed, much the same way his children did when they were frustrated and uncomfortable. "I apologize." He didn't sound sorry at all and Holly filed the tone away as matching the one Gail made when she wasn't sorry at all for calling people by insulting nicknames. "Can we talk?" He gestured at her office.

Holly frowned and did not remove her gloves. "This is where I work, Inspector. While you and your wife seem to be cavalier about blurring the lines, I am not. You can talk to your own daughter. I'll tell her you're looking for her, but if you can't tell, I'm busy."

The Inspector lingered a moment, and then nodded. "I see. Excuse me, Doctor."

After he left, and after she actually finished her work, Holly picked up her phone. The text from Oliver was a warning that Gail would be in a bad mood. The one from Gail was that she'd be home late. Holly hesitated and sent Gail a text.

*Everything okay?*

There was no reply right away but she knew Gail was on patrol today. That meant Gail's phone was often off or set to silent. Holly went back to her samples until the phone buzzed again.

*Peck stuff*

Oh. Good. Maybe she was talking to her father already and Holly could conveniently forget the
conversation. She tapped out three words.

*I love you*

The reply was two words.

*That helps*

Holly smiled and went back to work. When she got home the garage was empty. True to her word, Gail didn't arrive home until almost two hours later. Holly had already made pasta and was contemplating the pasta sauce when Gail walked in from the garage.

"Perfect timing, honey. Alfredo or tomato?" When Gail explained her allergy only extended to raw tomatoes, Holly called it a sensitivity and quickly cut uncooked tomatoes from her repertoire. The one time she'd had a salad with raw tomatoes and kissed Gail, the rash had taken two days to stop itching and Gail had been exceptionally grumpy the whole time. But cooked tomatoes, in sauce, were generally safe.

"Alfredo," sighed Gail. Holly looked over and saw her girlfriend wearing a rundown expression. She fell onto the couch, leaving her work bag by the door.

Bad day. "How did it go with your father?"

Gail blinked. "Dad? I haven't talked to him in months... Actually I'm avoiding his judgmental homophobia." She looked nervous for a moment, "I swear I'm not up a tree with it, I'm just mad at him and I don't want to talk until I can figure out how to do it and not shout at him."

"Oh." Holly frowned. "He came by my lab."

And Gail's face tightened. "What did dear old Dad want?"

"Me to get you to come to dinner on Thursday." A pause. "Us."

Gail snorted and sunk into the couch, "Don't worry about it, girlfriend. That offer is about to be rescinded."

Holly frowned, but served up two plates of pasta. "Come here, eat, explain this to me."

Sluggishly, Gail rolled off the couch and sat at the island. They rarely ate at the table. "I aced the exam," she started, picking up her fork.

"That's great news!" Holly beamed at her girlfriend, knowing better than anyone how hard Gail had worked. Hours of running, studying, target practice, reading, and exercising. Once Gail had explained there was a practical part to the exam, Holly had understood the shift in exercise priority. There could be no screw ups, Gail insisted, if she was going to do this. It had to be done right, it had to be done cleanly, and above all, publicly. So why was Gail looking so pained. "Not great?"

"My *mother* spiked me."

Cold water splashed over the room. "Sorry, she what?"

Gail took a bite, swallowed, and said, "Approval pending review. From the desk of Staff Superintendent Elaine Peck." She resumed eating, as if this horrifying fact had been expected.

"She can do that?"
"Apparently so." Gail paused and tapped Holly's plate with her fork. "Hey. Eat. I'm even eating your zucchini things." She stole one off Holly's plate for good measure.

Eating gave her time to think about the situation. Gail's father wanted Gail (and Holly) to come to the Peck Monthly dinner. Both Peck siblings had skipped the last one, with Gail simply telling her mother she wasn't going and taking Holly on a double date with Steve and Traci instead. That had been surprisingly fun. There was no talk about parents, though the Pecks had used ASL at the table a couple times until Holly threatened to withhold sex.

One could assume then that Inspector Dad Peck wanted Gail to come over in order to discuss things. And one could also assume that Gail had something happen in-between the time her father talked to Holly and the time she came home that would make that unnecessary. That would mean Gail talked to her mother. Probably in person. And probably about the whole turfing of Gail's transfer.

"What did you say to your mother?"

"Nothing, I went to IA," Gail said calmly.

Internal Affairs. Holly dropped her fork. "You did what?"

"I talked to Frank first." Gail's old sergeant had been transferred and found a home in Major Crimes, which Gail had noted could only help her. He knew what kind of cop and person she was. "He and I talked to his Inspector and they said there wasn't anything they could do." She ate more pasta, "Sounded familiar, right?"

"Disturbingly."

"Well. Then I called in some favors, made sure this was just Mother, and filed a complaint with IA that she was impeding my career needlessly and with unfounded allegations as to my abilities." With that, Gail finished her pasta.

"Jesus," whispered Holly. "Are you insane? You just sic'd IA on your own mother!"

"Just cause." Gail was insane. Insane and calm. "I should probably warn Steve..." She pulled her phone out and started texting.

Holly gibbered. She actually exploded with nonexistent words. "Gail!"

Looking up from her phone, Gail frowned, "I know what I did, Holly. Either she gets suspended or I do." The phone went down onto the counter and Gail sighed, "I did think about this. All day. They weren't going to tell me about it till Friday. Frank slipped Oliver the note, so ... I got a jump on it. It's going to be fine."

There was no universe where a daughter essentially suing her mother was fine. Holly wanted to scream. "How is this fine? What if they fire you?"

Her phone buzzed and Gail glanced at it briefly. "I found out why Social Services watched the Perik interview," she said flatly.

Holly felt herself pale. No. Screwing up her face in a very Gail expression of annoyance, Holly said two words. "Your mother?"

Her girlfriend confirmed Holly's fears, "Apparently she said I'd be unfit due to trauma. Spiked that too."
Holly blurted, "Why the hell would she do that?"

Gail looked beyond sad and torn about what she was about to say, "It gets worse." When Holly was unable to speak, Gail went on looking at the table and Holly knew this was about to be way worse. "She turfed your Visa, in part because you don't want kids and she thought you'd stop me. Having a kid alone would throw off her master plan. When that didn't stop me, and I guess when we didn't get back together right away, she pushed the trauma angle."

Rage. This was what rage felt like. Her hands, her whole body, was shaking. "She had my Visa pulled... How-" that someone would go this far to force her daughter to her own path was nearly incomprehensible to Holly. But now little conversations made more sense. "How long have you known?"

"I suspected when she waylaid you," confessed Gail. "She dropped hints when I told her I was moving in, but I couldn't be sure until I talked to IA."

So Gail kept this a secret from before they'd moved in together. "I don't know who I'm more pissed at, Gail," whispered Holly, closing her eyes. She was shaking. How was Gail not shaking, or raging?

"Sorry." And Gail actually did sound sorry. "I should have talked to you. I just— I had this moment, this window where I could get in front of her stupid…"

"Machinations," offered Holly, pressing her fingers to the bridge of her nose.

"That," agreed Gail. "I should have told you about the Visa thing when I suspected it."

"I think I might punch your mother if I saw her."

"Don't hold off on my account." Gail sighed. "I don't know why I'm not mad at my mother, to be honest." When Holly didn't say anything, Gail went on. "I should be mad at her, but I'm not. I'm just... I'm sad, Holly." And Gail sounded intensely depressed.

Opening her eyes, Holly saw Gail was silently crying. It was a strange ability Gail had, the silent cry. The first time it had happened was at a crime scene where a police officer Gail knew had died. Her voice had been perfectly normal, but Holly saw the tears pouring down her face. They hadn't even been dating then and had just been at the batting cages level of a relationship.

Since then, Gail had cried a few more times. The only time it had been audible was the time in the living room when the panic attack swallowed her whole. Even then, it was remarkably quiet for someone wracked with sobs. Most of Gail's freak outs were quiet. Even the nightmares were, generally, quiet. Gail had explained the one in Holly's guest room was because it was a strange place, combined with the Oxy. Waking up fuzzy headed, in the dark, in a strange room was synergistic.

It hurt Holly to think about, because she made a logical inference. Her girlfriend had never once felt safe enough to express emotion. What the hell had happened to Elaine Peck? Or Bill Peck? Gail smiled softly at Holly and touched her hand. "I know what you're thinking, Doctor."

"Oh?" Holly bit her lip.

"If I'm this repressed, what's wrong with my parents."

Holly sighed and squeezed Gail's hand. "How do you do that? The mind reading and memorizing what I say is creepy."
"I can only read your mind." She lifted Holly's hand to her mouth and kissed it lightly. "And I don't know why she's like this. But she's always been power hungry."

"Power mad," muttered Holly and she slid off her stool to hug Gail. "What she did was illegal as hell." Which explained why Gail took it to IA. It was the only way.

After a moment, Gail coughed. "Baby, my face is in your boobs."

Pursing her lips, Holly let go. "This better be the only time you say that like its a bad thing."

"Yes, ma'am." Gail kept her hands on Holly's hips. "This is gonna suck, you know."

"I know."

"You may get pulled in..."

"Honey, your father already showed up at my lab." She kissed Gail's forehead. "Jesus, your mother killed a job for me already!" Holly closed her eyes and put her cheek to Gail's head, finding her words. "I actually thought about all this before we got back together. The way I see it, Toronto can't function without me but if they screw with you, we can move to Montréal, or Vancouver. Or... Calgary!" Babbling. She was babbling again.

"If you're looking for the most murders, it's Winnipeg."

Holly paused and opened her eyes, "Winnipeg?"

"Canada's murder and violent crime capital. Montréal is good, though. More like Toronto and Steve's French sucks so we can make fun of him a lot."

"You," smiled Holly, "Are an impressive fountain of police knowledge." Gail returned the smile and Holly cupped her face with her hands. "We will make it through this. But." Gail arched her eyebrows. "Next time you decide to do something like this, please talk to me first."

She leaned in and kissed Gail softly. "I promise," whispered Gail, her hands tightening on Holly's hips. They kissed again, a little deeper. "Just one thing." Holly made a questioning noise before kissing Gail again. "Are you going to finish your pasta?"
Chapter Notes

Ex-Peck-tations

When things go to the line, you find out who was on your side all along. Gail told Gerald people liked her better than him because she did her job well. Gail was not wrong. By the way... does anyone wonder how Elaine got that way?

Gail had been wrong about her or her mother being suspended. Both Peck women were suspended, with pay, pending allegations. Gail was cleared first but required to stay on desk duty. Her mother was not allowed to return to work, taking a forced vacation, and Gail was permitted to work the streets again though not as a T.O. which was fine. With her future in mind, she'd planned to take a break from that.

The silence from her family was deafening. Only Steve would talk to her at first. Surprisingly, her godfather had asked to come over and meet Holly, and had been nice about everything. He apologized for her parents, which Gail told him not to do. They were adults. Stupid adults. Al thanked her for helping with Duncan, which Gail accepted. Then he apologized to Holly for the impending storm. The Peck-Storm, as Gail put it, had been large and loud, but not many drops landed anywhere near Holly. Even Gail was at a loss as to why that was the case, but suggested they take advantage of it.

The division was a mess. No one knew what to say to Gail, or to Holly, and most people just avoided them or pretended they knew nothing. As more information trickled out, however, Gail found herself the unwilling recipient of apologies. So many people had just assumed she'd ridden on Peck coattails, the truth of her situation, that five years had been 100% Gail, won her friends. She didn't really like it but she accepted it for what it was. They needed a Peck hero and it was her. Her mother had not been loved, which Gail knew, but it was a shock to find out that she was appreciated. Liked, even. That was decidedly less fun, as Gail didn't like people well enough to want to socialize.

Finally though, it was settled. Surprisingly quietly, the war just stopped. Elaine stepped down as Staff Superintendent. It was a demotion, everyone knew it, but to the news it was an inspiring move to let fresh, young, blood take over the duties. To have the person in charge of ethics and professionalism investigated for meddling with her own daughter's career as well as the international scandal of Holly's Visa would have been a bloodbath, and hurt the entirety of police in Toronto.

Of course, so would have having her daughter be fired. And while everyone acted like it was all over, Gail knew there was one fight left. She didn't look forward to SIU poking the bear again but this time she knew it was fine for her. Gail took it in stride, as well as the news that she'd have to wait at least three months to start with Major Crimes as a uniformed assignee. It wasn't quite what she'd wanted but it was better than the alternatives. And no more Peck dinners.

Oliver had been impressed at her maturity. "I thought you were going to shoot your own mother," he admitted over an illicit lamb schwarma lunch. Celery had been on his case about red meat and enlisted Gail's help. In response, Gail continued to feed Oliver real food. And candy.

"Can you imagine the paperwork?" Gail smirked.
"All I'm saying, darling, is I'm proud of you." When Gail eyed him skeptically, he shrugged. "You did it right. You did it smart. And it's okay."

Gail sighed and swirled a fry in the ketchup aioli sauce. "I thought everyone would take her side, you know."

"Not a chance. Not Fifteen." He smiled at her and stole a fry. "You, Gail Peck, are awesome."

"You, Oliver Shaw, are a fry thief!"

But he was also right.

Steve was elated on many levels too. "Gail," he cheerfully bounded up to her a week later. "Do you know what today is, my most dearest sister in the universe?"

"Thursday?" She slung her bag onto her shoulder, walking out of the changing room with Andy. Sam was out of town for most of the week and Gail had felt a small amount of sympathy for the chronically lovelorn McNally. A quick check with Holly and a legit girls night was on.

"Third Thursday of the month."

They shared a look and laughed. "Steven Peck, I am fairly confident that I will never be invited to another family dinner again. You on the other hand, have the possibility of being a productive breeder."

"Not gonna happen. Least wanted number two pointed out having Dad in the same building might be construed as mommy trying to pressure us through him. He's over in 27 now. Ba-bam! Captain of the Universe delivers!"

Gail smirked, "If you can get Dad investigated, I'm sure you'll win the top spot, brother of mine." Andy looked worried. "Don't worry, McNally, this is normal for us."

"I should go," Andy started and Gail looped her arm through her friend's.

"Absolutely not. You, missy, are putting your shit in my car and we are going to have drinks and then you're spending the night in my guest room." She wiggled her fingers at Steve and hauled Andy off.

When Holly got home, Gail and Andy were tipsy, but laughing. Gail hadn't been drunk in a rather long time and found she didn't miss it. Two drinks was her limit, depending on the drink, and if everyone wanted to blame it on Holly and not Gail growing up, well, that was okay.

Holly had a sour look on her face, alas, and both Andy and Gail noticed. "How quiet is the guest room?" Andy's voice was low.

"If we start shouting, you'll hear it," sighed Gail, and she traipsed upstairs to check on her girlfriend. "Holly?"

"I'm fine," replied Holly from the bathroom. "I'll be down in a minute."

Gail hesitated and listened to the noises. Crying. "I'm coming in."

The door opened and a frustrated Holly scowled. "Seriously Gail, what if I was on the toilet?" She was sitting on the edge of the tub, having been crying into a towel.

"News flash, I've seen you pee before." The scowl stayed in place. "I'm sure Andy will have no
problem going to read in the guest room, baby. Or you can come downstairs and pick a movie for us to watch." She reached out and brushed the back of her hand on Holly's cheek. "Or you can come talk to us or stay here and talk to me."

Holly looked down, "Work sucks." She did not want to talk.

"Bad case?"

But Holly shook her head. "Peck Storm." Gail winced and tentatively reached over to Holly, who fell into her arms. Okay. Good. "I have to talk to SIU."

"Yeah, I kinda expected that." In fact she'd warned Holly about the likelihood.

"I know, but I was hoping." Holly sighed.

"It's okay, Holly. Just tell them the truth."

Holly sighed again and pressed her face into Gail's shoulder. "Can I sit on the couch with you?"

Gail smiled, "Baby, this is our home. If you want to sit on the couch naked and eat ice cream, Andy will just have to cope."

While they did sit on the couch, they ate popcorn and were fully clothed.

She had known, they had both known, that Holly was going to be called in about the Peck Storm. Neither had been looking forward to it but Holly was thankful they called her in first. The waiting had made her start eating antacids like candy. Gail had explained that since, technically, Holly was a civilian, SIU was going to be involved and the odds were that they all had worked with a Peck at least once.

Even though IA had cleared Gail and soft-suspended Elaine, the investigation went right to hell because of Sophie and Holly. Gail had been very apologetic, to the point of not sounding like Gail at all. She swore she never meant to hurt Holly with this and would move anywhere if they had to. With more bravado than she felt, Holly told Gail it would be fine.

She checked her clothes one last time before knocking on the office door in her own building. Gail warned her that SIU didn't have their own offices and liked you to feel at home. She'd also explained that her own last experience with SIU ended with her being suspended and nearly losing her badge for improperly searching someone, resulting in a death.

Holly didn't find it comforting.

"Come in." The woman sat at the desk as if it was her own and not Holly's boss's.

"I'm Dr. Stewart," offered Holly, and found herself gestured to sit in the chair.

"Under most other circumstances, I would say it's a pleasure." The woman did not seem to be lying, "I'm Sarah Mills." She looked at the papers and frowned a little. "You're living with Officer Peck?"

Holly swallowed and nodded. "Yes."

Sarah sighed, "Please tell her I say hello."

"Uh, sure," agreed Holly, highly confused.
Sarah flipped on her camera, focusing it on Holly. "This is Sarah Mills, investigating allegations of misconduct and abuse of power of Staff- excuse me, of Superintendent Elaine Marie Peck. Please state your full name and profession for the record."

"Dr. Holly Stewart." She paused. "I don't have a middle name. I'm a senior forensic pathologist for the Toronto Police Department."

Sarah smiled thinly. "Dr. Stewart, last April you put in notice to leave this job. Is that correct?"

"Yes," confirmed Holly. There was silence so she elaborated. "I had a job offer to be a assistant chief pathologist in San Francisco, which never happens to someone my age, so I took the job." She bit her lip, realizing she was rambling. Gail warned her not to do that.

"You don't have to be afraid, Dr. Stewart," Sarah said, calmly. "You're not being investigated, you're just a witness."

But Gail was being investigated. As was her mother. "I'm sorry," Holly tried not to laugh nervously. "I'm just... Not used to this."

"Count yourself lucky." The dry humor made Holly feel better. This woman was like the SIU version of Gail. Or maybe what Gail wanted to be on some level. "You took the job in San Francisco in April but it was rescinded. Can you explain what happened?"

Holly nodded. "They called me a week after I took the job, and told me there was a hang up with my Visa application. I thought it was just something silly, paperwork with a crossed 'i' or something. Dotted 't' you know? We both thought it would be fine and went on with the whole process. But then the consulate called and said my application was rejected. I didn't understand why, since I haven't committed any crimes. I never even shoplifted." It was still frustrating.

"Did you find out why?"

"Labor certification." Holly had felt it was bullshit at the time, since she had a very specialized job. But all her appeals and arguments had been shot down.

They discussed the semantics of that, briefly, and Sarah took notes. "In the investigation regarding Superintendent Peck, it came to light that she used her ties with a resource in immigration to raise concerns to your viability." Holly winced. "You're aware of this?"

Holly nodded. Gail had put it more baldly, stating her mother asked a family friend to do a deep background check on Holly, which had sent up red flags. When the US had asked for information, Canada simply denied access to some of the records and that scared them off. "Yes, Gail- Officer Peck told me. She asked."

With that, Sarah moved on to ask about their relationship. She determined Holly had wanted Gail to move with her, to get away from the Pecks. They talked about how much Holly knew about the IA case. While Holly had been at many a trial, this was the first time she'd been nervous about anything work related.

But Sarah made it pretty easy, as much as it could be, to talk about the very odd situation. Had Holly felt pressured by Pecks other than Elaine? When Holly said yes, she'd had to run down the list, which included Gail's father and a few cousins. Who had been more on her side? Gail had, of course, and so had Steve, but so had the chief of police. That made Sarah smirk. The other aspects of the case were just facts Holly had known. Sarah had no new revelations, just confirmation as to what Gail had suspected and theorized.
When it was over, Sarah turned off the video and studied Holly thoughtfully. "This is the first time I've had to investigate a pathologist," she mused. "Police officers are usually more defensive."

"Gail prepped me." She still wasn't sure exactly how good this was. How well it went was a mystery to Holly.

"She's grown a great deal in two years," smiled Sarah. "Did she tell you I was her investigator?" When Holly's eyes widened, the smile grew. "But you know the case?" That Holly nodded at, dumbfounded. "I asked to interview you. I thought, since I knew Gail and used to work with her mother, I'd know if you were..." Sarah pursed her lips. "I worried you were Elaine's plant. Sabotage. Make sure Gail did what she wanted."

"Never," snapped Holly. Her constant anger at Elaine surprised her. The woman nearly ruined her career and while she was grateful to have Gail back, it had come at a price for both of them.

Sarah closed her notebook. "So I see. Thank you, Dr. Stewart."

Letting herself out, Holly exhaled so hard she shuddered. She pulled her phone out and smiled, seeing Gail had texted her an 'I love you' at some point. She tapped a reply.

_I survived._

_I knew you would. I'm on patrol._

_Fun. I'm going to try and actually get work done._

_I'll try find you a dead body. Chloe okay for you?_

Holly laughed, feeling tension ebb from her body, and pulled on her lab coat.

Eight year olds didn't really understand life. "You promised!"

"I know I did, but I have to go to the hearing."

"But you promised to take me to the game!"

Gail sighed and squatted by Sophie. "Sophie, I'm really sorry. They changed the date and I have to go."

"So make them change it back!"

"I can't. We can go to another game-"

"There won't be another game! This is the only time they play all year, and it's the last game! I hate you!" And Sophie sprinted up the stairs to her room, slamming the door.

That was a first for Gail and she was stunned. "She's eight, Gail, it's okay. They changed the date and I have to go."

"I still feel like an ass," grumbled Gail and she stood up.

"For what? Having to sort out your mother's insanity? I can't believe it's going to trial."

"It's all going to be internal." The volume of people who had to recuse themselves from the investigation and deliberation was insanely high. Gail was shocked they had enough people to
convene an internal tribunal.

Noelle touched Gail's shoulder. "I'll talk to her."

That actually hurt. Gail kept her face together, but those four words pummeled her hard. She had worked so hard to keep Sophie in her life, she'd forgotten that she'd given the girl a family with parents who cared about her, cared for her. Loved her. And now Gail wasn't needed the same way anymore.

"Thanks," she nodded at Noelle, and went to her car.

One of the few wise things her mother had ever told her was that she shouldn't look back on her life in 30 years and think that she hadn't done enough. Of course, Elaine was talking about her career, but Gail thought about it with Holly and with Sophie. Would she look back in another 29 years to think she should have had children? That Holly wasn't enough?

Holly did not want children now, possibly ever. She'd made that plain. And Gail chose Holly. Or more, she fell back into Holly, just as she'd fallen into her orbit before. Falling for Holly was an accident. It changed her life and her very being. It changed how she saw the world and opened it up for things she never thought could be. Even when she thought she'd lost Holly, she didn't stop changing and growing. It was late, but Gail finally understood what everyone else was about when it came to liking people.

But was that enough? And was it fair that she hadn't chosen this? They'd fallen together because of Gail's mother's idiocy. Her delusional ideas of grandeur and misguided machinations ruined their original plans and yet...

Gail pulled into the garage. Their garage. Once they planned for Gail to move in, Holly had sorted through miles of sports junk to make actual room. Anything Holly still played stayed, but the skis and kayak went. The house itself had pictures of both of them, alone and together. The office had been repainted and reorganized to make room for Gail's gun collection, locked safely away. The downstairs had been moved around, bringing the TV out of the back room and making that an actual guest room, to keep people away from the guns. The living room and dining room were so spacious, it hardly mattered. Gail's video games were organized onto shelves, while her DVDs sorted with Holly's; Gail had the original Star Wars and the remastered, Holly the HD, and they kept all three sets.

But. But. Gail put her head on the steering wheel and sighed. Why was life so complicated? Was there even a right or wrong choice to be made here? She wanted to be with Holly, she knew that beyond a doubt. She wanted this life with her, and a career, and there would be sacrifices. If that meant a choice between no children or raising children like her parents had done, then so be it. There would be no children. She wanted to walk to her future with Holly beside her.

The darkness suddenly lifted, literally, when the garage door went back up and Holly pulled in. Gail waved a hand, but kept her head on the steering wheel.

Holly put her bag inside the house and then opened the passenger door to sit with Gail, not even asking what was wrong. Turning to look at Holly, Gail smiled. "I love you," she told her girlfriend.

"I love you too." When Gail held a hand out, Holly took it and caressed Gail's knuckles with her thumb. And she did not ask what happened.

So Gail told her about Sophie and how it felt to have been replaced. "It's right next to when you said you were seeing someone else," sighed Gail. "Only this is a good thing for her."
Holly's hand remained in hers, and the woman looked thoughtful. "But you're thinking of maybes and being replaced."

"I was never going to be her mom."

"And neither is Noelle, honey."

Gail sighed. "I know." She squeezed Holly's fingers. "I want to be here forever." And the truth hit her. This was the right choice, the right decision. To be with Holly was right for Gail and she would regret nothing in 30 or 50 years.

"In the garage?" Holly looked around dubiously and Gail smiled.

"Nerd. I want to be here, with you, forever. If you get a job in Winnipeg or Montréal or Budapest, I want to be with you."

Holly smiled that crooked grin of hers. "Is this a Greys Anatomy 'pick me' moment?"

"Only if you're about to tell me you have a secret wife."

"Hm. No." Holly brought Gail's hand to her lips and kissed them. "No trees, huh?"

Gail shook her head. "I want to build a treehouse, so we can hide up there from everyone forever."

She finally lifted her head up and leaned across the gear shift to kiss Holly.

"I'll bring a rope ladder," smiled Holly.

"I don't get how resigning fixes everything. Or anything."

"Early retirement in a year. And it doesn't," replied Steve. "It doesn't even mean a damn thing, but it gets it away."

Holly grumbled and tasted the frosting. It needed more tequila. "And that's it? She retires or resigns or whatever and I let it go and it's over?"

"Pretty much."

"I hate it."

The snort from the man in her kitchen showed he shared her feelings on the matter. "Holly, I know it's crazy and weird, but ... What else can we do? Sue for damages? Mom's losing *everything*. Me, Gail, her career." He paused, seeming to know something more but leaving it out. "She'll never get to know you or Traci, and if any of us have kids, she won't get them either."

"I guess," sighed Holly. "She could have ruined my life. Gail could have been fired."

"Never gonna happen. Too many people like the cop Gail's becoming." He was so firm about it, it was startling.

Holly looked at the cake batter Steve was working on and stuck a finger in. "Salt, Steve. It needs a tablespoon."

"Crap, thanks." He carefully added the amount, looking as concerned as Gail did when trying something new. "Thanks for letting me do this here. I want to surprise Traci."
It was Traci's thirty-second birthday. Steve, following the daunting move by his kid sister to move in with her girlfriend, had begun to broach the topic with his slightly more reserved one. Seeing as the last man Traci lived with had died saving Gail, Holly found it downright weird that she was even considering it with Steve. But love was love, she admitted, and when Steve enlisted her help to make lollipop cakes to spell out 'move in with me' she'd found it romantic.

Neither of them had told Gail, who was working anyway. Holly had felt Gail had enough on her plate and would just grumble about a party. "When's Gail due back? I don't want her to drink the frosting."

"She left ten minutes before you got here. Why aren't we doing this at your place?"

"Because Traci has a key, and she'd think something was up if I asked her not to come over. It was you or Andy for baking, and Andy cooks worse than Gail does."

It wasn't the first time she'd heard one of their friends tease Gail about drinking or not being a decent cook. And maybe it was because of the crap with Elaine, but Holly no longer felt like the proud secret keeper of Gail's amazing skills. She was annoyed. "Steve," growled Holly. "What the hell?"

The man startled and looked at Holly, confused. "What?"

"Gail can cook. She doesn't get wasted. Why does everyone treat her like she's some irresponsible child?"

Steve put the bowl down and was honestly surprised. "I don't know why they do it..." His face tightened and he seemed to skip over an explanation. "Gail scared our parents, I picked up on that."

"What? With all this? Come on, Steve. They started this shit!"

"No, when she was in kindergarten. I don't know what happened, but ... Before then, Mom doted on Gail. She was this perfect kid who never did anything wrong. And it was cool to me. I had this awesome kid sister and she and I were gonna be champions of the universe." He hesitated, "I really remember this ... I came home from school and they were sitting around the table looking all serious. Dad looked scared. Actually scared. So I figured it was a case. That happened sometimes. When I went to find Gail, she was hiding in my room and told me that Mom didn't talk to her after picking her up from school."

When Steve paused, Holly got out bottles of water. "What had she done?"

"I don't know. I just remember that was when Mom stepped back. She stopped being so fawning over Gail. It was like something freaked her out. And I knew it wasn't the cat, which was my fault too. We never told them. But something really freaked them out. And ... When your parents are distant, you kind of are too. And I stopped seeing what Gail did." He sighed. "So ... All I see is Gail at a bar, or avoiding me at work. And all I hear is she can't cook from Nick, though I know I should ignore him." Steve looked at Holly seriously. "You're the only person who gets the Gail I remember."

Holly frowned. That didn't make much sense. She knew about the cat thing, of course. Gail told her pretty much any secret these days, saying they were Holly's for the taking. And this was nothing Gail had mentioned so she likely didn't remember it herself. "She hasn't gotten drunk since she cut off all her hair," Holly pointed out.

"Do you know why?"

"Not really. She just said she didn't want not be a part time binge drinker anymore."
"And ... My sister can cook?"

"Jesus, Steve, did you know she can speak eight languages?" Probably nine, now. Holly had heard Gail asking Chloe about Portuguese recently at the Penny. "She can memorize anything she hears, which is really annoying sometimes. She's a fucking genius. And she's funny and sweet. How the hell do you never see it?"

Steve smiled tiredly. "She won't show me. Once mom stopped fawning, she shut me out too. Became that bitchy ice queen."

Truthfully, Gail was still pretty snide and brittle. But Holly saw the shield for what it was and, being someone let in behind it, found it charming. She liked prickly people, though. "Why does Nick think she's not girlfriend material?"

"Jesus, Nicholas." Steve rolled his eyes. "Because she's cold."

More than once, Gail had said as much to Holly. She was cold. Unfeeling. "No she's not," marveled Holly. How did they not see?

"Right, not to you. Or kids."

"Or Oliver, or Andy or Dov or any of them. She just ... Doesn't say what she feels."

"Nick can't read that." Steve tilted his head and studied Holly's face. "You can."

This time Holly looked away. Damn it, detectives were smart. "I like solving puzzles," she muttered. And Steve didn't press.

"I like you, Holly," he grinned, and held out a drop of batter on a spoon. "Help me with this, please."

It was hard to turn Pecks down. At least, these two Pecks. Holly sighed and took the batter. "Baking soda?" She rolled her eyes when he looked confused.
In light of everything that happened in the United States recently, Inspector Jarvis insisted they have an open house at Fifteen Division. Gail thought it was stupid and said as much all week long. But as the day arrived, she was not surprised to find herself assigned to meet and greet the kids that afternoon.

She could handle the kids at least and most of them just wanted their prints taken or fake mug shots. That was, at least, entertaining, even if it meant hanging with Chloe all day. Anything was better than the last day of her stupid IA case. The tension from sitting in a room with her parents and lawyers for ten hours had been so stressful, Holly had dragged Gail to a spa for a professional massage.

The last day of the case had been the most painful. Her father hadn't even looked at her while her mother actually looked apologetic. The three of them, in their best uniforms, sat in a room listening to an inspector review everything, clarify the arguments, and finally announce that Officer Peck's claims were upheld. Her mother had crossed a line and all that was left was to determine punishments.

Her mother changed the game in that moment, saying she'd retire. It was better for the division and the department if she retired, less of a media shit storm in a city struggling with a mayor who made international news. Part of Gail wanted to see her taken down, ripped apart and stripped of rank and power. The other part knew her mother wanted to have Uncle Al's job. And that would never happen now, no matter what.

Gail finally looked at her mother, not the Staff Superintendent, and saw the agony and pain in her eyes. Her mother lost it all. Everything. The amount of meddling she'd done, not just for Gail but Steve and other Pecks, would have retributions for years. Other relatives would find their careers stalled. Gail would be a Peck pariah along with her mother. And she nodded. She took the deal. Let her mother step away with some grace, some dignity, and let Gail be the better man.

It was downright depressing.

It became much better when the young boy's voice cut through the crowd. "Aunt Gail!"

"Hey, Leo," replied Gail, not really smiling but still happy to see him. "Need to update your credentials of evil?"

"Yeah, and Sophie needs hers!"

There was a practical aspect to the finger printing, Gail had to admit. With their parents permissions, all the children were entered in a database in case they ever went missing. While Gail had to explain that this was not related to the MasoniCHIP program run by the Free Masons more times than she wanted too, most of the parents were alright with the process.

Gail tilted her head as Leo dragged Sophie into the room, the girl clearly didn't want to be there. "So what'd they get you for, Sophie?" She gave the girl her toothiest smile, and got an awkward one in return.

"Bein' mean," muttered Sophie, kicking the ground.

Behind Gail, Chloe laughed. "If that was a crime, Officer Peck would be behind bars forever."
"Bite me, Officer Price," replied Gail and the gathered children laughed. "Okay, who's next?"

There were a few kids in the room and they ran them all first before Leo and Sophie, and Leo shoved her up first. Chloe took the fingerprints, explaining they rarely used actual ink anymore, and showed Sophie her prints, including a scar that ran across her right ring finger. That brightened her mood up a bit until she faced Gail for her mug shot. "Okay, no smiling. Look mean," instructed Chloe, chipper.

Sophie did not smile. "I'm still mad," she told Gail, looking embarrassed but also firm.

Catching Chloe's eyes, Gail jerked her chin. "Você está bem?" Of course Chloe would do that. Gail's understanding of Portuguese was better than her speaking.

"Yeah," confirmed Gail and she took Sophie's photo. It made an adorable grumpy mug shot. "Okay, Criminal Sophie, come here." Gail toed the stool over and Sophie climbed up to look at her photo choices.

"I don't care," she muttered. "What'd Chloe say?"

"She asked if I was okay. In Portuguese."

Sophie blinked and looked at Gail, "You speak French."

"I speak lots of languages," Gail noted, picking her favorite shot and printing up three copies. "You ever going to forgive me?"

"Yeah," muttered Sophie, looking away. That was promising. "Noelle said that being a cop meant sometimes you had to do stuff you didn't want to do. Sometimes she or Frank were gonna have to work and not see me even when they promised to. And … it wasn't fair to be mad at you about it." Deciding that explaining the inherent unfairness of life to an eight year-old wasn't a great idea tonight, Gail nodded. "But … she didn't say what you were doing."

Gail sighed and sat down on a stool beside Sophie. "Normally," she said slowly, "I'm out there. In a car, driving around, fighting crime. But for a while I've had to be here, working in the station the whole time."

Leo spoke up, "That sounds mega boring."

"It's ultra boring," agreed Gail.

"How come?" Sophie looked confused. "How come you had to stay here the whole time?"

"Because I was suspended." She paused. "Do you guys know what that means?"

Nodding, Leo explained, "It means you're in trouble for doing something really wrong and can't go to school and your mom grounds you." Well aware that Leo had been suspended after getting into a fight with a classmate over a video game, Gail smiled and nodded. "Who'd you hit?"

"I didn't hit anyone," she said sternly. "Someone was bullying me and I told on her." That was the simplest way to explain it, but the look on Sophie and Leo's faces was hilarious. The concept that even grownups got bullied and had to appeal to other grownups had, clearly, never crossed their minds as remotely possible.

Sophie blinked a lot. "You told?"
That aspect of childhood, tattle-telling, was one Gail had never really subscribed to. "I did. Because she wouldn't stop when I asked. I went and found someone who could help, and they did. But since we're both cops, they had to suspend us both until they could figure out if I was lying."

"Another cop was being mean?" Leo was aghast, but Sophie narrowed her eyes. "That isn't fair they suspended both of you. What happened?"

Children were artless. They didn't always connect the people with the story, even when the people were telling the story. "I got back to work, and she quit her job. But we had to talk to a lot of people before that and I missed the game with Sophie because we were talking all day. I didn't get home until real late."

Leo looked impressed. "Uncle Steve said you were going to be a detective soon." When Gail nodded, he asked, "You gonna work with my mom?"

"No, Traci's a homicide detective. I want to work with on big cases."

"Like Frank?" asked Sophie carefully.

"Yep, just like Frank."

When the afternoon was finally done, Gail was not surprised that Holly was waiting for her, though the appearance of her brother was odd. He and Holly had been very friendly since she'd helped him ask Traci to move in with him, though that had yet to happen. The moving. Traci was arguing that neither of their apartments was big enough for three, which was bringing up other arguments. "Hey, Gail," Steve looked stiff. "Can I steal you before you guys go?"

"Make it fast, brother mine," she smiled and allowed him to lead her towards the bullpen. "I need a favor," he said quietly, going right to his desk. "You're still keeping eyes on weird stuff with ambulances, right?"

"Oh god, you're not going to give me crap too, are you?" Everyone, from Oliver and Noelle to Traci and Andy thought she was a little daft about the whole obsession with weird EMT things. It was at the point where she didn't tell anyone about it, not even Holly, who was the most accepting.

"No." There was something in Steve's voice that surprised her and Gail regarded her brother carefully. "Can you keep an eye on someone for me?" He held out a folder and Gail flipped it open, looking at the face and name. Pale, though not as pale as the Pecks, with dusty brown hair that looked like he didn't eat enough vegetables. Drug user, probably. Baines, Timothy. A nurse. "I'm working on flipping him but since you're already showing up around there, I was hoping you could keep tabs on him. In case he spooks."

Gail scanned the notes. "Smuggling for Two Lakes? When did they expand?" She paused and looked up at her brother, clues sliding into place. "Shit." Steve nodded at her. "Coincidence?"

And her brother looked away. "No. I was thinking about what you said and something Holly told me. You're smart, Gail. I should have listened to you before. I think you're on to something."

Part of Gail wanted to cheer. Finally someone was listening. The other part was annoyed that Steve would probably be getting the credit for the case. Telling herself to shut up because she was a cop and that was what mattered, she just nodded. "Okay," she said slowly.

"I'm going to ask Oliver to borrow you for this." When she looked up at him, surprised, he smiled. "I can't just say 'gimme Gail' without it looking like favoritism. And after that shit with Herr Peck…"
They both grimaced. "Memorize it, will you?"

"Sure, no problem," Gail replied absently and read through the short folder. She couldn't make sense of Steve's weird look as they walked back to Holly, but accepted his one-armed hug before she took Holly's hand to leave.

"What was that about?" asked Holly, leaning in to bump shoulders with Gail.

Gail smiled, falling in to the comfortable ease of being with her girlfriend. "The hug or the talk?"

"The look."

"Beats me. He asked me to read something." Gail sighed. She did have an idea of what weirded him out, but couldn't really wrap her head around it. He'd asked her to memorize something and then got odd when she did. So did he not expect it to be a possibility? Brothers were so annoying. And it wasn't like she memorized the whole thing, just enough to fill in the rest, like their father had taught them.

Holly made a thoughtful sound. "I'm glad I don't have siblings," she said firmly.

"You can borrow mine, any time," grinned Gail.

They stumbled through the door from the garage, intent on nothing more than each other. Holly struggled with Gail's shawl/wrap, which her girlfriend had looped around her arms to hang off her shoulders. "Why did you think this was a good idea," grumbled Holly. She had to actually stop kissing Gail to figure out how to undo the wrap.

"You like how it makes my arms look," laughed Gail and she simply shook her arms to loosen and drop the wrap thingy onto the ground, kicking it away.

"Color. I like the color," growled Holly and she returned to kissing, lingering on Gail's neck. "It's inconvenient."

Gail made an appreciative noise and started on Holly's shirt buttons. "At least I can get out of my shoes," she teased, stepping out of them as if to prove it. Holly's shirt hung open and Gail ran her hands across Holly's stomach, her purse dangling from a shoulder. Holly shuddered at the touch, her body heating up everywhere Gail touched. "God, I love the way your skin feels," Gail sighed and her thumbs traced Holly's ribs.

As distracting as the sensation was, Holly desperately wanted to feel more of Gail's skin on hers. The dress zipper was not complying, which was Holly's current problem, shoes be dammed. "I swear, I'm going to pull this dress off with my teeth," she growled. Women's clothing was such a damn trial, but god did Gail look amazing. Holly hadn't wanted to pay attention to the ballet, as amazing as it was, because her inner-nerd was jumping up and down wanting everyone to look at the amazing, sexy, woman with her… and perhaps also get that woman home and naked in her bed. "Finally!" With a pop, the zipper agreed to move.

Someone coughed.

It wasn't Gail.

Holly froze, trying to process the sound. Before she could peg it, Gail spun around, pushing Holly behind her with one hand and producing a small gun out of nowhere. "Stay back here," hissed Gail, lowering slightly and stepping towards the living room.
Nodding, Holly scooted back, away from the direction Gail headed, and back to the door to the garage. Someone was in her house? Her eyes very slowly adjusted to the change in the light from the garage. The house was dark, just as they'd left it, and Gail was also taking her time. Clutching her shirt, Holly quickly buttoned it together, a row off and not caring. But damned if she was going to call 911 with her top off.

Then she heard Gail curse and turn a light on in the kitchen. "Steve, you asshole."

"Nice dress," coughed Steve. He didn't sound great.

"Shit, Holly! Get the first aid kit."

The doctor in Holly kicked into gear and she bolted up the stairs without looking at what was going on. When she got back down, Gail was kneeling on the floor of the kitchen, holding a towel to her brother's back and berating him for not going to a hospital.

"Potato, tomato," he grumbled.

"What's going on?" Holly pushed her glasses up and squatted by Steve. He looked terrible, like he'd been beaten and rolled. With Gail's help, he leaned forward and Holly hissed as a broken scalpel stuck out of his back.

"My CI stabbed me," explained Steve. He said it like it happened every day, and Holly frowned.

Without being prompted, Gail gave Holly clear access to the back wound, which was bleeding through the towel quite a bit. The very filthy towel. Holly pulled on gloves and took the towel off. It was not long, but it looked deep. "Steve, you need a doctor."

He laughed weakly. "I though you were one."

"I'm a pathologist," Holly pointed out. "Dead people doctor."

"I hurt too much to be dead."

Holly chewed her lip. "Gail, I need fresh towels. Can you get the ones my aunt sent us?" With the gun still in her hand, Gail nodded and rushed off to get the ugly towels with the grape embroidery. "You need stitches, Steve."

"I'm sure I do," he sighed. "I can't go to the ER right now."

When Gail came back, she had jeans and a shirt on as well as the towels in hand, but the gun was still evident. "Who's your drop, Steve?"

"Blackstone." The towels went down and Gail tucked the gun into a holster before putting it on the counter. "Where the hell did you have your gun in that dress?"

"It was in my purse, you moron," she growled and starting tapping on her phone. "And because tonight couldn't get more awkward..."

Steve hissed as Holly probed his back. "You're supposed to wear it on your thigh," he told her through gritted teeth. Clearly the bantering was to take his mind off the pain. Gail flipped him off and stepped out of the room.

"Stay still," ordered Holly. "Gail, we need to take him to a hospital. He needs stitches."

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"Stay still," ordered Holly. "Gail, we need to take him to a hospital. He needs stitches."
Pausing in the archway, Gail asked the phone, "Did you hear that? Yeah. Well I don't know." She nodded, hand on hip, head down. Holly knew that pose. Gail was about to do something, "Well, no. I don't think so." She exhaled. "Steve, where's your car?"

"Bastard took it. I walked." No wonder he was so tired.

Wiping off Steve's face, Holly tried to think of how to treat it. If Steve was lucky, it didn't cut a muscle. "That seems short sighted," muttered Holly. He'd walked this far, so he was probably not in serious danger, though Gail had a remarkable ability to downplay injuries. It was either a cop or a Peck thing.

"He probably ditched it."

Gail was still on the phone with whomever Blackstone was. "Jacob, he's my brother. Don't fuck with me about this." She exhaled and listened. "Actually..." A pause and Gail turned to look at Holly, "Hang on." Gail held the phone a little away from her face. "Can you take care of him here?"

"Are you all insane?" Holly snapped and glared at Gail. "He needs a hospital. If this cut his muscles-"

"Holly, I know," sighed Gail. "He can't go to the ER right now." Gail looked sympathetic. "It's okay if you say no, but can you?"

Seriously? They were crazy. "I can," she allowed. "This is a bad idea, he could bleed out. I have no idea what I'm getting into, or ..."

"I know, it's okay." Steve's pale skin was waxen in pain.

"Gail?" Holly looked up at her girlfriend, seriously. "Why?"

"His CI works at Toronto General. It's too dangerous, especially if he's double crossed Steve," she said slowly. "You didn't tell me you were officially on that case, Steve."

"I bounced it off Jacob and we picked it up."

Gail frowned. "How long has he worked for Lapointe?" The answer came over the phone and Gail nodded. "Yeah, I know, shut up, I'm not ... Okay. Holly, yes or no?"

Biting her lip, Holly asked, "If I say no, you're going to put him in your car and drive somewhere else, aren't you?" And Gail nodded. Damn it. "Yes. But I need your help."

Nodding again, Gail spoke into the phone. "Call me when you know." She hung up and squatted by Steve. "Blackstone's got a BOLO out for your car."

"I hate that car—" Steve hissed as Holly moved him a little. "Jesus, why does it burn like that?"

"You were stabbed, Steve," sighed Holly. "I hope this isn't your favorite suit." She pulled out the scissors.

"It was," he grumbled. "Cut it off, I don't care." Gail held his hands and he cringed. "I take back everything, Garbage Pail."

With quick snips, Holly cut the shirt and vest off. She took a deep breath, "Steve, just breath normally for me, okay?" With her stethoscope, Holly listened to his lungs. No fluid sounds. The scalpel had cut down over an inch, dragged down probably. "If I take this out and he spurts, we go
Gail agreed right away, though Steve did not. "Fine. Shut up Steve, you don't get a vote."

"Let's get him to a bed. He won't be able to get up after."

"And you said cleaning out the downstairs was silly." Gail's humor was clearly self defense against fear and Holly let it go. It took both of them to get Steve up and down the hall to the guest bed. Gail just threw a top sheet down for him, forgoing with actually making the bed, and towels layered under where he'd lie.

They lay Steve down on his stomach carefully, another towel under his head. "I haven't done this since I was in med school, Gail," hissed Holly, handing Gail gloves.

"Hey, I saved Chris' life when he was stabbed," Gail smiled thinly. Holly handed her a tampon. "Seriously?"

"Seriously? Get it open and ready."

Steve asked cautiously, "Do I want to know?"

"Maybe," allowed Gail, smirking but also looking serious and scared. This was her brother after all.

Holly slowly took another breath and then drew the scalpel out. Steve gasped, not a great sound, and the blood began to flow. "Gail, give it here." The tampon went onto the cut, and Holly pressed sterile gauze to it. "I swear, if I have to put goddamn HemCon in my house," she growled, and fell into the rhythm of medicine.

Remarkably, Steve stayed still as Holly debrided the cut and stitched it up. Gail held his hands and neither Peck said a thing until Holly asked Gail to get a damp towel. "You're gonna live, Steve," she told her brother.

"I'll never play the violin again," he wheezed.

"Thank god," Gail muttered.

After cleaning his back and applying bandages, Holly collected her tools and shakily took them upstairs, leaving Gail to monitor her brother. She wanted to vomit. She hated treating live people, but there was no choice. It was this or something worse.

Taking advantage of the distance, Holly showered and changed before coming back downstairs. Gail was perched, cross-legged, beside Steve, holding his hand. The small pistol was clipped to her waist. Holly hadn't really noticed the gun had come with them. "I really owe her one, huh?"

"Yeah, you do, moron." Gail brushed his hair from his face. "You're going to owe her a hell of a lot more when I tell her who Blackstone is."

"Shit, she's going to hate him. Holly's right. You're insane. Or brave."

"Both." There was a hiss sound and Gail sighed loudly. "Sorry all we have is regular pain killers."

"Just promise me it'll be a cool scar."

"Better looking than the rest of you." Gail paused and looked up, seeing Holly. "I'll be right back, Steve. Don't move." Steve grunted. Crossing the room, Gail touched Holly's arm. "Thank you," she whispered. "I'm really sorry."
"It's not your fault," sighed Holly. She started to move to hug Gail, but her eyes dropped to the gun. "Do you always bring that when we go out?"

Following the gaze, Gail sighed. "Almost always, yes."

Not sure how that made her feel, Holly wrapped her arms tight around herself. "Now what?"

"Blackstone's coming over with someone to guard you and Steve tonight." Gail chewed her lip and paused.

"Me and Steve." Not Gail. The blonde nodded. "Where are you going?"

There was the briefest pause before Gail replied, "To collar his CI."

"You're— The guy who stabbed your brother!?!"

"I know who he is, Holly. And I know the case. It'll be faster. I can pick him up and I'll have backup. We've got uniformed looking for him right now. Soon as they spot him, Blackstone and I'll go in."

Holly looked at the man sprawled on her guest bed and scowled. "Who is Blackstone, and why won't I like him?"

Flinching, Gail pushed both hands through her hair. "Nick... He's the guy I slept with."

The guy Gail slept with? What did that have to do with Nick... Then she remembered the conversation. Steve was right, Holly did hate him right away. "And you're going with him tonight?" She knew she sounded bitter and angry, and she was not able to nor cared to tamp it down. Seriously, Gail was going to hang out with the guy she cheated on Nick with?

"Be realistic, Holly," Gail said calmly. "Would you rather be here with him?"

"No." Holly glowered. "I don't like that you're working with him."

Gail reached over and touched Holly's face, gently cradling it, "Holly. I know this is not the night I planned." Her voice was soft, the tender tone that Holly never heard anywhere else. "I'm sorry I even had to ask you."

Leaning a little into the hand, Holly closed her eyes. "What would you have done if I wasn't here?"

"Less sterile, more swearing, no stitches, and a fuck ton of bandages." In other words, the same thing, less safely. Holly sighed and Gail's thumb brushed her cheekbone. "I totally get why you're mad."

Holly shook her head and stepped closer to Gail, unfolding her arms and grabbing Gail's shirt hem. "I'm not. I'm terrified, Gail. This … this is not me. This is not what I know. This is—" Holly paused and pressed her head to Gail's shoulder. "Remember when I said I was all about trying new things?"

"Yeah," replied Gail, one hand gently rubbing Holly's back.

"I did not mean this," Holly said firmly and Gail coughed a dry laugh. They stayed like that for a little while, until Gail's phone beeped. "Do you have to go now?"

Gail nodded. "I do." She pressed her lips to Holly's forehead.

"Wash your face," sighed Holly. Without another word, Gail jogged upstairs and, moments later,
returned with a scrubbed face and a black jacket and watch cap. It was summer, but that blonde hair would stand out. She paused to give Holly an apologetic look before opening the door to let in Detective Luke Callaghan and a confused Nick.

"Jesus, what is this? You couldn't bring Chris too?" Gail was snappish and it was somehow very comforting.

"Jacob's used us before," Callaghan pointed out. "And Nick's the best shot, so it was him or Andy."

Gail scowled, "If anything happens to her..." The threat was so low, Holly was certain she wasn't supposed to hear it, but Nick just nodded. There were no more hugs, just one last look from Gail, impossible to read, and Holly was left alone with three policemen.

"So. Uh. Are you okay, Holly?" Nick looked nervous.

"I've had worse dates," she muttered. That was a lie, though. This was now, officially, the worst date she'd ever had with Gail. Holly sighed and turned to the detective, "Now what?"

Callaghan nodded. "Now we wait. Can I talk to Peck? Steve..."

"Yes," sighed Holly and she led him into the room. Nick stayed out, walking around the house as if on patrol. Would this ever get any easier?
Sitting in the car with Jacob Blackstone, on an impromptu stakeout for an ER nurse who was helping a gang smuggle medical supplies, and had shanked her brother with a scalpel, was so incredibly far from how she'd wanted to spend her night, Gail could barely process it. At least he'd picked up good coffee. She propped her feet on the dash and watched the man pace in his apartment.

"So," Blackstone said slowly, as if certain Gail was going to lash out at him. "You live with her?"

"Yep." Gail frowned as Tim Baines paused at the window and looked out. He didn't seem to see them. "Jesus, is he ever going to leave?" She slouched in the seat and kept watching.

Blackstone didn't reply to that and scratched on his notepad. "When did that happen?"

Gail eyed him, "Why does everyone want to ask me about that? Yes, I bang chicks now. I'm living with my girlfriend." She turned back to the window and watched stupid Tim pace back and forth. "Can we tap his phone?"

"You ever tried to wake up a judge at 2am on a Saturday?"

That would be a no. "You filed anyway?"

"Of course." Blackstone sounded offended. He squinted. "Is he on the phone now?"

"Third time," confirmed Gail.

"Three calls. Times?" As Gail recited the times, Blackstone jotted them down. "Didn't answer when though."

Gail blinked and sighed. "After Nick... And no, it had nothing to do with you." As Gail said that she wondered how true it was. He'd been a strange part of it. "Well. Maybe the back hair," she added aloud, as a dig.

And Blackstone smiled. He liked it when people gave him crap. "Good. You've got to know this stuff before you get in to undercover work."

"Mm, no. I'm not doing that."

"Major Crimes, I know." He grinned. "Steve told me this was all because you saw something. That right?"

Gail hesitated. Fuck it. Blackstone used people, but he was also a good cop. "Kid dumped in a lake after being picked up by a non-existent ambulance, body dumped in the woods with an IV stuck in
wrong, fake EMTs picking up a non-dead body for god knows why, a headless guy in an ambulance rolled down a hill."

To her surprise, Blackstone added to her list with three more oddities. "And you're wondering why Guns and Gangs is interested?"

"They're part of a cover up," she suggested, not phrasing it as a question on purpose. A question made it sound like you doubted yourself. A statement made you seem certain.

Blackstone nodded. "You nabbed Bobby Zanaro, right?"

"Oliver and I did, yeah."

"He got ousted from Two Lakes." Gail remembered that and nodded, encouraging Blackstone to go on. "A lot of the older lieutenants and old school guys have been showing up dead. Including the ones on your list."

Gail tore her eyes away from Tim in the window. "They're all members of Two Lakes?"

"Some more than others, but they're all old school. We think it's a takeover."

She chewed on that for a while watching Tim put the phone down. Was he on the move yet? "But why the ambulances?"

"That's where Tim comes in. He's been feeding Two Lakes for almost five years, supplies. But there's got to be a reason they're using ambulances."

Without thinking Gail replied, "Easy way to move drugs. We'd never pull 'em over. And great for body dumps." She took her feet off the dash as Tim started moving in the bedroom. "The kid in the lake was an accident. Wrong place, wrong time. The guy who was alive was a dump and they were still in the area. Heard our call. Right place right time." Yeah, Tim was definitely on the move.

Her hand was on the door handle when Blackstone spoke, "Take the front."

They'd already disabled his car so Gail knew he'd be making a run for it. Blackstone went to the back, by the car, while Gail tried to decide if Tim would run from the alley or the street. She moved to the alley right as she heard the shout. Tim tripped on to Blackstone and Gail crouched, waiting.

The crash sound was garbage bins probably intended to delay Blackstone. The clatter was Tim slipping. She heard his breathing and tensed.

Now.

Gail threw herself at him the moment he was clear of the alley and slammed Tim into the pavement hard. Probably harder than was necessary, truth be told. "Hi, you're under arrest," she said brightly.

Struggling, Tim tried to evade the cuffs. "What the hell for?"

"Assault and attempted murder of a police officer for starters," she growled and yanked his arm up to cuff.

"Nice tackle, Peck," smiled Blackstone holding his hand to his face. Tim had clearly gotten a swing in.

The name Peck made Tim stop moving and Gail hauled him to his feet. "Are ... You ..."
"I'm your arresting officer, moron." She frog marched him to the car and tossed him in the back. "This is why I don't want guns and gangs. Your criminals are stupid."

Her neck was killing her. That was Holly's first thought as awareness crept in. Her legs too. "Ow," she muttered and tried to move her limbs, wincing at the pins and needles stabbing her. An afghan slipped from her shoulders, slithering down to the ground as Holly sorted out where she was.

She had fallen asleep in the (comfortable) reading chair in the guest room. Why was she asleep in the guest room? Holly rubbed her eyes, realizing why the pattern on the chair was so damn fuzzy. Where were her glasses? She looked around, spotting a shape on the guest bed, and memory flooded back. Worst. Date. Ever.

"I promise."

A voice from outside the room was familiar. Male. Nick! Holly sat bolt upright and winced. Jesus everything hurt. She was too old to be sleeping in chairs and was feeling every inch of her 'closer to 40 than 35' right now. The little coffee table held her glasses and Holly fumbled, pushing them on to her face. Ahhh, focus. God bless glasses. The distance to the bed was right on the edge of her ever increasing fuzzy zone. Getting old sucked.

Steve was asleep or seemingly so. "Steve?" she asked softly. It was possible he, like Gail, had that distressing ability to fake-sleep through anything. She slowly stretched her muscles until, certain she wasn't about to topple, Holly could move to the bed and check on her girlfriend's brother.

No, Steve was soundly asleep, his face screwed up in pain. He really needed a hospital, with an IV and some damn good painkillers. Pressing one hand, gently, to his face, Holly did not find his temperature to be too abnormal. She carefully pulled the sheet back and peeked at the bandages. That was warm to the touch but not painfully so. It didn't seem like an infection had cropped up in the night.

Was it night? She looked at the window and saw the light of not early dawn but well towards morning. The clock told her it was nearly seven in the morning. The last time she remembered was around three when Gail texted her to say she'd arrested the CI. Had Holly really slept for four-ish hours? Had Gail slept at all? And where the hell was her phone?

Leaving Steve to sleep as much as he could, Holly slipped out into the living room where Nick was pacing nervously. He looked like an anxious father. "Do you want coffee?" she asked him, feeling the desperate need herself.

"Oh! You're awake. Gail just called." He held the phone out. "You slept through it ringing, she said to let you rest."

Holly took her phone and blinked at the list of calls from Gail which she had, totally, slept right through. "I see. Thank you." Hesitating with her thumb over the call back button, Holly looked up at Nick. "Who were you promising?"

He smiled sheepishly. "Gail. She said if I woke you up, she'd … er …"

"Do something anatomically impossible to your reproductive parts?"

"She's really inventive when she's mad." When Holly smiled, he grinned back. "Oh, and they're sending people to pick up Steve and take him to the hospital, under guard."

Holly frowned, "So you're leaving?"
"You're coming with … I mean … Uh, Gail…" He blinked and rubbed his head. "She said you should go if you wanted. Woke up. I'm sorry."

"Coffee," Holly said firmly, not entirely clear on all this herself, and she made two cups of espresso, passing one to Nick. "Yes, I'm going with Steve to the hospital," she said firmly. "How are we going to explain this?" Holly was struck by a crazy fear of losing her license over the mess. After she'd just sorted her job out again, too!

When Nick didn't know, Holly sighed and called Gail. The phone rang three times before Gail picked up. "Please tell me Nicholas didn't wake you up."

Holly smiled. Gail sounded frustrated and cranky, and she was clearly annoyed at Nick quite a bit. She generally called him Nicholas only when she was angry with him. "No. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," sighed Gail. "Tired as hell. We're interrogating the dumb ass loser."

"Now? Sorry, did I interrupt?" She sipped her coffee and felt life flowing back in her. So they had caught the man who stabbed Steve. That was good.

"Nah, we're letting him sweat for a bit anyway." Gail's flippant reply was ruined by the yawn. "God, I would kill for your espresso."

"Come home?"

"Can't yet. Is Steve doing okay?"

Holly was a little miffed Gail didn't ask how she was doing, but then again she was on the phone chatting so Gail probably presumed she was fine. "He needs a—"

"Hospital, yeah, didn't Nick tell you? Callaghan's going to take him in. You don't have to go but I thought you might want to. Explain what happened."

The name Callaghan reminded her and Holly looked around. Where was he? "God, I'm going to be in so much shit for this," she groaned.

"For … what?"

"Illegal medical procedures?"

"Good Samaritan laws were invented for a reason. Don't worry, Blackstone'll clear it. Right?" The last bit was said away from the phone. "Yeah, you are going to do that right now, thank you." Then more clearly to Holly, Gail added. "All good. Sorry."

Holly shook her head. "Why do I get the feeling you're breaking the law."

"Never," Gail said, surprisingly firmly. Then she sighed again, "What can I do?"

"For me?" The real answer was rewind time and undo everything. "Nothing, honey. It's … well no, it's not fine." Holly exhaled. "I want to get away from all of this." Nick, catching her words, looked away but did not leave earshot. Damn it.

"That's not a stupid idea," agreed Gail. "After. I'll come meet you at the ER?"

"Oh, so I'm going?" There was no reply and Holly was sure Gail was grinning. "Yes, fine, I'm going. Eat something, will you?"
"I will. I love you."

Shyly, Holly turned away from Nick and whispered, "I love you too."

"Oh, Nick's there, eh?"

"Yeah, and I seem to have lost your detective."

"Probably on the deck being all detectivey. I'm going to find something to eat and then play good cop, bad cop."

Another whispered endearment and Holly hung up. She did not turn around to look at Nick, pretending he wasn't there for a moment longer. When her back door opened, Callaghan walked in and looked surprised to see her awake. "Good. The ambulance will be here in 10 minutes. Coming?"

"Ambulance?" She felt suddenly nervous.

"EMTs we know," he assured her. "Can I have some coffee?"

Coffee. Yes. Holly made another cup for the police officers and then excused herself to go upstairs. Taking the time to freshen up, Holly pulled on a clean shirt, brushed her teeth, and washed her face. She felt a little more human and went back down to get Steve ready, as well as packing her purse.

She ended up riding in the ambulance with Callaghan, Nick taking their car. Wide awake, Steve grimaced with every bump and bounce on the drive but he didn't curse. He did complain that everyone else had coffee and he didn't, but it was the same sort of tone Gail used when she was just annoyed and cranky. So Holly held his hand and smiled fondly. All the Pecks were cats in trees sometimes.

The ER was prepared for them, asking Holly only the important questions and letting her tag along with them as the doctor inspected her work. When she explained about the tampon Callaghan laughed and Steve looked offended but the doctors agreed it was a good idea. In less time than Holly expected, Steve was in a private room with an IV pumping him with fluids, antibiotics, and pain killers. Just like his sister, he got loopy fast. Pecks could hold their alcohol but not the good drugs.

Holly felt infinitely calmer, now that Steve was under professional care. "Is anyone going to tell Traci- Um, Detective Nash?"

The question surprised Callaghan but he nodded. "Oh. Yes." He ducked out to make a call and Holly rolled her eyes. They were all the same, cops. Brilliant in their fields, dense as planks with people in their personal lives. Not that she thought Callaghan fell under the brilliant category, mind. He was more average and annoying when compared to Steve or Traci.

She took a seat next to Steve's bed and leaned back. God, the stress of this sort of thing was unimaginable. And Gail lived with this daily? She pulled her phone out and texted Gail, telling her she was safe at the hospital and please make sure someone actually does tell Traci.

And then she waited. At least she'd brought a book.

"You ready to go in?" Blackstone looked only slightly more awake and aware than she did, and for that Gail felt pleased.

"Alone," she replied and he nodded. She sighed and stood up. "Right. Give me a minute." Gail went to the bathroom to wash her face and bumped into Andy, looking grumpy as one might expect for
anyone who worked on weekends. "Hey," she muttered, turning on cold water.

Absently, Andy replied in kind and then did a double take. "Hey, why are you in street clothes? Parade is in 5!" Gail opened her mouth to reply when Andy corrected herself, "Why are you here at all!? We swapped shifts so you could do that dance!"

"Ballet, Andy, I was at the ballet." She splashed her face again and winced. Not really helping. She wanted to be back there, at the ballet or the part where Holly was threatening to bite Gail's dress off, instead of the place where here brother was in the hospital. "I got called in last night. This morning. Whatever."

Gail tried to think of how many consecutive hours she'd been up. It was past eight. She'd been up twenty six hours, with a work day and a show in the middle. No wonder she felt like absolute crap. The adrenaline rush had clearly worn off. "Wow, that sucks," muttered Andy and she grabbed Gail's elbow.

"Hey, what the hell, McNally?"

"Sit," ordered Andy, pushing Gail into a seat and grabbing a brush. "You're doing something important, right? You need to not look like death warmed over. You need to be bad-ass Peck."

Out came a brush and makeup from Gail's locker. In a moment, Andy cleaned Gail up far better than she could do herself. "Thank you," muttered Gail, uncomfortable.

"If you hug me, I know the world is ending."

So Gail rolled her eyes and went back to interrogation. Blackstone did a small double take on seeing her but grinned in a way Gail understood well. War paint. She'd have shaved if she was her brother. She picked up the folder and let herself in.

"Tim," she sighed, tossing the folder down and sitting, as if she did this every single day of her life. The weaselly CI winced. "Here's the thing, Tim. My partner, that hairy guy? He doesn't like you."

"You don't like me either," muttered Tim. "Peck, right?" She nodded and he looked away. "That guy was Peck. The guy I stabbed."

"Oh my brother?" Gail was as flippant as she could be. "Yeah, I should thank you. He's been a pain in my ass for years. Maybe he'll be more humble now." Tim latched on to her words and looked up, surprised. "He's alive. You're a pretty shitty murderer."

"I didn't mean…" Tim looked away. "Good. I didn't want to kill him."

"And yet you stole his car, his phone, and his gun. Why'd you stab him?" No answer. "Right. So you've been supplying Two Lakes for, what, over a decade now? Drug crap, screwing up records so your guys don't get tracked when they get hurt. What we kind of expect. But … two years ago it changed to something else."

Tim's hands twitched. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure do," smiled Gail. She glanced at the door and got up. "You hungry? Thirsty?" Gail knocked on the door and Blackstone handed her two granola bars and two water bottles. He mouthed 'doing good' and the door closed. "I'm starving, but I'm always hungry."

Taking the offered food and drink, Tim chewed on the granola bar. "Thanks."
"You ever watch SciFi stuff, Tim?" When he blinked, Gail went on, editing herself somewhat to avoid mentioning she was dating anyone. You never gave a perp real information, she learned that from Perik. "I know this total nerd, so I end up watching some weird crap with her. There's this show, right, called *Firefly*. Whole episode's based on them breaking into a hospital as EMTs and stealing a tonne of supplies. Black Market stuff." She paused, "It's a really good show, actually." Gail sipped her water, "Anyway, you guys aren't doing the black market, which is weird, right? Why do you need a fleet of fake ambulances?"

Tim's eyes widened. "We don't…" He trailed off and then clammed up.

"Don't need a *fleet* right, bad choice of words. You had five, though. Three still working. We've got the other two." She scratched her cheek. "How long have you been in Two Lakes now, Timbo? Fifteen years? Twenty? Bobby Zanaro was your old boss, right?"

The more Gail spoke, the paler Tim looked. "Bobby's gone," he whispered.

That was not news to her, having arrested him. Gail was pretty sure Bobby was out in Alberta or Vancouver under a new identity, and she tapped her folder. "Lots of guys from your generation are at loose ends theses days. Funny thing. Times are changing."

Tim looked up at her slowly. "I'm dead. The minute I walk out the doors, I'm dead." Tilting her head slowly, Gail said nothing.

She was tired. No, she was exhausted. Every minute awake wore on her, and she wanted a nap, in her own bed, with Holly. "What am I gonna do with you, Tim?" She sighed and leaned back.

"I can tell you everything." She tilted her head again. Silence. She was too tired to speak. "Okay, I know it won't get me out of- of what I did, but we can cut a deal right? I tell you everything you move me to Saskatchewan or Yellow Knife. Someplace way the hell away, and I marry an Eskimo and it's okay, right?" Gail frowned a little. She had no power to make a deal. Pursing her lips she looked over his shoulder, trying to think of an answer.

And a miracle happened.

Tim began to talk. It wasn't his idea, he stressed. He'd just noticed that no one stopped the ambulances, no matter where they went. Even the druggies and gangs, they all left them alone, unless they were transporting the enemy. One day Tim mentioned it to someone else and he fell under the aegis of Bobby.

Bobby became his mentor, listening to his ideas, taking them further. They turned a drug using doctor into a resource. They learned how to fake an ambulance safely and used it to transport drugs. Illegal drugs, just like you'd expect. No one pulled over an ambulance, after all. And they'd been doing that for almost a decade. Bobby ran the show, and even made Tim go to nursing school, making him use his smarts to be their inside guy.

But the last few years it changed. The new kids were expanding past just drugs. There was more killing, outright killing. Bobby was against it and they threw him out. Cut his ties, disowned him, whatever you wanted to call it, Bobby was persona non gratis in the Two Lakes family. Tim was sure he'd be next, being Bobby's golden boy, but these new guys had a new plan.

The turf wars escalated, quietly. Instead of shoot outs, they assassinated each other. One at a time, over long periods of time. And those drug mule ambulances had a new purpose. They were transporting dead bodies, they were clean up. They followed the killers to make sure the bodies were dead and dropped them off in new locations. Some were left at the hospitals, some were dumped in
Quietly, Gail opened the folder and slid over photos of the bodies they knew about. Tim gave them names and jobs. The kid in the lake was a confirmed accident. And the morons arrested by Gail and Gerald flubbed the drop. They were supposed to make sure he was dead. Of course, that guy was still in a coma so it didn't really matter to the gang. Tim was supposed to keep tabs on him, kill him if he woke up.

And that was when Tim started having second thoughts. That was when he turned to Steve and started the whole CI crap. But last night he'd panicked. The rumor was there was going to be a hit on him and when Steve offered to take him some place safe, he freaked. It was a mistake, Tim admitted. It was stupid.

The door opened and Blackstone jerked his chin at Gail. They had enough. "Sit tight, Timmy," she told him, handing him her uneaten granola bar, and left the room.

To her surprise, the observation room was filled with detectives from guns and gangs. Their voices overlapped as they told her how impressed they were, how thrilled. How this broke open everything. And how Gail had been right. Praise like that, praise she'd always craved, was falling over her and her brain barely processed it all. She'd waited him out, given him the rope and let him hang himself. Giving him the room to talk. She'd bonded, apparently.

Blackstone put a meaty hand on her shoulder. "You got enough? Kid hasn't seen her own brother since he got to the hospital. And I need a week of sleep."

Inspector Jarvis was in a pressed suit, Saturday be damned, and nodded. "Impressive work, Peck. You'll do."

"Sir," she replied, not entirely sure where that was going. But Jarvis didn't explain anything else and Blackstone hauled Gail out of the room, pushing her phone into her hand. There were texts from Holly and Gail smiled. Her brother was just fine.

"Hope you're ready for the big leagues, kid," Blackstone told her, looking pleased and smug.

Gail blinked and looked back at the room. In that moment she abruptly knew, even though it was months too soon, she wasn't going to be doing patrol any longer. "Huh. Am I supposed to thank you? Because you're still an ass who uses people."

"Damn right I used you. Your brother said you had raw talent, I thought he was being a brother." Blackstone tossed Gail her jacket. "I figured you could bridge the rapport he'd had with that idiot. You broke him."

She really wasn't entirely sure how that happened either. They eased into Blackstone's car and Gail shook her head. "That was luck."

"That was luck and being prepared for this your whole life. Jarvis is greasing your transfer."

"Yeah," she sighed. "I figured." Closing her eyes, Gail slumped in the seat and put her head against the window. Dimly she was aware of Blackstone telling her to be more excited, but Gail let the car sooth her into a light doze. It was the first time her eyes had shut for more than a blink in hours and they burned too much to let her sleep. She did try to ignore Blackstone but when he said Holly's name, she tuned back in. "What about Holly?" Gail was not embarrassed to be caught out.

"I was saying your girlfriend, it is girlfriend, right? Your girlfriend handled that situation really well. If there's anything I can do ..."
"No offense, Jacob, but the last thing I want from you is your nose in my personal life again." He snorted and she smiled. "She knows about you, anyway. I'll sort it out."

"You told her about us?" He sounded surprised.

"Rip off the bandaid, they say." Gail tried to keep her eyes closed, but they hurt more to be closed than open. Dry. They'd have eye drops at the hospital. "She knows everything about me, Jacob."

"I can totally see flipping for her," he mused thoughtfully. "She's got a sexy librarian thing going on."

"Just stop," winced Gail. "Do not ruin that for me, or I will duct tape your back hair to your ass hair." It worked and Blackstone dropped her off. "You're not coming in?"

"Nah, I'm going to write up how the damn Peck siblings saved my ass."

Gail went right to Steve's room, finding him alone. The nurse explained that Holly and Traci (aka two cute women, one with a badge) had gone to find food. Steve was stoned out of his mind and cheerful. He was as much a lightweight with painkillers as she was, though right now Gail would have murdered him for the Oxy. As she listened to him singing "Hit Me Baby" there was a noise behind her.

There was Holly. Gail offered as much of an energetic smile as she could muster. Hesitating a moment, Holly ruthlessly handed Traci her coffee and bag of food before rushing to hug Gail tightly. "Hey, I'm okay," whispered Gail, her hands landing on Holly's waist. But Holly had to look for herself. She always had to look closely when she was worried about Gail and cupped her face with both hands. "Good," whispered Holly and leaned in to kiss her.

Oh if only Gail had a little more energy. The kiss was not a simple peck nor a friendly warm reminder. This was a kiss to insist that Gail was very much alive. Holly snaked a hand to the back of Gail's head, pulling her even closer, winding her fingers in the short hair. It was breathless. Gail hated to back away. "Traci's right here," Gail muttered into Holly's lips.

"Don't care," replied Holly, pressing into Gail again.

"Don't stop on my account, Holly, but blondie looks like she's going to fall over." God bless Traci. Holly did cease her onslaught and sighed, making Gail sit down on the couch. "Don't worry, Gail. We got food for you too."

Handed a breakfast burrito, Gail cautiously took a bite before groaning. "I'm leaving you for Traci." No eggs, no tomatoes.

"That's okay," smiled Holly. "Steve has professed his undying love for me. Peck swap?"

Traci looked seriously between Gail and her brother. "No, I like the goofy one. You keep the bitchy one."

Miffed, Gail let Holly draw her back against the couch, sighing as Holly draped a long arm around her shoulders. "I retract my offer and now I'm not going to tell you how I saved the world and am champion of the universe."

The threat was empty and Gail gave them the rundown. Traci looked chagrined as Gail's theory was confirmed and did apologize for calling her crazy. Holly squeezed Gail closer when she explained about the likelihood of being transferred by Monday. They stayed for a while longer in the hospital,
until Gail nearly fell asleep twice and Holly finally dragged her out, taking them home in their own car.

Gail wanted to tell Holly more about the day, but was pushed into the shower first. All Gail remembered after that was sitting on the bed for a minute to pull on socks, waking up in the afternoon with Holly's arm around her waist, and going back to sleep. It would keep.
Holly is more forgiving about scary cop stuff, but her therapist is really earning that bill, I betcha. Now that one case is wrapped up, or at least Gail's part in it is done, it's time for something new.

"Officer Peck reporting, sir," Gail tried to keep any trace of a smile off her face. She was dressed in her normal uniform, complete with tie (clip on) and kit as requested.

Inspector David Butler looked up from his computer and smiled. "Don't look so serious, Peck." He stood up and extended a hand. "Welcome to Major Crimes. You already know Sergeant Best."

Shaking her new boss's hand, Gail nodded at the man to the side. "Hi, Frank."

"Hi, Gail, welcome to the third floor." The twinkle in Frank's eyes was comforting. "Nice job last weekend. That guy folded fast. I saw the tapes."

"Guess I put the fear of god in him," she grinned, gesturing at herself.

She was introduced around to the rest of the staff. The regular detectives worked on the first floor, with overflow and special crimes like Steve's work on two (she never understood why Steve insisted on working on the main floor). The third floor, Fifteen's top floor, was for major crimes and staff like her parents. Her mother's office when Gail was in school had been up here. Thankfully it was not Butler's office. Her father had once held a desk here as well, recently even.

Butler had converted the office into an interview room, preferring to sit in the open with everyone else. "You'll sit with Frank for now. I was going to have you start with a case you knew, but you wrapped that up for guns and drugs." Shaking his head, Butler gestured at the board at the end of the room.

Both of Gail's eyebrows rose and she looked at the board. The ambulance cases. "Sorry about that," she smirked.

"Don't be. I was going to have to wait another couple months for you without it." Butler put his hands in his pockets, like an overgrown schoolboy. "How's your brother?"

"Fine. He's got a sling to stop moving his arm around, but he's healing. Went home yesterday."


Gail quirked a grin, but held it tight. "Beat out a Staff Inspector?"

"Jarvis said you'd be better here. Two versus one." Someone called Butler's name and he nodded. "Best, get Peck dialed in."

Frank brought Gail to his desk and they sat down. There was an awkward pause before he chuckled.
and slid over a blotter. "For later." With intense sincerity, Frank ran her down on the crimes they’d be working on as well as a quick briefing on three task forces they were running in coordination with other divisions. For now, Gail's duties were to follow Frank and watch and learn.

While Frank was demoted from Staff Sergeant to Sergeant, the lateral shift to Detective Sergeant had done him well. Not that he’d been a bad boss, but the last two years had been especially rough. He was a good leader of masses, better than most, and Butler was wise to assign Frank to onboard new people. Not that Gail was really new. Frank knew it too, which made the day speed by.

Gail was home first, even with a trip to the gym with Traci, and spread her copy of the recent blotter over the kitchen island while cooking dinner.

"Oh you're all professional," laughed Holly, coming in from the garage. "Already got a case?" She swooped around to kiss Gail's cheek and look over her shoulder.

"No, just memorizing everything on the blotter. Frank wants me to look for patterns." She stretched her arms over her head and laughed as Holly's arms wrapped around her waist.

"So first day was good?" Holly smiled, looking as pleased as if she'd done it herself.

That was an odd question, Gail realized. "Weird. It's just ... Strange being upstairs all day. And I'm the only one in uniform," she grumbled. That part she hated. She wasn't a detective yet. That would have to wait until her mother had officially retired. A whole damn year unless she did something epic, something amazing.

Holly, however, pointed out a flaw. "Having seen your wardrobe, honey, it's probably better this way." Gail did not want to shopping for work clothes. "Maybe when you're in charge, you can get everyone to wear jeans and your slouchy blouses."

"In a million years," she complained. Gail leaned back into Holly and sighed, drinking in her presence.

Resting her chin on Gail's shoulder, Holly sighed and her hands drifted down to Gail's thighs. "You like it."

"I spent my day reading about robberies," Gail muttered. The hands on her legs squeezed and one moved up Gail's shirt, slipping under it, resting on her stomach.

"Major Crimes sounds a little petty." Holly's breath was distractingly pleasant on her neck.

"Like bees?" Holly brushed a thumb across Gail's inner thigh.

Gail sighed, covering that hand with her own and bringing it up to her lips. "When groups, usually kids, crowd someone to rob them." Gail turned Holly's hand, kissing the palm. "I like it."

"I like how you caught your ambulance guy because I made you watch the greatest sci-fi show in the last 10 years."

"Neeeeeerrrd," smirked Gail.

"You watch reality TV," snapped Holly without any venom in her voice. The hand under Gail's shirt poked her, however.
"Hey, I watched that *Lost Girl* show with you. Didn't even have a single sexy librarian," she lamented and won a neck kiss from her girlfriend. "And it wasn't like the *Firefly* episode. Baby, you know real crime isn't like TV."

Holly sighed. "Well if it was they'd have caught the guys faster."

Letting go of Holly's hand, Gail spun the stool around. She tugged Holly by the waist so they were somewhat more entangled. Pressing her face into Holly's neck, she asked, "Would you go to the ballet with me again?"

"Will you wear that shawl thing again?"

"Maybe," grinned Gail. "Maybe something you don't have to use your teeth to unzip."

Holly groaned. "I hate zippers." Leaning back however, Holly smiled and kissed Gail gently. "I'll think about it. Just ... Bring Steve. Or make Traci promise to sit on him."

"I don't want to know what Steve and Traci do in their free time," winced Gail. "I'm hungry."

"You're always hungry." But she let go and asked, "What is for dinner?"

"Cheese puff crusted chicken." Holly made a surprised face and Gail smirked. "I made a broccoli salad thing too, shallots and onions and all that. I promise, it's good."

"Well... The mac and cheese thing was awesome," allowed Holly. "But Gail, just how many recipes do you know with cheese puffs?"

With a smile, Gail did not answer.

Holly liked the new routine. Gail had a normal kind of schedule, which meant they regularly had time together. There were now weekends, whole weekends which were consistently theirs. As summer ended, Holly dragged Gail to a baseball game and the lake, and lamented not having a summer cottage to hide in. That was when Gail mentioned that her family did have a cottage, or a cabin, she was unclear as to which, and that Gail actually had the keys.

"Will your parents be there?"

"Dunno... So yeah, there is that."

They decided not to risk it, which turned out to be providential when Gail found herself the unwilling recipient of an award for saving Steve's life and breaking open the Two Lakes little crime ring. Privately Holly though the name was dumb but Gail said criminals weren't always known for their smarts. Then she told Holly a hilarious story about a robber who had a custom license plate on his getaway car.

At the award ceremony, which was in public and outside, Gail was withdrawn and quiet on stage. She hated it and Holly knew it, so watching her girlfriend retreat into her comfortable angry shell was not unexpected. Getting a medal for doing her job had, per Gail, been stupid. If anyone deserved a medal for that crap it was Holly, and she threatened to submit Holly's name for an order of merit.

It hadn't taken much to talk Gail out of that idea as soon as Holly pointed out they'd make Gail give a speech.

With the new medal pinned to her jacket, Gail grumbled, "Can I just get drunk?"
Her brother slung his good arm around her shoulders, showing off his own medal (a reward for being stabbed apparently). "Yes, sister dear. I think tonight calls for drinks at the Penny with our beautiful women. Women we will go home with."

Since Steve had needed a little extra care and help after being stabbed, Traci and Leo de facto moved in early. That sped up the search for a larger place, which turned out to be close to where Traci already lived. Gail had been enlisted to help move and did not complain too much about it, though she and Holly gave the couple sports tickets. But now both Pecks were well and truly healed and happy, which they admitted was a strange place to be.

The Penny was packed with people who wanted to buy Gail a drink, most of whom were her former patrol mates though Detective Blackstone only stopped by briefly, getting weird looks from Nick and Andy. Both of Gail's rookies made an adorable honor guard, keeping track of everyone who bought a drink.

"This is cute," Holly informed Gail. "Gerald and Snowflake are getting along."

Gail squinted at them for a long moment. "Ah crap, they're boning." Holly nearly shot her beer out her nose much to Gail's delight.

Alas, Gail had not been joking and Holly was aghast when she spotted the two making out in a corner an hour later. Gail had sighed knowingly and complained about people in general being far too happy and perky. This led to Gail and Chloe arguing across at least four languages about happiness.

"It's disturbing, isn't it?" Dov sighed and handed Holly another beer.

"Mm, no thanks, I'm driving. Do they both speak a bajillion languages?"

"Chloe said Gail was cheating by not teaching her Punjabi I think, and Gail called her a snob for not teaching Swahili. Who even knows Swahili?" They shook their heads. "She's just going to go on and on, isn't she?"

"I'm afraid so." Holly smiled fondly at her girlfriend and her limitless future.

Dov sighed. "I miss the old days sometimes, when we were all rookies and she was just the bitchy, cold one who stabbed us in the back."

It was hard for Holly to see that Gail in her mind. She knew the other Gail, the sweet and sensitive one who was sarcastic and witty and defensive. "Which came first," wondered Holly aloud.

"Huh?" Dov looked confused. "You mean were we mean or was she? God, I don't even know. If she hadn't been dating Chris, maybe we'd never know." He paused and changed the topic, "Hey, what are you guys doing for the holiday weekend?"

Holly blinked. "Nothing," she realized. Gail had taken the long weekend off, since her new boss didn't like how much unspent holiday time she'd acquired. Holly liked Butler for that alone, though she had not yet met him.

And Dov smiled. "Do you like camping? We all go, it's like a tradition. Only we've never gotten Gail to come..." Dov gestured at their arguing girlfriends and frowned. "Crap."

Sweet and kind Chloe snapped. "Você é um saco!"

The argument looked like it was getting serious. "Let me think about it," Holly replied and stood up.
She tapped Gail on the shoulder and as soon as the blonde turned to look at her, kissed her. The words stopped and Gail melted into Holly for the moment. "Let people be happy, honey," whispered Holly, taking Gail by the hand and sauntering back to the table.

Dov was slack jawed. "How did you do that?"

"Shut up," grumbled Gail, but she smiled at Holly.

But Dov was delighted. "You made Gail be nice! That's like a super power. You should, I don't know, get an award or something." When Gail raised her fist, Dov stopped. "Just ask her later."

"Ask me what?" Gail sounded suspicious and Holly kissed her again.

Kissing was a fast way to hush Gail up. "It's not later."

The odds of Gail wanting to go camping voluntarily were slim to none, but Holly felt it might be fun. She hadn't been camping in a very long time. Holly knew she would enjoy it, and she was pretty sure she could make sure Gail had a good time as well.

That day, today, was for Gail and her medal and Holly made sure she didn't suffer too much at the smiles and congratulations from her friends. Detective Rosati showed up, sans child or husband, to offer her congratulations to Gail and Holly had never seen Andy so mad. Gail promised to explain later. At that point, it was clear Gail's ability to tolerate the masses was wearing thin. Holly waved off many people who wanted to hug Gail, warning them in advance, and finally they made it to the car.

They didn't talk about anything on the way home. Gail tuned in the radio to Disney pop music and sang along, making Holly laugh. She even did a little shimmy in her seat. "You are insane, Gail," laughed Holly.

"I'm a little tipsy," admitted Gail. "But I'm happy. I love you and I'm happy."

In the last few months, Gail had taken to dropping the 'I love you' phrase more often. In public even. It still made Holly's body heat up and she shuddered. There was a thrill to hearing that from Gail. "Gail," she sighed, looking fondly at her girlfriend's reflection in the windshield, "Don't ever change."


"What? No! I love the way you, um, grow. I don't think I'm saying this right at all. Don't stop being you, Gail. I love you as sarcastic, and snarky, and ... and bitchy. I like your attitude." She took a hand off the steering wheel and covered Gail's hand with her own. "I like you very much, Gail."

"So you're not mad I told Chloe her roots were showing?"

"When did you say that?" Holly bubbled with laughter. "Also so are yours!"

"I'll have you know, this is my natural hair color," sassed Gail. "She started it, calling me a tucha and caminhoneira. Then I told her Dov was a broxa... It went downhill. She knows more dirty words than I do."

Holly rolled her eyes. "You like Chloe."

"I don't hate her," Gail sighed. "She's very good at being Chloe. I envy that." Holly just grinned. "Oh fine. I like her. She's not fake, she's actually really nice and awkward and god, she drives me up
the wall with her perky optimism."

Good enough. "What was the sack thing she called you?"

"Huh? Você é um saco... She said I sucked." Gail shrugged. "We weren't being serious, you know. I mean... No one else speaks Portuguese in Fifteen."

"You two really are sides of the same coin," laughed Holly.

She laughed even more at Gail's absolutely horrified and offended expression.

She was supposed to be quiet and still and listen which wasn't a set of skills Gail really had a talent for. The listening sure, she was good. The sitting still and being quiet not too much. That was the worse part of her job. Gail rarely sat still at Parade let alone for a whole day. But she listened while fidgeting and reading, which Frank said was close enough.

When she heard them ask for Nemov, twice, she started paying closer attention.

"He's still on paternity leave, sir," explained one of the detectives.

"Damn it, doesn't anyone around here speak Russian besides Nemov?"

As Gail stood up, Frank hissed at her. "Not the time, Peck!"

But she ignored him. "Inspector Butler," she said directly.

"Not now, Peck," snapped her boss. "What about that guy in 27? He knows a little." The group started to argue about how much Russian needed to be understood, and was it Russian or a dialect.

Right. So she said a bit loudly, in Russian, that she spoke Russian.

The room fell silent. "What?" Butler put his phone down.

"I said I speak Russian. Nemov taught me."

"Your file says you speak French and Italian." Butler paused and looked thoughtful. "And Spanish and German. Are you holding out on me, Peck?"

"I speak Russian. And Punjabi. Officer Price is teaching me Portuguese." Gail had never bothered to add anything to her file because her mother would see it as a waste of time. Anything that wasn't directly cop related was a waste. Privately Gail didn't agree that multiple languages was a waste of her time, but her mother's opinion of her skills didn't matter much anymore.

Butler pointed at the chair at his desk and pushed over papers. "Can you read it?"

"A little slowly," she admitted and scanned the paper. "They're... They have the women captive." Her stomach turned and Gail read the letter aloud. They, whomever they were, had women. Girls practically, whom they smuggled into the country to be brides. As soon as she read it, Gail knew Butler would ask her to conduct the interviews. The letter was a plea, from someone to her family, to please take her back. Save her.

But they didn't have the brides, or anyone alive yet. They had two dead women, one of whom had the note on her person. The autopsy results, which did not have Holly's name on them, included photos with tattoos that Gail translated for them. She then found herself listening to phone conversations and putting her fluency to the test, translating on the fly. The hard part was when they
used a couple colloquialisms she didn't know well.

The more she listened, the more she got used to their tone and dialect and cadence, the easier it got to understand. Once in school she'd played translator for some visiting deaf students, sitting beside them and real-time translating. That was easier than this, but she had been more familiar with ASL at the time. At last, she was able to get practical information. An address. And quickly following that they had a warrant.

"Grab your vest, Peck, you're coming with me," declared Butler, pulling his own on.

Finally! She was pleased to be tossed the keys as well, which would let her boss call in various things on the way. She shot a fast text to Holly, telling her that she was going out with Butler on a case and they'd have to skip lunch, before turning her phone to silent.

Frank was holding her vest up. "You impress the hell out of me daily, Peck."

Gail blinked, "Oh?" She didn't have a reply for that.

"I remember Rookie Peck. Detective Peck is going to be a hella impressive."

Compliments. Weird. Especially from Frank who had been rough on her in the beginning. "Doing my best, Sir," she said without sharing the grin she felt and pulled the vest on carefully. Then she hesitated. "Can I ask a favor?" Frank nodded. "Normally, when I go out, Holly calls Oliver if, um, she hears about stuff and freaks... But he won't know..."

Frank smirked, "I do the same thing about Noelle. Tell you what, unless we're both on site, you do the same?"

"Deal," agreed Gail and she tugged her phone out to tell Holly to ping Frank in case of emergency.

Butler shouted across the room, "Peck! Let's go, you're driving! You know how to get there fast?"

Gail looked at the address again and closed her eyes. "Yes," she said firmly, thinking up three ways to get around traffic. "Sir, it's okay that I'm in uniform?"

"Makes it more officially police to the losers," he grinned and Gail felt her happiest smile cross her face. Her boss called them losers too. Oh this was going to be as fun as working with Oliver.

She half listened to Butler on the phone, talking to the other detectives who would meet them there, and Oliver, who would arrange for backup to be on hand and possibly EMS. Hopefully EMS, Gail though privately. The alternative was a lot of dead women.

When she'd been twelve, her mother made her map out the city by hand, with all the major streets and as many minor as possible. When Gail was twenty, and the advent of Google Maps happened, she tried to argue that her mother's stupid tests were, in fact, ridiculous. Now that she was 28 (two months from 29) and there was GPS in every phone on the planet with real time traffic, she felt the memorization was stupid and brilliant.

They knew where the accidents were and the way the GPS wanted them to be routed, which was fine, but Gail knew shortcuts and cheats. And Butler was impressed. "Here's the deal, Peck," he told her. "I'm going to serve the warrant, you're my backup. Simple. We're going to walk around. You don't let on you know Russian, but if you hear anything or see anything, you tell me."

"Do we use code words?" Gail couldn't help the sarcastic quip as she parked the car. This was not her first time at the rodeo after all.
Butler smirked. "Funny." He adjusted his badge, hanging it around his neck. "The odds of this being the right place on the first go is slim to none, Peck." He got out of the car and looked around. "You're a good luck charm, though."

"Tell my partners that," joked Gail.

"Late bloomer," Butler declared, and motioned for Gail to follow him. She turned on the video camera and checked her gun. Here they go.

The door was answered by someone who barely spoke English, but understood 'police' and 'warrant' enough to let them in. Butler had explained he didn't think they'd absolutely need to have backup, but it was just a good idea. So as he argued with the men, Gail took the time to look around the room and pretend she didn't understand a word they were saying.

Four men, all compact and gruff, glowered. The one talked to Butler, while the other three argued if the cops knew anything. Gail absently picked up a book from the table. Russian smut. Awesome. She tossed it back down, keeping her face schooled to confusion, as if none of it made sense.

Butler continued to talk to the main guy, and one of his minions followed Gail into the kitchen. "What are you doing?" His accent was thick and clipped.

"Looking," she said plainly.

The man turned to the door and told his boss that the skinny blonde was in the kitchen. Could be worse. Gail popped open the fridge and looked at the inside. Beers, crappy takeout. The freezer, predictably, held vodka. Seriously, were they even trying?

The boss growled back that one of them should keep an eye on Gail, he would stay with the man. They argued who had to watch Gail, clearly underestimating her, which was fine. If you can't be strong, be clever. Gail looked around at the dirty sink and the mess. It only looked like the four men, no five, lived here. Keeping that in mind, that there was another man, Gail walked into the dining room. Used for storage. Most of the downstairs rooms seemed to be that way.

She glanced at the door to the basement and sighed. Gail didn't want to go down there but she noticed how the man following her didn't seem to react. Maybe no one was here.

"Peck, check upstairs," called Butler.

"Sir," she replied, and immediately the men started to argue. Nyet, a word everyone knew, was used loudly and Gail froze with one foot on the stairs. Her man, the one following her, grabbed her arm.

Not good. She turned slowly and glared at him. The hand loosened reflexively and Gail shook it off. "Hey, hey," shouted Butler. "Police! We can go upstairs." He waved the paper at them. "We have a warrant."

As two men moved to surround them, Gail listened carefully. They were talking about taking targets. "Sir," she said slowly, and reached to her shoulder, thumbing her radio on. "10-35." He'd been right, they didn't need a code. They had a code. They had hundreds of codes. They were the goddamned police.

She let go of the radio, stopping transmissions. Butler's eyes met hers, widening slightly, and they both put their hands on their belts as casually as humanly possible.

"Gentlemen," Butler said carefully. "What could possibly be upstairs?"
The men argued in Russian. The women were upstairs. Gail glanced up and took a step. All the men moved, their boss shouting. "No, not upstairs." Then he called a man's name.

Gail looked at Butler. His hand wrapped around the butt of his gun as did hers. "Okay, let's calm down. Peck, come on." They needed backup, clearly. Gail nodded and took a step back down the stairs.

There was a sound behind her. The name made sense. Oh shit. "There are five," she said loudly, drawing her gun and pivoting to look up. There was number five. The sound of a footsteps and the sound of a larger caliber shotgun than she wanted to see.

Praying it was buckshot and not a 12-gauge, Gail's gun was up and centered. "Put the gun down," she said loudly, repeating it in Russian. Secrecy be damned. The man froze and told her to put the gun down instead. Gail repeated she was police and he should put the gun down.

Of all the things she'd done in her life, in her career, shooting someone was not an aspect of police work she'd ever wanted to do nor had she yet done. Most officers went their entire careers without ever firing at a person. Nick, the aberration amongst her friends, had killed before when he was in Afghanistan, but that was something else entirely. He hadn't wanted to talk about it much.

But right now she wasn't terribly concerned with what it would be like to shoot a man. The memory in Gail's head was the day she got her driver's license. That was the day her father had her drive them to the range and let her use the larger guns for the first (official) time. And that was the day her father demonstrated what happened to a bulletproof vest when you had a shotgun. More than a decade had passed since then and yet Gail knew the Level II vest she wore wasn't enough to stop that damn gun pointed at her.

As clearly and calmly as she could possibly be, she repeated the words. "Put. The gun. Down."

Chapter End Notes

A normal LEO vest will not stop a 12-gauge shot. Even if you were supremely lucky, you'd have pneumothorax (collapsed lung) and months of recovery. Would I do that to you? To Gail? To Holly? Maybe. But not in this fic. Neither Holly nor Gail dies. I don't consider that a spoiler. There are lots of horrible things besides death, after all. Other people will die.

The names Chloe and Gail called each other are nowhere near polite at all. Don't use them.
Im-Peck-able

When Gail's number and face lit up her screen, Holly beamed. Her doofy girlfriend had put an exceptionally silly face on Holly's phone for her contact information. "Hey, sexy. How was the streets?"

"Exciting. You still at work?"

"Just finishing up. You?" The phone beeped, disconnecting, and Holly looked at it curiously. "The hell?"

"Hey." That was Gail in person, smiling, already in her street clothes.

"Hey, fancy meeting you here," grinned Holly. "Exciting day? More robberies and under thefts?"

Gail perched on the edge of the desk. "Something like that," she allowed. "International human trafficking and selling. Wives from Russia and Ukraine." She picked up Holly's phone and tabbed through it, taking a new selfie.

"Well, that's new and different. And you're not staying late?"

"Eh, they make you go home when they think you're stressed." Holly narrowed her eyes, and Gail folded amazingly fast. "The bad guys had guns, no one shot anything. I talked them out of it." She waved a hand.

Holly sighed and closed her eyes. "Please tell me you wore your vest."

Indignant, Gail scoffed. "Of course."

The whole story waited until they were at the Penny, where Gail's friends demanded to hear everything. From Gail, the story was simple. She'd shouted at the guys, in Russian, to stand down, told them that more police were coming and they should put their guns down. From Butler, who came to introduce himself to Holly and have a drink, it was more impressive and dangerous. Gail had done that with a man pointing a 12-gauge shotgun at her. Even Holly knew the odds of a 12-gauge versus a vest.

Butler was nice, Holly had to admit. While Gail was arguing about drinks with someone, he sat down by Holly. "Dr. Stewart," he smiled, holding out a hand.

"Inspector Butler."

"You can call me David," he suggested.

"Holly," she grinned. "Gail calls you Butler."

David Butler laughed, "She's only called me 'Sir' since she got upstairs. Never expected that out of her. Everyone said she was more ..."

"Reckless?"

"Direct."

Holly smothered a smirk, "She really wanted this job."
Butler smiled, lifting his beer. "I wanted her." This was, Holly decided, a strange conversation. "Ah, this is weird, right? I like to know who my people are tied to, that's all. How long have you two been together?"

"Since spring." She toyed with the bottle before her. "She moved in just four months ago."

"Busy four months. Two rookies and a gang. She's impressive."

Holly grinned and felt the blush on her face, "Gerald—Duncan only needed polishing up." The name slip was not lost on Butler who laughed. "I'm impressed, but I'm biased."

"Good," declared Butler. He clapped Holly's shoulder. "That's what I wanted to know." He finished the beer in one go. "Good to meet you, Holly." He nodded and went to say a goodbye to Gail before leaving.

A confused Gail sat back done with Holly. "What'd he want?"

"I think he wanted to make sure I loved you." Gail smiled and leaned in to kiss her fondly. "I do, you know. Even if you do crazy things."

Any further depth of conversation was put on hold as Dov came to join them at their table. "What I don't get," remarked Dov, "is the part where you know Russian."

"Toma," replied Gail, eyeing Dov suspiciously. "Remember the kid we found?"

Dov blinked, "Gail, that was a couple years ago!"

"Yeah. So? I didn't start learning it until Nick went under cover."

Holly coughed and took Gail's hand. "Honey, I think he means that was really fast to get that good."

"Oh," muttered Gail, and she sipped her beer.

The conversation wound around a few times, before Chloe sat in Dov's lap. "Are you coming camping?"

And Holly flinched. She hadn't forgotten, not exactly, she'd just not mentioned it yet. Things had been busy. "Camping? It's almost October, don't you guys do that in spring or summer?" Gail leaned against Holly, looking amused.

Dov was surprised, "With everything else, we put it off. But we were thinking, hey, let's have one more." He fidgeted a bit.

"They never invite me," Gail pointed out.

"Oh but you were going to come last time!" Chloe looked honestly shocked.

"I was dating Nick. Andy invited him, you got stuck with me." Gail's hand slipped onto Holly's thigh, squeezing it gently. "I've never been camping."

Holly tilted her head, "But you said your family had a cabin."

"Yeah and a car," laughed Gail. "You want to go, don't you, Holly." It wasn't a question, and Holly gnawed her lip. "Oh, don't do that," sighed Gail, leaning in and kissing her. She seemed just not to care about public displays of affection at the moment and Holly didn't object.
"Camping on the long weekend," Holly murmured against Gail's lips. "It'll be fun." Gail whinged a little but capitulated and went to get the next round.

"That is amazing," sighed Dov. "I will never get over how you just wrap her around your fingers."

Holly startled and caught Chloe's eyes. They both started laughing horribly inappropriately, and kept laughing even when Dov tried to retract the statement.

It was not surprising that Holly had camping equipment. Since Gail did not, Holly dragged her and Steve shopping for the right clothes and shoes and backpacks. By unspoken agreement, Gail and Steve did not speak of what they did know about the outdoors. Tents, sleeping bags, and supplies. Those were new.

The children were not coming which Gail was pleased about. Sometimes a big kids only trip was needed, even if it was going to be in the woods. Leo was staying over with Frank and Noelle, the latter of whom had promised to put up a tent in the backyard. Sophie, mildly put out, told Gail not to be eaten by a moose. Gail assured her that moose didn't eat people while Holly explained that moose was the plural of moose.

Finally the day arrived and they drove out to the middle of ass-nowhere. Gail and Holly had Chris in their car, Holly having decided he was the least objectionable of Gail's exes. Andy, flying solo with Swarek working a case in Niagara, was in Traci's car with Steve. Her brother texted her repeatedly, telling Gail how annoying Andy was. They definitely came out ahead since Chris just wanted to sleep.

They were the first to pull in to the parking lot and Gail sighed. "I hate it already," she told Holly, leaving Chris asleep on the backseat.

"No you don't, you big baby." Holly grinned and slid her arms around Gail's waist, under the puffy vest.

"I'm wearing fleece and I have a backpack," Gail whinged and pulled Holly up against her. "It's not too late. There's a B&B down the road. We could totally skip out and spend the weekend in bed."

Holly laughed and kissed her. It was so hard to think when she did that and Gail leaned back against the car, keeping her close. "Never made out under the stars, Officer Peck?" teased Holly, mercilessly.

With a sigh, Gail put one hand on the back of Holly's hair and the other on her ass. "I was thinking a little more than making out," she whispered. "Four days and I really wanted to do more than get hot and bothered."

"Maybe you'll have to learn to be quiet," teased Holly, but she moulded herself against Gail quite contentedly.

The honking of Nick's truck snapped them out of it. Both he and Traci pulled up, one after the other. "Ew, get a room, sister," called Steve, leaning out the window.

"Bite me, brother." She sighed and let Holly go to get their bags out of the trunk. "I hate all of you," Gail grumbled and saw Chris was still asleep. Ruthlessly, she opened the door. "Chris! Wake up!" Chris yelped and Gail smiled, feeling slightly better.

"Stop being mean," advised Holly, handing her a backpack.
"Never," grinned Gail, and she pulled it on. "You like me mean." Steve came over to shove Gail's shoulder and they scuffled for a moment, shoving each other.

Holly rolled her eyes, "Why do two call each other that?"

Pointing at himself and then Gail, Steve tilted his head. "Call each other what? Captains of the Universe?"

"That too, but you always call each other brother and sister."

"We are related," Gail smirked. She started messing with the straps on her pack and checked that everything on the waist band was where she wanted it. The waist strap was cinched over her hips, the weight lifting off her shoulders.

"I mean you always use the whole word."

Traci snapped her fingers, "She's right! Never big bro or little sis. What's up with that?"

Looking at each other, the Peck siblings hesitated. Steve shrugged and signed that he didn't want to get into it. Gail huffed and snapped the chest bit into place. Fine, leave it on her. "Just because mere mortals can't fathom the depth that is our awesomeness doesn't mean we'll explain it."

As one, Holly and Traci muttered, "Pecks."

The subject was dropped, however, and everyone suited up to hike. You couldn't hold hands while hiking, so Gail settled for trudging near Holly and listening to her girlfriend natter on with Chris about the foliage.

It surprised Gail, how many times everyone wanted to stop for water and pee breaks, and she signed as much to her brother. He shrugged and said he didn't know, which finally made Dov ask about the sign language. This time Steve pointed out it wasn't his fault they weren't as cool as he was.

"Forget it, Dov," grumbled Nick. "They'll never tell anyone."

As everyone else pulled their packs on (Gail had been firmly instructed by Holly to never take it off unless you had to, it was too hard to get them back on), Holly grabbed Gail's shoulder straps and tugged her close for a moment. "Hey. I know..." She wiggled one hand.

"You do," agreed Gail, kissing Holly lightly. "Gonna tell on me?"

Holly shook her head and smiled, "Fine, keep your secrets from your friends. Just stop signing faster than I can read."

Gail grinned. "Read faster next time," she suggested and got swatted in the arm.

The group tromped over the next hill, which was when Andy started whinging it was taking forever. "But look at the weather," sang Chloe and Gail winced. "It's sunshiny, it's not too cold, there are beautiful people!" Chloe threw her arms out and spun around, like a Disney Princess. Unlike a princess, Chloe slipped and fell on her ass.

Everyone laughed, which made Gail feel better that she found it hilarious. Dov helped her up, "Andy has a point. How far to the campground?"

"Another four miles," Nick said, looking at the map.

Gail leaned over his arm, "Six."
"What? No, it's four. See, we're here," Nick pointed at the paper. "And we're going here..."

"Yeah, and this trail follows switchbacks." She reached over and pointed. "Steve, c'mere." Her brother complied and leaned over Nick's other arm. "That's faster, right?"

Steve nodded, "Or this way." He traced his finger around another path that went more uphill.

"Not even," snapped Gail. "I'm not going over that." She patted Nick's arm, watching him try to math out the switchbacks. "Come on, Nicholas, shortcut." And Steve and Gail started down the fastest route.

She heard an argument but ignored it when Holly caught up with her. "Nick doesn't believe you two." Holly sounded like she was about to have the giggles. "He thinks you two don't know how to read topographical maps."

Looking past Gail, Steve grinned, "You believe us, though."

"I am familiar with the mysteries that the Peck name carries along," laughed Holly.

Apparently so was Traci, who was the next to catch up, Andy trotting behind her. While Nick complained the whole time, Gail's shortcut had them at the campsite in just under three hours, and finally the backpacks came off.

"That was fun, right?" Dov grinned in his stupid way. "That was fun. I've never hiked in before!"

Gail rubbed her hips, sore and a little chafed. "What? You losers don't hike in every year?" She glared at them.

Sitting down, pulling her boots off, Andy scowled. "No, we usually drive to this other place. I think I have blisters. Holly, are these blisters?"

"I'm not that kind of doctor," Holly pointed out, but she put her pack next to Gail's and leaned over to eyeball Andy's feet. "Nope, just sore. Go stick them in the stream."

While people with sore feet addressed that, Gail took the tent out of her pack and stared at it. Hiking in weird places, reading maps, those she knew. The tent was something new and she frowned at it. "You're a Peck," she muttered and pulled out the directions, studying them.

"When did you learn to read a map?"

"Years ago, Nicholas," she sighed. Pulling out the poles, Gail scowled. What the actual hell?

Nick squatted by her and untangled the poles. "Can't erect a tent, though," he teased.

Sometimes, Nick really pissed her off. Gail turned to him with a snarl, when Holly cracked a joke. "Here I thought the best part about being a lesbian was no more erection problems." She wedged in between Nick and Gail. "Nick, why don't you help Steve and Traci."

After a moment Nick took the hint and left. "He knows how to push my buttons," grumbled Gail, holding the bits Holly held out for her.

"I seem to scare him off still." Holly smiled that goofy side smile and Gail felt herself relax. "Come on, I'll teach you how to pitch a tent."

"And we're back to penis jokes," smirked Gail, getting another swat from Holly but also a laugh.
It didn't take too long to get everyone set up, with Nick and Chris sharing a tent, Andy on her own, and the couples sorted out. Privately, Gail wondered if Nick would tip toe over to Andy's tent, but decided it wasn't her business, and sat by the fire pit, pulling off her own shoes to feel the breeze.

Closing her eyes to relax in the sunlight, Gail was startled to hear her brother complain, "How long does it take to start a fire, Chris? I'm hungry."

"The wood's too wet," explained Chris, sounding defensive.

"That's what you said last time," Dov interjected. "When we were at Oliver's cabin. I don't think you actually know anything."

The boys squabbled and Gail cracked an eye to watch her brother carefully building the means for a fire. He ignored them and took out a knife to create wood shavings. "That's new," she remarked to her brother.

"Traci gave it to me."

"As a warning?" Gail grinned and sat up, watching her brother idly. "Going okay?"

Steve smiled at the blade. "I think so." He glanced at Gail and then at his pile of shavings. "Okay, been a while..."

"I won't tell if you use a match. Not like I talk to them at all." Gail wedged her feet back in her boots and drew her knees up to be hugged.

"Have you ever...? I mean since...?"

"God, no. Why would I?" She rested her chin on her knees and was not terribly surprised when Holly sat down on a log behind her, wrapping her arms around Gail and resting her own chin on Gail's shoulder.

"I didn't know you could make a fire, Steve," Holly remarked, not so much in a tone of surprise as one of interest.

Crap, he was going to tell. "Didn't Gail tell you? Fifteenth birthday, Pecks get dropped off in the woods at sunset, find your way home. Nice counterpart to the store, I thought. That was only a day hike."

Holly startled and murmured in Gail's ear, "Really?" Gail nodded a little. "Your parents absolutely suck," Holly said, loud enough for Steve to hear.

"Can we not talk about them?" She let Holly's fingers work to twine with hers and they watched Steve actually make a fire by rubbing sticks together.

The show attracted attention and everyone came to watch Steve. Traci cheerfully pointed out that was her man, and Nick eyed Steve and Gail curiously. The incongruity of their woods skills was creeping up on him and Gail expected an awkward conversation later on. But Steve had a nice fire going soon enough and food was brought out to cook and eat.

The boys talked about fishing tomorrow and Nick explained how he'd made a cooler in the stream. Gail made herself comfortable against a log, keeping beside Holly and sharing a plate. For all it was dirty and grubby out, Gail would have to admit that it was nice. Chloe managed to keep the singing to a minimum and Andy's suggestion of 'I Never' was shot down by everyone.
Finally they washed up, as best anyone could in the woods. People drifted off to their tents, promising a sunrise morning, and arguing about who would watch the fire.

"I'll watch it," volunteered Holly. "I'm not tired yet."

Gail sighed and went to their tent, fetching the wool blanket Holly had hauled in, and joined her by the fire. "I hate you," she informed Holly. "You made me come out camping. I'm wearing fleece and I have a backpack."

Smiling, Holly fixed the watch cap on Gail's head. "You play softball too." She kissed Gail lightly. "And you drag me to the opera and ballet and fancy dinners." Smiling, Holly took the blanket. "This is exactly why I brought the blanket."

They wrapped it around themselves, getting cuddly by the fire, Holly claiming her spot as big spoon, the log serving as a backrest. "So what? We just watch the fire till it dies out?"

"Until it's low enough to toss dirt over safely," Holly replied softly. "Didn't you... Never mind."

"You mean when I tromped through the woods to get home?" Gail managed to keep the bitterness out of her voice. Often it felt like her childhood was a story told by others. "My birthday's in November, I walked all night."

The arms around her squeezed and Holly sighed. "You should have said. We didn't have to come."

Gail leaned back against Holly's warmth. "They never invited me before," Gail noted, looking at the other tents. There were giggles from Chloe and Dov's. "We didn't really get along." She caught Holly's hands in her own. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, honey." Holly fell silent and they sat listening to the crackle of the wood die down. The fire became wisps of flame and Holly nudged Gail to sit next to her instead of in her arms. "Look up," she whispered.

Sighing, Gail looked up and blinked. "Oh." The sky was full of stars. Not the one or two you saw in Toronto, but millions. She'd never looked up at them at the cottage, preferring to sleep in the quiet, and now regretted that. Suddenly she wondered if it would be possible to ever visit that cottage again. "What's the fuzzy bit?"

Holly laughed softly, "That's the edge of the Milky Way." Muttering her surprise, Gail made Holly point out all the constellations she knew and they admired the sky until there were no more noises from tents and the fire was almost coals.

Turning slightly, Gail caressed Holly's face. "This doesn't totally suck," she noted and drew Holly's face closer to kiss. Maybe camping wasn't all bad.

The food had been chancy at best, which Gail had complained about. They had packed in food to cook, but Chris and Nick swore they could fish and so it meant a long second day watching the boys attempt to catch a fish, growing more wet and cold. Holly offered to help and was rebuffed, so she took Traci upstream with a pole and taught her how to fish. Seven fish later, Gail was in hysterics when they showed up.

Surprising the others, Gail took over the grilling of the fish while Nick and Chris shivered by the fire. The second night ended with most everyone getting drunk, as they decided the idea of drinking the night before they hiked home was foolish. That led to a delightful moment of levity, with Steve, Gail, and Chloe singing a bawdy cop drinking song they'd learned from their families.
It even had a slapping routine and stomping.

Come morning, hangovers led to Gail threatening to break the coffee pot until she'd been caffeinated. Exhausted enough from the night, they all spent a quiet day, walking around and figuring out what else to make of the food leftovers. Holly pointed out all the plants, remembering her mother's lessons and teaching anyone who would listen. Which pretty much meant Chloe and Chris.

Chris managed to make a nice meal of the odds and ends they still had, and as the darkness swallowed up the night they all sat around the fire, chatting.

"I can't believe you're not a detective, Gail," sighed Andy.

Seated behind Holly, Gail sighed but did not reply. "She can't until the Superintendent retires," Traci pointed out. "That's such a stupid thing. I can't believe her."

Of course Traci knew but the others didn't. Chloe looked confused. "What does your mom have to do with anything? I thought she wanted you to be a detective, Gail."

"On her terms," Gail replied. "She wanted me to do homicide, or guns and gangs." There was a nervous tension in Gail's arms and Holly wanted to kiss her to make it better.

"So what's that have to do with her retiring?" Dov looked absolutely perplexed.

So Holly explained, "Her mother tried to refuse her transfer to Major Crimes." The others clamored their disbelief, but Gail just whispered a thank you. "Should I tell them the rest?" Holly kept her voice low, but she caught Andy looking at her suspiciously.

"Mother also killed a job offer Holly had in the States," Gail added.

"Don't forget she got your adoption thing rejected." Steve, ever helpful, lifted his cocoa. "Three cheers to mom."

"Thanks, Steven," grumbled Gail.

"Sophie?" asked Chloe, who knew the girl through Frank.

"I can believe it," Chris decided, at length.

"So can I," agreed Nick. "No offense, Gail, but your mother is evil."

Steve snorted. "You don't know the half of it."

Feeling Gail tense up, Holly frowned, "That's enough, Steve."

It looked like Steve was about to say more when Traci wrapped a hand around Steve's arm. "It's more than enough," agreed Traci. "It sucks you have to wait a year before they'll think about you being detective."

Dov coughed. "Remember when I said I wish I was a Peck?" Behind her, Gail nodded. "Yeah, I take that back. I didn't even think about how that could go bad with them, just us." Silent, Chloe all but curled up in Dov's arms.

"Well... That was a mood killer," decided Andy. "I'm sorry."
The group fell silent again until Gail asked, "Didn't any of you dorks bring s'mores?"

The calm was back and indeed Chloe had brought the fixings of s'mores for the group. Holly let Gail make her one, giggling as Gail explained the perfect toasting method. Things were light and fun again, which Holly enjoyed more than the annoying personal discussions.

A year. She'd known Gail just over a year, been dating for eight months, even if you counted breaking up. It was a whirlwind year that Holly would not give up for anything at all. Gail was a wild storm of incongruence. Aloof and caring, mean and tender, distant and comforting. And while she claimed to be scared to death of hitching herself with anyone, Gail had wound herself into Holly's life, with a few false starts.

In many ways they were the same. Holly was terrified about life with someone else. She knew she wanted to be with Gail and that it felt empty when they'd been apart, but the whole idea of this being a long term commitment was novel. Even with her other serious girlfriends, even with the only other relationship she'd thought was love, Holly hadn't lived with her. Gail made her different. Better and braver, certainly, but unafraid most of all. She could do anything with Gail beside her.

When Gail returned from making her third or fourth s'more, she flopped onto the blanket with Holly. "You're thinking too hard. What's in that brain?"

"You, and how hopped up on sugar you're going to be tonight. How many of those have you had?"

Gail snorted and kissed Holly, tasting of marshmallow and chocolate. "Four and this is my last one, I promise." With that, Gail shoved the whole mess into her mouth and grinned.

"That's gross," laughed Holly, shoving Gail away as she attempted to press a gooey, crumby, kiss on her. All joking stopped when a loud noise rang out. Holly frowned, not recognizing it, but cognizant that everyone else around her did. "What-"

Covering Holly's mouth with a hand, Gail held a finger up to her own lips. Oh. Kay. There was another sound, a bang, with a reverberating echo. "Shit," muttered Chris, getting to his feet.

"Rifle," whispered Nick.

"Hunter?" That was Chloe, her voice impossibly serious.

Holly swallowed. Gail took her hand away and signed for Holly to stay put, before scrambling to their tent. What the hell? A third shot went off. Someone was shooting at them? Around them?

"Traci, stay here," instructed Steve, handing her a small object. There was the sound of guns being checked and Holly realized Steve and Gail were in dark shirts, each with a watch cap pulled over their pale hair.

Nodding, Traci buckled her gun on. "Who the hell brings a gun camping," hissed Dov, sounding like he wished he had thought of it.

"Shut up," growled Gail. "Traci..."

"I know." Traci came to stand by Holly. "Watch his back."

And just like that, the Peck siblings vanished into the woods.

Holly exhaled and muttered, "Why can't I have a normal date?"
"Peck!"

Oliver was loud and excited to see her, even at six in the morning, bounding around uniforms to clap Gail on the arms. He clearly wanted to hug her but, as they were both in uniform (and Gail held coffee and donuts), held himself up short. There was stifled laughter from someone by the desks.

"Hi, Ollie," she rolled her eyes at him as if this display of affection was embarrassing.

He smirked. "To what do I owe the consummate pleasure of your petulance this day?"

Gail arched an eyebrow, "Clearly you need to check your email. Butler needs me to borrow a uni for a ride along."

"Can't convince any of those hoity detective to dress down for a day?" Oliver let go and gestured for Gail to follow him to his office. "You're lucky I haven't sorted out assignments yet."

"Luck had nothing to do with it and you know it." Gail dropped onto Oliver's spare chair and separated the food while he sorted through his email.

Oliver made a couple noises and then asked, "You have your very own case?"

Not exactly. "Frank asked me to look at all the robberies near the university. It's his case, I'm just his feet." She slid over his coffee (non fat triple chai latte) and donut (Hawaiian).

"I love you," he beamed at her. "You love me."

"I'm bribing you for anyone but Chloe or Nick," refuted Gail.

"Done." He room a bite and groaned. "So good. So amazing. Such sugar!"

Gail snorted, "Do you need some private time?"

Swallowing his bite, Oliver grinned. "Tell me about camping."

God, had everyone heard? "Nick can't read a map, Chris can't make a fire, neither of them can catch fish, and Chloe actually may be cool but if you tell her I said that, I'll tell Celery you eat lamb when she's not looking."

Oliver frowned, "Don't be mean to me, you love me." She smirked and took a bite of her own
Boston Creme donut. "Don't lie to me, Gail. You could have cheated out and gotten timbits, but you, you sprung for fancy donuts that your girl won't let you have at home." He waggled a bit of his donut at her. "Traci told me how you and Steve caught the drunk guy."

"He was shooting at stray animals, Oliver." Running into the woods, at night, going up against a guy with a rifle was probably not one of the smartest ideas ever, but Gail and Steve reacted before they really thought about what they were doing. Peck training kicked in at the weirdest times. They'd found the drunk idiot shooting at random things, mostly strays, bemoaning his breakup. Just the act of shouting that they were the police caused him to drop the gun.

The rangers had been delighted to find the guy, and happily took him off their hands. They even came back with breakfast and a ride back to their cars, which after being up all night the group had readily accepted, piling into the back of the two trucks. Holly accused Gail of orchestrating the entire mess just to get a ride back so they wouldn't be exhausted when they got home.

With the exception of that last bit, Gail did tell Oliver the story.

He was amused and chastised Gail for running off. "Look, I know I'm not your parents, but... In light of them being actual, you know, parents, Uncle Ollie is going to make you remember that your girl will come crying to him, me, if you do stupid things. Don't freak her out."

Gail rolled her eyes, but accepted the dressing down from Oliver, probably better than she might have if her parents tried it. "Okay," she replied, simply.

"Okay. Good. Come sit in parade, it'll be fun. You know you miss it."

"It's hasn't even been two months," she whinged, but let him usher her in.

"It's an early birthday present."

As she took a seat at the back of the room, she told Oliver loudly, "My birthday is in 11 days, Oliver! I demand a real present!"

That caught the attention of her friends, who cheerfully said hello and asked how things were on the top floor until Oliver called them to attention. Gail half listened to the patrol orders of the day, filing away various orders, until Oliver called out a word she hadn't heard in a while. "Peckstein, you good with that?"

She shot Oliver a thumbs up and tossed her coffee cup. Working with Dov would be relatively easy. "You can drive, Dov," she informed him. Oliver took a moment to tell Dov that Gail was in charge, and effectively outranked him.

"I'm helping Major Crimes?" Dov bounced like the puppy he was. He seemed like he could care less about Gail being in charge.

"You're driving Major Crimes." Gail stretched her arms up and yawned.

Dov didn't argue and pulled his vest and camera on. "How come you never wear short sleeves?"

"At work?" She blinked, surprised he'd even noticed. "Sunburns. I'd rather be overheated than crispy." Gail pulled her phone out to text Frank that she was working with Dov, and then sent the same message to Holly, with an 'I love you' added on. "Take me to UToronto, minion," she instructed.

The drive was mostly quiet. Dov eager to drive but not bothering Gail, who was reading from her
iPad. "So ... Um. What are we looking for?"

"Just drive around, patrolling, Dov," she muttered. Gail tabbed through the reports again. "Three blocks around the university, try to stick near the frats." She turned off the device and tucked it into the side of the door. "Swarming."

"You're covering swarming? In a cruiser?"

Gail smiled softly. "I'm scoping the lay of the land in a cruiser." She looked out the window at the students. "Did you go to university, Dov?" There was no answer and Gail turned to look at him, confused.

To her surprise, Dov was eying her. "You've never asked me a thing about my life."

"Sorry," she muttered and looked back out the window.

After a block he replied, "No. I did some junior college stuff, but not much." More silence. "You?"

"Four years," she told him. Traci knew, they'd talked about it for those horrible six months without Nick or Andy. And Traci had told Holly, which was fine. It wasn't a secret after all.

"Finish?"

"Yep. Criminal Justice." She frowned at the crowd of kids. "I don't remember looking that young," she told Dov.

Laconically, Dov noted, "You probably didn't. I bet you looked all snooty and mean."

"Shut up," she told him, without any real rancor to her snap. That was why she liked riding with Dov and had missed it. They got along on so many levels.

"College degree. So ... Wait how old are you?"

"Almost 29."

"No wonder you're pushing for detective."

Gail snorted. "Age is the least of my worries, Dov. I just ... I really like the job, okay?" She glanced at the time on the cruiser and looked at a group of kids. "Do I look older or younger with my hair short?"

A long pause proceeded Dov's cautious reply. "Is that a trick question?"

"No, it's not a does-the-dress-make-my-ass-look-big question," she laughed. "Park over there. I want to watch the lawn."

Dov obliged. "You looked younger with the, uh, pixie cut. Before it grew out. But you look softer with this." He shrugged, as if expecting a verbal blow.

But Gail just nodded, thinking she'd have to go somewhere in between if she was right. "Thanks."

"See, now you're freaking me out. Everything okay with you and Holly?"

Rolling her eyes, Gail watched the classes come and go. "Yep, and please don't think about her anymore. It's disturbing. And creepy."
"Right." He turned to watch what she watched. "It's just... You touch her a lot."

"What?" Gail turned, surprised. "Dov, I live with her."

Dov looked worried as he backpedaled, "It's just that I saw you with Chris and Nick, and you've never been ... touchy-feely before. You're almost like Chloe—"

"No I am not," snapped Gail. "Just stop." She turned back to the lawn and watched how the groups of students tended to congregate.

But he didn't stop. "You touch her a lot. Way more than you did Nick or Chris and what I'm trying to say is ... I think you like her. A lot."

Sometimes his little itty bitty hamster on a wheel wasn't stupid. "I'm in love with her, Dov. That's kinda why I'm living with her." Gail frowned. "These losers are stupid. Don't any of them have an inkling of public safety?" She gestured with a hand. "Headphones, books, I think that guy's watching a movie."

Dov coughed. "Well they're kids, Gail."

"They're idiots, Dov." Gail popped the door open.

"Where are we going?" Dov scrambled behind her, locking the car and following as she walked up to one of the student billboards.

She ignored him, skimming over the various announcements. Clubs, groups, parties, a declaration of love (did people really still do that?), lost items, wanted items, selling items. She paused. Selling? Pulling out her phone, Gail ignored the texts and snapped photos of the lost items. Maybe they were the stolen items. They were already checking Craigslist and eBay, but Gail wondered if the school had some sort of covert, underground, way to sell things.

The IT nerds would know. And she had Dov to translate. She smiled and pulled up the map on her phone.

"I know that smile," Dov interjected, warily. "That smile is dangerous. That smile is right before you make me dive in a dumpster."

"Nah, we're just going slumming with the web geeks. You'll like this one."

And she wasn't wrong.

It was payback, clearly, for softball, but Holly sighed and went over everything Gail had told her. Point it down range and away from people. Load it carefully. Check it again. Stand in a triangle position. Raise her arms, sight down the top. Aim. And gently squeeze the trigger.

The recoil jerked her arms up again and Holly winced. She glanced back and saw Gail just watching her, silently. Right, keep shooting. Holly took a deep breath and concentrated. Breath. Shoot.

One clip later, she put the gun down on the shelf and stepped back. The shooting rounds all died off and the light changed, a buzzer rang loudly. Ear protectors off, Gail pressed the button to pull in the target.

"So?" Holly chewed her lip.

"I've seen worse," Gail deadpanned and hung a new target after checking the time. "One more."
Holly groaned and rubbed her wrists. "I hate you."

"How's she doing?" Dov appeared from one side, looking interested. When Gail held up the target, he winced. "It's your first time! You'll get better."

They all sucked. Gail had told her that Dov once scored the highest for their rookie class on the range, though that was about it for his high scores. When asked, Traci told her that Gail had the highest average overall. No one beat her on the competition shoots. "I didn't throw the gun at it," muttered Holly and Gail shot her a look.

"It's my birthday," Gail pointed out. "You said anything, I don't want a party. Shoot."

"Fine, but you shoot after me."

"Fine, but I'm not shooting silly designs," she smirked and stepped back.

Ugh. How the hell noodle arm Gail managed to shoot regularly was beyond her, but Holly put her ear protection back on and her shooting glasses. Then she checked her gun. The buzzer sounded, holy crap that was loud, and Holly loaded the pistol.

She knew she was angry. It was Gail's birthday and, after multiple promises to not throw a party, Holly had simply asked what Gail wanted to do. Hearing she wanted to teach Holly how to shoot and then go out to a non-fancy dinner was not what Holly expected. But Gail did not want to make a fuss about her birthday at all. This was something Holly was going to have to ask Steve about, clearly, and he might clam up. While Gail's brother was pretty forthcoming with Gail's secrets, some things were Peck problems and not to be discussed.

The gun was comfortable for some reason. Gail had picked it from her own collection, saying it would do for a first timer, and Holly had hated the feel earlier. But now it felt right in her hand, the right weight and pressure. She wrapped her fingers around the butt properly, both hands supporting the weight, and fired.

Damn it, her girlfriend was annoying. Didn't Gail know that birthdays were for fancy clothes and sex? A party for your friends who probably needed a party anyway. God knows they'd drink over anything. A celebration of another year around the sun. Not for doing something totally mundane that Gail did at least every week anyway. Frustrated, Holly poured her annoyance into the gun and fired until the clip was empty. Checking it, she put it down and turned to look at Gail.

Who was smirking.

_Nice job._ Gail's hands moved in slowly so Holly could read them. Narrowing her eyes, Holly waited for the buzzer and pulled off the ear protectors. "Good shooting, Annie Oakley." Gail wrapped one arm around Holly's waist and reached past her to reel in the target.

Compared to Dov's it was terrible. Compared to her first try, it was amazing. "Hey..." Holly blinked and stared at it.

"Were you thinking about anything I taught you, or just bitching that I made you do this?"

"I plead the fifth," muttered Holly and stepped out of the booth. "Can I be done?"

She bumped right into Oliver, "Ooooh, lookit!" He grabbed the target and held it up. "Dr. Stewart's dangerous!"

Holly blinked and looked at a crowd who hadn't been there before. Everyone from Fifteen, including
Steve. "What the hell?"

Standing on a chair, Dov spoke loudly. "Okay, she hasn't warmed up. You know the rules. One round to warm up, then it's for real." He grinned. "As last year's winner, I am running the show. Everyone who's in, tip the hat."

A hat was shoved into Holly's hands and twenty dollar bills were dropped in. Gail, ignoring all of that, picked up Holly's gun and packed it away. Then she pulled out her own case, just smiling.

"What are we shooting?" That was Andy.

Dov held up two fingers. "22s, so Steve and Traci, you'll need to borrow."

"Hardly," scoffed Steve. He and Traci took up booths, unpacking their own. Quickly the entire line was sorted.

Then Dov vanished for a moment, leaving Holly holding the money and feeling entirely confused. Gail left her gun on the counter and sauntered over. "Did every one pay?"

"I have no idea... What's going on?"

Gail reached in and counted the money. "Hey, someone stiffed. Steven?"

"I put in a fifty," he replied.

"Sorry, I was getting change." Oliver popped back over, Celery following him with her own ear protection. "You ready to lose, Gail?"

And Gail sassed at her former sergeant. "In the history of ever, when have you made the top four?" Taking the $20 from his hand, Gail dropped it in the hat and then smiled at Holly, "Kiss me for luck?"

"Only if you tell me what's going on," Holly complained.

"Annual Gail Birthday Competition Shoot Challenge." Gail took the hat and put it on the chair. "When we were rookies, I didn't tell them it was my birthday, I just challenged them at the range. Best score won the pot. Couple years later, Nicholas let on it was my birthday. Now it's a thing."

Holly huh'd and looped her arms around Gail's neck. "You hustled them?"

"Maybe." They smiled at each other and Holly leaned in to kiss Gail very suggestively. Someone wolf whistled.

"Next time just tell me," Holly whispered. "Go shoot in my honor, or whatever."

With a broad grin, the toothy one that was Gail at her happiest, the cop bounced back to her cubicle. Dov returned momentarily, collecting the money. "Buzzer coming." Everyone put their ear protection on, even Celery who sat beside Holly.

This was the warm up, Dov had said, and everyone emptied a clip into their paper targets far faster than Holly had. She'd watched Gail shoot before, mostly perving on Gail's ass as Gail had mentioned, but also admiring her form. Gail, the non-athlete, had power and grace and skill, and it was damn sexy. There in her boots and skinny jeans and over-sized shirt, Gail looked like anything except the cop she was.

The buzzer sounded again, everyone reloaded and hung fresh targets. "For all the marbles," shouted
Dov. There was laughter, another sound of the buzzer, and this time the shots were steady. They still were faster than Holly, getting a whole round done amazingly fast, and the guns were down. Gail was done in the middle of the pack, clearly not rushing. The buzzer went off again and everyone laughed, pulling off their ear protection.

A brief (two beer) stop at the Penny and they went home, Holly giggling. "So you win every year and they fight for second?"

"Nick gives me a run for my money," admitted Gail. "He can beat me at most single long distance shots. So can Dov. And none of us come close to Nick at rifles. But I win at consistency. ... I mean, it's a competition shoot. I've been doing that since before I got my first gun."

"When was that?"

"Eighteen." Gail pulled into the garage. Holly swatted her arm. "Ow! What? Even a Peck can't own a gun as a minor. I used one of my mother's." Smirking, Gail reached over and took the police baseball cap off of Holly's head and kissed her. "I've been shooting a gun at least once a week for seventeen years," she allowed.

That was somewhat disturbing. "I cannot imagine doing anything for seventeen years," Holly decided, watching Gail grab the gun cases.

"Well," sighed Gail. "If you want to go shooting again, I'll help you get a provisional license. You probably should have one anyway, since I keep them in the house."

Holly frowned, "No, I don't want to, if that's okay. Didn't enjoy it."

"I tried." Gail smiled and held the door for Holly. "I still hate playing soccer."

"You liked softball," teased Holly, reaching to trace a finger along Gail's neckline as she passed by.

"I also am a total fan of lesbian sex. Which makes it two points in your favor." Like a puppy, Gail loped behind Holly. "Let me put these away and we can take up something we both like."

As Gail ran up the stairs, Holly shouted, "I was promised dinner, Gail!"

"Skipping to desert!"

The last time her hair had been that short, and that blonde, it had been a very, very bad day. This time she actually went to a salon with a photo of herself with the pixie cut and directions. Holly had done a great job that drunken night, of course, and Gail loved her for it, but this was time for a professional.

She slipped into the office on Saturday afternoon and took over Frank's desk, pulling up her account and notes on his computer. She had asked for a laptop. The plan was simple but Butler had liked it when she suggested it. Of course, he had intended her to oversee it until she showed him the small problems. Stakeouts were fine, this would be good for the rookies to learn. They needed students. And they needed them out of experienced officers.

And the idea she had was too right and perfect, and Butler liked it and gave her permission to set it up. Step one was to get herself right. Step two was to get a team. Dov could work for the van, but Chris was looking too scruffy lately and wouldn't be good for the street, and she didn't want to stress him overly. Also Gail really wanted a detective in the van, and Chloe for the street, so it was Gerald in the van with one of the detectives on her team. Snowflake could work with Frank and get
experience at the station monitoring the feeds.

That left Chloe and Gail.

She knew Chloe was scheduled for Saturday and, after finishing her list for her team, went downstairs to find her working at a desk. So Gail just walked up and sat beside her.

"Gail! Why are you here? Oh! I bet you have a case. Are you allowed cases? You're not a detective, which sucks."

God, the woman was tiring. She didn't babble half as attractively as Holly did. "Actually, I do have a case." Stretching her legs out, Gail scratched her head through the black watch cap. "How old are you?"

"Wow. That's personal."

Gail rolled her eyes, "I could look it up, you ninny."

"25. And you need to buy me a drink."

"Huh, you look younger." Gail rubbed her lower lip. "Ever gone to college?"

Chloe narrowed her gaze. "Did you break up with Holly?"

Everyone had such little faith in her. "No, and I'm not hitting on you. I need someone for backup." She arched a eyebrow at Chloe.

Like her, Chloe was smart. She was driven. Chloe came from cop people and she knew what being a cop meant. Chloe's hippy dippy parents were the only non-cops in her family, even though her mother had graduated the academy. Apparently she'd quit her second day on the job and went into social work. That still gave Chloe an edge, making her like Gail in that they both went for what they wanted, with stumbles on the way, but they knew. The nice part about Chloe, the part Gail actually liked and would never in a million years tell anyone, was that she understood when things weren't said.

"Buy me lunch and tell me," decided Chloe.

They got hot dogs, Chloe's idea, and sat in a park so Gail could explain. They would be casually undercover. Not weeks and months away from home, but just pretending to be college students to draw out the criminals. The robbery victims were women, not super young, but TAs and grad students with enough money to be attractive and enough familiarity with college to be careless. None of the women drank or partied, they just tended to walk in smaller groups. Ones and twos, not gaggles and packs.

The women had all be surrounded, by five or six men, all looking like college students, and relieved of their technology. No money, no assault. Just phones and tablets and laptops. It had taken a while to connect the crimes, since they'd slowed down over the summer, but with November coming to a close, they were more frequent and Gail had narrowed down things even more. She had an idea of the classes and areas. Hell, Gail had even found a couple professors willing to work with them.

All she needed from Chloe was an agreement and a haircut. They had to look younger, after all. Chloe though about it for all of a minute and then smiled. She was in. After all, Chloe didn't want to be a patrol cop forever either. They went over what they could and could not talk about to others, how much people would be involved. Who was backing up Gail at the office (and Chloe demanded to know if Uncle Frank picked her, fearing the same favoritism Gail used to). But this was on the up
and up. A chance for the legacies.

When Gail got home, the sun had set and Holly was in the middle of cleaning the kitchen. "You're late. I thought you were going to get your hair done."

Gail pulled the watch cap off and hung up her jacket. "Had some work to do. How much will you hate me if I have to go undercover during the days?"

There was a pause in Holly's scrubbing and she didn't look over. "I don't like it." Holly sounded tense.

That was good to know. "Why not?"

"Because the last time you were undercover?" Holly stopped scrubbing but did not turn around. "It scares the shit out of me, Gail."

With a loud sigh, Gail leaned against the island. "Well. It's not the same. I'm not looking for a serial killer, just some idiot robbers."

After a longer pause, she asked, "Do you come back here at night?" Holly still didn't look at Gail. She resumed scrubbing the stovetop and making it whimper in agony.

"Weekday gig only, nights and weekends at home." It was the most cushy op ever, Gail had to admit.

Holly huffed and straightened up. "I guess I can't be all mad." She turned around and stared at Gail's head. "Oh, oh. So that happened?"

"It's just hair, right?"

Pressing her lips together, Holly resumed scrubbing, her ponytail bouncing with the ferocity. "Undercover Gail needs that haircut?"

Gail sighed. "It makes me look younger, Holly." There was a grunt from the kitchen.

"Can you tell me what you're doing?"

"I'm not supposed to talk about it," drawled Gail and Holly shot her a look over her shoulder. Right. That never worked. "It's at UToronto. Butler's letting me run with an op about a robbery ring. Too small for gangs."

Holly turned around and leaned on the counter. "You know, every time you tell me about what you actually work on upstairs, Major Crimes works on some really petty and minor stuff."

It was complicated. "I'm gonna be a TA. Languages." She smiled softly and sheepishly.

"Huh." Holly put the scrubber down. Her eyes roamed over Gail's head and then body. "I forgot how you looked like that." Holly's voice was breathy.

Blinking, Gail recognized that look. She had long suspected Holly gave her this haircut in the first place because she found it sexy. And if that also cleverly distracted Holly from any fears about Gail being undercover, so much the better. "Is that a hint I should keep my hair short?"

With a blush, Holly turned to wash her hands off. "Well if you like it short, that's okay."

Gail laughed and shook her head. "We're not doing it this way, Holly. You're totally getting hot and
bothered over my haircut." And Holly kept her back to Gail, drying her hands. So Gail walked around the kitchen island and put her hands on Holly's hips. "You like my short hair."

As Gail pressed her lips to Holly's shoulder, a shudder ran through Holly's body. "How dangerous is the op?"

Gail did not stop kissing Holly's neck and shoulder. "They might rob me," she admitted. "The tech nerds are trying to find an underground tech sales ring." It was totally safe, in so far as any op was safe.

Sensing that, perhaps, Holly leaned back, pressing into Gail's body. "I really like you with short hair," exhaled Holly, turning her head and giving Gail a little more access. "You won't vanish for six months like Nick, right?"

"Hey," Gail growled. "This house is a Nicholas free zone." She hooked her thumbs through Holly's belt loops and tugged her closer. "This neck is a Gail-only zone." She brushed her cheek against Holly's neck and got another full body shiver out of it.

Holly sighed and turned around, loosening Gail's hold on her. "My stomach is a food free zone, honey." She cupped Gail's face in her hands and kissed her. "As beautiful as you are with that haircut, I'm starving."

That was something Gail could understand. She half glanced at the stove top. "What were you making before the stove needed a bath?"

"Ugh! Why am I dating a detective?" Holly kissed her again and wormed out of Gail's hands. "Tell me you have a dinner idea."

"I had a desert idea," drawled Gail, but as she was never one to skip a meal, addressed herself to that pressing need, before allowing them to attend other pressing needs.
I am in love with Gail with the pixie cut. This is a mostly Gail story, but Holly should have a case too. Holly's disgusting Jell-O snack is something my younger family members made once. It was inedible.

While Holly had no idea why people from 15 gave Detective Rosati such odd looks, she was happy enough to see a familiar face when she came to the scene of the crime. "He looks fresh," said the detective, gesturing for Holly to follow her.

"Glad you found him before it started snowing," Holly grinned and walked down the stairs to the parking garage. Officer Cole (only memorable for being Chloe's ex husband, something Holly learned on the camping trip) stood guard and waved them on through to where his partner, Officer Luck (aka the officer Gail tolerated with snide comments), was stationed by the body.

"Does that really matter when the body is inside?" Rosati asked in a casual way, as if she knew the answer but was making polite conversation.

"It always matters, Detective." Holly put down her kit and took in the scene. A car, door open, a man on the ground. Not a whole lot. Pulling on gloves, she asked, "Photos?"

"CSI took them of the body and placement. There's blood on the top of the door."

Holly leaned over and muttered her interest. Squatting, Holly checked the body for a pulse out of habit. You find one not-dead guy and you worry about it forever. "He's cold," she noted, glancing at Rodney who was writing that down. "Broken nose, before he died. The gash there may match the door, have CSI check for mucus."

Making a face, Officer Luck peered at the body. "Choked on the blood from his nose?"

Reflexively, Holly shook her head. "Not enough blood on the ground for that." She carefully picked up the head and turned it, or started to. "Oh. Well that'll wait till we get the body in," she muttered to herself.

Rosati coughed gently. "Anything important?"

"His skull is loose," Holly replied without thinking. "Bashed in pretty good, possibly perimortem."

"In English?" That was Officer Luck. Gail didn't have a high regard for the woman, calling her a reliable cop. In Peck verbiage that meant average and Holly now understood why. This was a woman who would be on patrol her whole life. She was probably a very good patrol cop, just not imaginative.

"At or near time of death," Holly poked the winter hat and felt it smush a little. "Not as much blood as I'd expect, unless it's all in his clothes." It reminded Holly of the Jell-o salad she'd made as a young girl, complete with her favorite snacks: walnuts, chocolate chips, and marshmallows. It had been crunchy and disgusting.
The detective spoke again, "Any ID?"

They always wanted to get to the meat of the case. That was the problem with cops, they had no sense of foreplay. Okay, that wasn't totally true. They just didn't like the anticipation of science. Holly prodded pockets and found a wallet in the front pocket of the jeans. "You're in luck, Rosati." She handed the wallet to Rodney, who flipped open the ID and read off the details to Rosati before bagging the evidence.

It didn't take long to clear the body and Holly stretched as her assistants and CSI took over the onerous duty of transport. She watched, interested, as they put the body into a bag and it dripped. The blood was probably all soaked into his winter clothes. He was a little over dressed now that Holly thought about it. The puffy jacket.

What was it Gail had said? The kids believed that a puffy jacket would stop a hollow point round from expanding as fast. Of course that just let it penetrate more. Better not to get shot at all, Gail had dryly remarked. She was not a fan and Holly chuckled.

"Something funny?" Jen Luck smiled at her, suggestively.

And that was why Gail didn't like Luck. "The jacket. He probably thought he might get shot."

Rosati looked over, surprised. "Most likely," she agreed. "What brought the thought on?"

"He's over dressed." Winter had yet to really get downright cold, which Holly appreciated. That said, cold winter nights with Gail sounded rather appealing. Skiing? Gail probably didn't. "Maybe he expected to be shot at."

Officer Luck made a noise of surprise. "Wow." She shook her head.

"Luck, you take Cole and canvas the area." Rosati started to give orders, and Holly turned to make sure her own assistants handled everything properly. She beat them to the morgue and had time to suit up and prep beforehand. Rosati did not tag along, no one from 27 did that.

It made it quieter and easier on many levels to work unimpeded, but Holly did miss the attitude you got with 15. When she got home, she told Gail as much. "You miss my nattering? Should I record it so you can listen when I'm stuck in classes?"

"How's that going?"

"Five days so far, so good." Gail stretched, "One of the other students found her phone on a private black market website. Can you believe they have that for universities? We're using that to track them back. Oh and Chloe got followed today, so that's good."

"Not you?"

"No, not yet. I'm going to make my copious TA wealth more obvious soon."

Holly smiled at her girlfriend. "Running your own op."

"Technically it's not mine, I'm just on site." Gail dropped onto the end of the couch and picked up a game controller.

Because Gail wasn't a detective. Because Gail wasn't allowed to be a detective yet. "I hate your mother."
"Join the club," sighed Gail, flipping through screens until she found Netflix. "Okay, so what are we watching?"

"Doctor Who," smiled Holly, sitting down on the couch. "We're going to start with Nine."

Gail looked up, suspicious. "Nine? Holly, I can understand Star Wars and Star Trek, but all this weird stuff..." She tabbed through the screens to the one Holly indicated and hovered over the play button.

"Oh fine, there are thirteen Doctors. I'm not making you watch all of them."

Grumbling, Gail settled beside Holly and watched the first episode. Allowing as it didn't suck, she watched a second before they went to bed, but Holly knew she had another convert.

When her phone buzzed, Gail knew it was Gerald in the van. She glanced at it and frowned. This was not good timing. The tricky part of her cover was acting as a TA. Gail had no problem with the work, it was the people kept crowding her office. Her professor's office. Gail was just stationed in the front.

"Is something wrong?" The student, a woman who was incapable of reliable conjugation without assistance, and had no business in this level of class, was nervous.

"I have to cut this short, sorry. My boyfriend locked himself out. Again." She rolled her eyes and stood up.

Ushering the girl out, Gail locked the door and hustled, screwing in the earbuds that were really her radio. "Gerald, talk to me."

"It's four now. Four. They're the same guys who scoped her out yesterday."

"Frank?"

The sergeant replied quickly, "She knows you're coming."

Gail cut through the quad. Two weeks to lure them. That was it. These idiots weren't high level criminals, they were just organized and ordered. That made it hard to catch them at all, but six days ago had been their break. Chloe had been followed 'home' to the small student apartment that was 'hers.'

Really it was just another surveillance point, and Chloe had only spent one night there. But six days ago a guy followed her. And then four days ago the same loser followed Gail to the car where her boyfriend, played by the over earnest Gerald, waited for her. Gerald had been more nervous about being under cover, and Gail promptly dumped him back in the van, her bumbling but big hearted puppy.

The students joked and said she was taking advantage of his youthful stamina. If it hadn't been so gross, it might have been hilarious.

Once they had the one guy marked, it had been child's play. They followed him, carefully, and watched how he interacted. The communication was all done on cell phones, which they could not track without a warrant (and Frank insisted they didn't have enough evidence for that), but the discovery of the black market site for student supplies gave them the next clue.

The losers were using Twitter. Fucking Twitter! Public damn tweets about nothing were all a series
of coded communiques. Idiots. Dov had cracked their code in an hour, pointing out how simple it was and they had the code explained on their secret website, which had been no trouble to break into. Serious criminals these were not. This is what happened when people played at being criminals because it was easier on TV. Morons.

Between the remarks, they organized their little attacks, and it was clear Chloe and Gail were on their list.

Making Chloe the first target was intentional. She was younger, easier to buy as a rich transfer from McGill. Gail was the last minute TA, filling in while the actual TA healed up from a skating accident. That part was somewhat real; Gail did the TA classes, the actual TA did the paperwork from home as he healed two broken legs (the skating incident was 100% truth - the man was not a skater). They set up Chloe in a nice apartment, well off, and she portrayed the role of an ingenue, rich and bored and could care less about passing French Language Literature.

Gail even got to call her names in public. It was great.

In addition, Chloe also played absentminded, leaving an expensive laptop in class on the second day. She 'lost' her phone twice, and laughed it off. The point was to quickly, believably, establish her as an airhead with money. Someone who would get lost on a walk because she wasn't paying attention, and wouldn't notice she was missing things, or care.

"Gerald, tell me you have eyes on her," hissed Gail, nearly caroming off the whole damn basketball team. What the hell? She could see the Zipcar parking on Pond and Sentinel, but not Chloe.

"I'm losing her in the crowd. She's supposed to be on Pond." He paused. "Should I get out of the van?"

The echoing shout of "No!" from all quarters nearly blasted Gail's ear out. Good. Frank's firm voice cut in, "Duncan, just keep your eyes on her. Gail, what's your status?"

Crowded, Gail snarled and turned her shoulder, forcing herself through the crowd. "I can see the van..." She dodged around a couple and finally spotted Chloe's dyed head turning on Passy Crescent. Dov had hated the hair dye, but Gail wanted to be able to spot the red haired annoying person from afar, so she'd talked Chloe into a tint that was just off of normal.

Damned if she hadn't been right to do that. "I have eyes on you, Peck," said the detective in the van with Gerald. "Go."

Gail paused to make sure her hair was covered and tugged her jacket open just enough to have the gun holstered in the small of her back accessible. Black hat, navy blue coat, she looked like everyone else. She slowed to a walk and ambled in the general direction.

They knew what the swarm looked like. It was caught on camera once, the CCTV camera across the street had proven useful, and Gail used that information to wait until the group started to combine. "Gonna need two more," she said softly.

Frank replied quickly that Nick and his partner were nearby and McNally was on the way. Once again, Gerald offered and was shot down. It was funny. "Which way you think they'll go?"

"To the crowd," mused Gail, looking at the layout quickly. "Uniforms can grab 'em if they go down to Assiniboine. One'll make us run."

"Copy, they can back up Price."
One of the men around Chloe moved, his hand on her arm. He pulled. There was the move. "Go, go, go!" The detective in her ear shouted, and Gail was on the run.

Just like she was taught, Chloe twisted her arm out of the grasp of the robber and stepped back, slipping between two of her wanna-be assailants. "... and you're under arrest," she said, firmly and loudly, grabbing the one who'd manhandled her and twisting his arm up.

Perfect timing. The second Chloe did that, the other three started to move. One went right where Gail thought he would, right to the street where Nick flew out of the car before it stopped and grabbed him. Show off. Gail grinned as she caught one fleeing before he got more than five steps and swung him around, slapping a cuff on one wrist. "Hi! Nice try. You're under arrest," she said, unkindly to him, but with great glee.

Then there was the one who went into the crowd, headed back through campus. Nick's partner was there and Gail made a snap decision. This was her damn op, titles be damned. "You got this one?" she asked, letting the uniform take hold of the very confused robber.

"Yeah, but—"

Gail didn't let him finish, grabbing his cuffs out of his hand, and took off through the crowd. "Eyes on our runner?"

"Lost him when he went through the archway!" That was Nick.

A very excited Gerald cut in, "I see him! Should I get out of the—"

A "NO" echoed in Gail's ear again. At least he asked, she mused. "Spot him, Gerald."

"He dumped his jacket, it was black with a dark red stripe. Blue UoT hoodie, orange shoulder thingies, cutting through towards Atkinson."

If the loser took to the walks and lanes, she might loose him. Hustle time. "I hate when they make me run," she grouched into the mic, not caring that it was on.

Frank cut in, "Campus security is on the lookout but he's in a school hoodie. Gail, do you think he saw you?"

"Nope," she huffed, concentrating on speed and not tripping as she looked across the walks for the someone running in a school hoodie. Smart kid, wearing the school colors. In her haste, Gail nearly tumbled over the jacket on the ground.

Which way would she have tossed it? Assuming the loser was right handed, she mimed tossing her jacket and looked at the dirt. That way. Gail took off at a dead sprint, and damn it, she was going to have to tell Holly that all that stupid running, which really started when they broke up, was helpful. Stupid running. Running sucked. Head up, Gail kept sweeping the area looking for someone running. What if he stopped? There was a group of kids... What the hell. She pulled her badge out, took a breath, and yelled, "Police! Stop!"

Everyone stopped and snapped their heads at her. One guy, in a blue UoT hoodie looked right at her, face pale. He started to scramble backwards. Jesus, they were idiots. "Got him, Peck?"

She pushed through a crowd more than willing to let her through to grab the guy by the hoodie itself. That was probably a little too rough, but ... well he made her run! "Hey, what part of 'Stop' was unclear, dumb ass?"
He acked and tried to get away, but Gail, far too used to handling idiots like this, had him cuffed before he got too far, jerking him nearly off his feet. "I didn't do anything!"

"You're under arrest for attempted robbery," snapped Gail. She was breathing louder than she really wanted to be. "Why did you have to run? You're so annoying when you run," she growled. "Got him, Best."

"Sure it's him?" She could hear Frank laughing softly over the wire, and ignored the question.

As Gail hauled the guy back over to the parking lot where the uniforms were pulling up, they passed the jacket. "Hey, can I grab my coat?"

If Gail's hands had been empty, she would have face palmed. "Your coat, huh?" She heard Frank groan over the wire. "Sure." Gail pulled a latex glove out of the baggie in her pocket (thank you, Holly), and picked up the coat. "Can't forget your coat, can we," she drawled and led the idiot back to the uniforms.

This was going to be way easier than she thought.

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Watching Noelle behind the counter of the Penny was an experience Holly had never thought to enjoy, but there she was, in uniform, cheerfully reading off the names of four rookies who were having their faces pressed into the bartop. Dov, Chris, Andy, and Nick were holding the rookies to their places, cuffing them tightly.

Holly leaned into Gail's arm and asked, "This is normal?"

"Yep, any time we get an actual group of them, and not the one-offs, we do this." Gail sipped her beer, looking very pleased with herself.

Oliver was sitting beside them, sans Celery, and confided, "Gail won her year."

Traci laughed, "Gail cheated her year. She used Steve's key."

"They said by any means. Steve was here." Gail had absolutely zero shame about her methods, which was normal. An arm looped around the back of Holly's chair, gently tugging her closer as the rookies struggled to get themselves free.

Holly smiled. She enjoyed hanging out with the boisterous cops now and then, and often wondered if Gail missed it. It was clearly by her own choice that Gail had stopped coming every single night and certainly her own choice to stop drinking so much. A beer was common, but they'd both slowly cut back on the hard stuff. Holly had decided that for herself, waking up the morning after her Visa had been revoked. The hangover had been so intense, she never wanted to feel that way again.

Getting drunk had lost it's magic, she realized, and Holly abruptly felt old. A breath on her neck sent shivers down her spine. "You're thinking to hard, Lunchbox," whispered Gail softly.

"I think I'm getting old," sighed Holly.

"No, Oliver is old."

That was a disturbing thought. "How old is Oliver?" Holly lowered her voice and leaned in to ask.

Naturally Gail took the opportunity to kiss her. "45." And Gail turned her attention to the rookies, none of whom seemed to know that both Pecks carried cuff keys all the time.
At 45, Oliver was 16 years Gail's senior, but only 8 or so older than Holly, which was horribly sobering. He had a newly 16 year-old daughter (Izzy had proudly shown Gail her provisional license and somehow convinced Gail to teach her, though Holly was sure Gail enjoyed it). That meant that at around Gail's age, Oliver was already a parent. And what had Holly done?

How absolutely depressing.

Finally one of the rookie's won, using lock picks he kept in his bag. Gail announced she liked that one and went to help uncuff the other rookies and talk to that one. Sitting alone for a moment, Holly kept looking at Oliver and Traci. They were both parents. She could be if she wanted. Hell, Gail would have been if things had not been shot to .. Hell. Too much hell in her thoughts. Too many possibilities.

"Gail's right, you do overthink a lot," Steve informed her, taking Gail's seat and putting down a basket of fries.

Perfect. Delay with a fry. "Oh?"

"You're feeling old." He pointed at Gail, who was now arguing about something with Traci at the bar. The rat fink.

"I'm almost 40, Steve," she sighed. "She's not even 30... She wants kids. I don't." Holly starting waving her hands around in mild distress. She was feeling very panicked at the moment. "I know she's getting started on a career, but I'm already in the middle, and what if I get another job offer and move to, to Budapest?"

"Woah, woah, woah!" Putting his beer down, Steve grabbed her hands. "Holly, calm down a second, okay?" She swallowed and nodded. "Good. My sister is in love with you."

Holly waited for more and blinked a few times. "That's it?"

"No, ok but I want you to hold on to that thought. You like my sister."

"Steve," she groaned and started to look away.

His voice was surprisingly firm, "Hey." She blinked and looked at his eyes and startled more. They were the same sort of blue as Gail's, but somehow gentler. Gail's eyes reminded her of the tempest and storm that was Gale Peck. But Steve was the sea and sky after the storm. Potentially just as life changing, but vastly different. Where his eyes were calm and gentle, Gail's spoke of passion.

Looking at those eyes, thinking of Gail's eyes, she felt her lips curve into a smile. One side of her face came up, in a look Gail called 'that adorable side smile.' Holly couldn't help but blush a little. "Yes, I like your sister very much, Steve," she whispered, certain he couldn't hear her over the din of the room. "I love her."

"Then tell her what you want."

Holly's eyes fell to the table. "If I knew that..." She pulled her hands back and wrapped them around her beer. "I always know what I want. You have to, to make it through med school."

"That's professionally," Steve noted, leaning back somewhat. "I get it. So does Gail, even if she pretends she doesn't."

Pecks. Of course. Holly sighed. "Gail's the first person I've ever dated and lived with." The admission surprised Steve. "And I have a phenomenal track record with dating straight girls. Like ...
Amazingly awful. I've driven two women back to men," she added, morosely. And she'd run after that. Running was easy.

Steve looked at his sister and chuckled, "Given that she's telling me if I try to kiss you, she will ... Peel back the skin on my balls and hook it over my head, I'm pretty sure she's not all that straight." He shook his head and his hands moved too fast for Holly to read, even if she had known the words. "Actually, I think she just dated men because that's what our mom expected."

That was new. "You thought Gail was gay?"

"Yeah, always did. Something about it..." He shrugged. "I want to say it's my gut, but that particular method of deduction was beat out of my head before I could drive." Steve picked up his drink. "Stop thinking so hard. You love her. She loves you. She actually is doing a hell of a job breaking the Peck Self Sabotage Cycle because she thinks you're the most incredible person she's ever met. She literally cannot stop talking about you. Even when you broke up, you were all she thought about." He clapped a hand to Holly's shoulder. "She's all in, Holly." And he left her at the table.

If Holly thought that was going to be the weirdest part of her night, she was wrong.

"I have a talk," announced Oliver, sitting in the now empty Peck seat.

Reflexively, Holly asked, "For whom?" She glanced over to where Gail was and saw her lighting something alcoholic on fire. Oh Jesus.

Oliver followed the look. "She's fine. She's not drinking that. The talk is for my rookies." He gestured at Andy, who was awkwardly talking to Sam, and god knew what was up with that. Gail said she liked the McSwarek relationship because it made her feel normal. "Gail stole it."

That distracted Holly sufficiently from the fear of her girlfriend playing with fire. Stolen talk? "Oh! I know that one. The one about not touching things without permission?"

"That's the one." He smiled. "I have another one. She doesn't know it." He hesitated and then said, "Actually, she kind of gave it to Celery once."

The incongruity was giving Holly a headache. "I have no idea what that talk is, then. The only other one I know is the one about not puking in my lab and how Gail has special privileges." They also had a no making out at work rule right now, especially in interrogation. Kissing was allowed but not making out, just the PG kind of kisses. Sex was not up for discussion.

Oliver put a hand gently on Holly's arm. "A lot of cops have relationship problems. And this job, it scares people off. Frank got divorced, three times. I got divorced. You've seen Andy and Sammy screw up a million times." The older man sighed. "But. Sometimes, once in a while, we get really lucky. We fall in love with someone we can't explain. It doesn't make any sense and our friends think we're crazy. And ... And something changes us. We don't care about that so much, we care about this wonderful person." Oliver gestured with one hand. "I'm gonna ask Celery to marry me."

What? Holly blinked a few times and wished she had Gail's knack for instant recall of conversations. At the start, she thought that Oliver was going to give her some kind of talk about dealing with Gail, and then dealing with dating a cop. After almost a year, Holly was pretty sure she understood all the woes and pitfalls, but maybe not. This ... This had not been expected.

"Oh! I think, um, congratulations?"

"If she says yes," admitted Oliver. "You and my petulant Peck must attend, darling."
Holly nodded and the question popped out, "Why do you call her that?"

"Petulant? She's very pouty." Oliver grinned, broadly. "But she holds a very special place in my heart. She's my favorite. But don't tell her."

Holly grinned back, feeling the easy comfort that came with being with Oliver, and realized why Gail liked him so much. It was impossible not to like him. Letting go of her beer, Holly wrapped her arms around Oliver and squeezed him in a hug. "You're a very good man, Oliver," she whispered in his ear.

Squeezing her back, Oliver whispered back. "You're a great person, Holly. You don't need my talk. You love her, and you know she loves you. Keep that in your heart every day you worry about her out there."

Chapter End Notes

I wrote out a whole talk and then I decided to be Oliver and do it differently.

In real life, Aliyah O'Brien is not that old, but I'm aiming at a more realistic view of people's ages when they get through med school. So yay, Holly's about 7.5 years older than Gail. Gail's 29 and Holly is almost 37. Trust me, it's less awkward now than it would be if Gail was 21.
Unex-pekted

Sitting by the robbery victim, Gail held the shirt to his head and listened to him tell her all about the guy who'd cracked him on the head, hard. He was the fifth person that month, all of whom had been walloped hard on the head and lifted of their wallets. It was a hell of a way to mug someone in a parking garage, Gail had to admit, but effective.

When the EMTs came, Gail had a moment of concern and called back to dispatch, verifying who they were before letting her victim go. She frowned as they left and dusted her pants off. "That's weird, right?" She looked at the detective she was assigned to, and he shrugged.

He was not Gail's favorite partner. The silent act alone was frustrating. His lack of imagination and interest was mind boggling. Gail knew Butler liked him because he was solid, dependable, and intelligent. He did a good job and followed a case to a logical end every time. But that reminded her of Callaghan, and how he didn't always think beyond the obvious.

Obvious, right now, was that someone was a total asshole when it came to mugging. She pulled her phone out and tapped in a text to Holly.

*If I hit a bunch of people with the same thing the same way, would there be a way to verify that?*

On the detective's order, Gail went around getting statements and collecting CCTV tapes for evidence before going back to the station. It was the boring, legwork, portion of the cases that she hated. If she was a real detective, she could make Chris or Andy do her bidding. Instead, she was stuck in an uncomfortable in-between that she hated.

When her phone chimed, she dug it out at a stop light.

*If you had the object, theoretically it could be matched to the wounds.*

That was an idea.

*Can you get impressions from living skulls?*

She was honestly surprised she didn't get a lecture about how bones were alive out of that. Instead she got a phone call. "Honey, please tell me these are legit work questions," sighed Holly. A pause. "Am I on speaker?"

"I'm driving. It's just me in the cruiser."

"There's a relief. What's going on?"

Explaining the case, broadly, Gail touched on the meat of her issue. "I was thinking if I could get something like dental impressions from their head wounds, maybe we could reconstruct the weapon and look for that. The foot part of detectiving is coming up short."

Holly made a thoughtful noise on the phone and didn't answer. This wasn't weird. When she was thinking hard, Holly often made funny sounds. "Did they all have CT scans and X-rays?"

"Probably. I can check."

"That's where you need to start, then. The problem with making a mould is the skull will want to go back to it's normal shape. The brain is squishy."
Gail laughed, "That's a medical term, right? Squishy."

"Shut up," laughed Holly. "If you get the scans, I can take a look, Officer Peck."

"Thanks, Dr. Stewart. You're the best."

Getting the scans proved to be easy. Gail explained she wanted to follow up and Butler just hand-waved his permission. Between the Russians and the robbery swarming gang, she was his golden child and could do no wrong.

Looking at the scans, Gail hesitated about bringing them home. She didn't really want work to intrude their personal life any more than it already did, but this might save her some headaches later. It was always so damn complicated. Gail threw the images onto her official thumb drive and shoved the device into her bag.

Holly hadn't been satisfied with shooting and drinking as a birthday, and got Gail a leather shoulder bag for her work. Now that she was actually toting files home occasionally (though Gail preferred to put them on her iPad), she had a need for something that wouldn't crunch them up. It hadn't replaced a purse, but she now had a much smaller purse that she could stash in the bag when needed.

"Still here, Peck?"

Gail blinked and looked up at Butler walking back in. "Sir?"

"It's almost eight. I know you're eager, but …"

Shit, Holly was going to be annoyed. Gail grabbed her phone. "I was just going." She pointed at the door.

"Good," smiled Butler, going to his desk for something and turning right back around. "Don't you hate when you get home and realize you forgot something?"

Gail grinned, "I don't live that far away. It's not so bad."

"But you still have that street cop mentality. Check your bag before you walk out a door."

Looking at her bag, Gail realized he was right. She sighed and slung the bag to her shoulder, walking with him out to the stairs. "I'm still not used to not locking my gun up here every night."

"Oh that took me forever to get used to," agreed her boss. "But you have guns at home anyway."

Gail shrugged, "It's not the same thing. Those are mine. This is … work." Butler made a noise of understanding and they went downstairs.

It was still weird to her, not being on the main floor for work, and being inside most of the days. She went out on rendezvous more than patrol, though Butler had said if the uniforms were short handed, to expect to have to help out.

Just before she turned to the locker room, Butler cleared his throat. "You're friends with Frank, right?"

"Yes," Gail replied slowly, trying to think of where this was going.

Butler studied her face, "He's applied for a transfer to the main building. There's been a lot of overturn." His lips quirked slightly, indicating that Gail's guess was exactly why there'd been changes. Every day it seemed like her mother had less and less to do.
But Frank hadn't mentioned that to her and she frowned a little, "Oh. I didn't know."

"I asked him not to tell you," explained Butler. "He's kind of been my connection, between Sgt. Shaw and our guys. Greasing the wheel and making sure we get unis when we need them." Butler glanced at Oliver's office. "I wanted to ask you about taking that over."

Ask. Not an order. "Do I have to take the sergeants exam?"

"God, no, you'd be a terrible sergeant," laughed Butler. "You're better out there then half the rookies we get." He jerked his chin to the street. "If you were a detective…"

There was a moment of tense awkwardness and Gail sighed. "Well that's not your fault, sir." It was hers, in many ways, but more it was her mother's for screwing up everything. That was still funny to Gail, thinking about how much time her mother spent trying to make her to things the Peck way, and now Gail's assignment was screwed up because of Elaine's meddling.

"No, but I'd push more it if I could, Peck. Think about it, will you?"

"Don't need to, sir." She grinned broadly at her Inspector. "I can keep Oliver in check."

With a final clap to her shoulder, Butler headed out and Gail went to change out of her uniform. Hanging it up in her locker, Gail looked over at Andy and Chloé's. She never thought she'd miss hanging out with them, giving them crap about their lives, harassing them, but now that she didn't see them as often, it was starting to be weird.

Her life was slowly but inexorably moving away from bar life. There was no reason to get drunk after shift, because she had nothing to avoid. It was really freeing, not having to worry about the Peck crap most of the time. She didn't have the Damoclean sword dangling over her head at every life choice she made. The cost had been insanely high, admittedly, and it wasn't something Gail would readily suggest to anyone.

However. She texted Holly as she tossed her bags into her car.

You suck, Stewart.

At least I'm not late.

Sorry.

Why do I suck and where are you?

Just leaving. And because I know it's Damoclean and not Damocleseian.

I'm impressed autocorrect didn't duck that up.

Gail grinned and put the phone in the car's dock. At this hour, there was no traffic and getting home was speedy enough that it was barely after eight. Gail parked and bounded into the house, "Sorry, Holly. I got wrapped up."

"That's okay, I think I figured out what was wrong with the bacon." Her girlfriend was in the kitchen, based on the noise.

This might be bad. Gail dropped her bags by the stairs and hung up her coat. "London Broil again?"

"One more try. If I screw it up, we are done."
"I hope that's to your cooking and not me," teased Gail, and she leaned on the counter to watch Holly watch the oven.

"Shut up," laughed Holly. "I watched Alton Brown a dozen times."

"He makes it American style, Holly!"

Holly waved a hand, dismissive, "And I substituted lamb instead of veal, because baby cows make me cry."

Covering her face with her hands, Gail groaned. "This is why you can't get it right, Holly. You substitute after you have a successful recipe."

For the last few months, Holly had been experimenting with cooking she saw on the Food Network. Gail blamed it on the fact that she'd worked that college op, and wasn't as much at home, but Holly said she liked to cook. She wasn't great at it, was the problem. Simple stuff Holly could do wonderfully, way better than Gail, but the complicated cooking with braising and searing and frying in multiple steps, she was abysmal. And yet she kept on trying, no matter how Gail tried to talk her out of it.

Like tonight, Holly blithely ignored her and went on with the rest of her prep, which naturally included a salad. "How did you find out you were allergic to tomatoes?"

Gail blinked and eyed the salad. "You're not going to start with the whole desensitizing treatment idea, are you?"

"God, no! Steve told me you tried that once."

Thank god for Steve. "I think I was six or seven, Mother wanted me to eat a salad. I ended up in the ER." Gail had only a vague memory of that particular event. "My lips got all puffy and I was throwing up. Lots of fun."

Holly looked thoughtful, "That explains why you eat so much junk food."

"Who asked you anyway," laughed Gail. "Can I have a drink, or will I upset the precious balance of your kitchening ways?"

"You may. Why were you late?"

Gail walked past Holly to get a glass, pausing to kiss her shoulder. "I was getting those scans I asked you about."

"Oh, I worried you were going to go around hitting Dov and Chris." Holly grinned and diced bell peppers for the salad.

"Tempting. No, we've had five guys get mugged and whacked in the head."

That caught Holly's attention, surprisingly. "Back of the head?" When Gail nodded, Holly ordered her to stay and rushed upstairs to get her laptop. "Where's your scan?"

Knowing better than to get between Holly and science, Gail fetched the thumb drive and watched her girlfriend pull up the images and start comparing things. The smell of meat caressed her nose and Gail eyed the timer. Twenty minutes would be too long. She let Holly study and took the food out of the oven and set it to rest on the cutting board. It smelled good at least.
"Huh," muttered Holly and Gail took that as a cue to lean over and look.

"What does 'huh' mean?" She peered at the screen and frowned. "Wait a second." Even to her untrained eye, the cracks looked similar, but the comparison x-ray was not one Gail had brought in.

"That," Holly pointed to the left, "is a victim I picked up from 27. Rosati's case." She stabbed at the rightmost image, "That's your guy from last week." Beaming, Holly gestured with both hands.

"Can you break that down a bit for me, Holly," sighed Gail. "They look really similar—"

Holly cut her off, "Yes, they look really similar. If they were the same height, they'd look damn near identical."

Blinking, Gail regarded Holly's ecstatic face. "A serial head-cracker?"

"Same type of weapon. You find the weapon, CSI will confirm."

"Well now you've pointed at my other problem, Dr. Stewart," sighed Gail, and she pushed her sleeves up. "That's going to be tomorrow's problem, though. Come on, let's see how bad you cooked the meat."

Holly groaned. "Wait, why is it out of the oven?"

"Because you were going to over cook it. Carryover heat, we'll be fine. You just can't handle cooking meat, Holly, when will you give up?" Gail carefully cut into the meat and was pleased to see the right amount of pink.

"Is this where you make a joke about how the lesbian can't handle meat," complained Holly, but she was smiling.

It was cold. Surprisingly cold. Holly wrinkled her face and opened her eyes in the darkness of the winter morning. Why was she cold? Holly sat up and realized Gail had all the blankets. Something that hadn't been a problem in spring or summer was now, suddenly, very annoying. Holly managed to free the sheet and recover some warmth, but the quiet of the morning was disturbed.

In this early morning, with blowing snow and the only sounds were the heater and humidifier, Gail was soundly asleep, her back visible as she'd cuddled the comforter around so it was in front of her. Sometimes her favorite moments were when Gail was still like this, eyes closed, faced relaxed and calm. It was rare to see her this quiet and peaceful. Gail was a tempest in her waking hours, always moving and whirling. Of course Holly adored her for it, for her passion and sarcasm and wit, but also for this.

Holly smiled and gently tugged the comforter closer to her, but Gail hunkered down even more. The only way to keep warm enough was to cuddle up against her girlfriend, body to body. Early on, Gail had always woken up when Holly tried to cuddle her in the mornings. Some time before they'd moved in, Gail started to sleep through Holly getting up and after a while she dozed through morning snuggling.

That was another thing Holly absolutely adored about life at this moment. Curling around Gail, Holly sighed and sunk into the bed further, inhaling the scent of Gail and feeling her soft skin. The wind whirled around the house, snow pelting the windows. December was going to be a shit kicker, realized Holly. She pressed her lips to Gail's shoulder blade and tried to be still and quiet.

Eventually Gail's death grip on the comforter slacked and Holly eased more towards herself, getting
her back covered over. But she was too awake now. Holly sighed and reached for her glasses, pulling them on to study the shapes of the master bedroom in the gloom. The blue comforter was dark against Gail's skin and Holly lost herself in the smooth expanse.

"Beautiful," sighed Holly, and she ran her hand across Gail's shoulder and back, pulling the comforter up.

Gail sighed and squirmed, getting more of her body back under the covers. But she didn't wake for a while, allowing Holly to lay there watching her. Slowly the innocent face of relaxation eased into the quiet sleepy expression of wakefulness. Gail rolled to her back and opened her eyes, smiling. "Hey," she grinned at Holly. "Why are you awake?"

Reaching over, Holly traced her fingers down Gail's face. "You stole the blankets."

"Sorry," yawned Gail and she snuggled under the blankets more. "If you're cold, you could come here."

Obliging, Holly curled back up with Gail, settling in the middle of the bed, as was her favorite spot. The wind picked up and Gail looked up, surprised. "The storm hit."

"Damn," sighed Gail. "Early storms."

"Long winters." The wind howled and Gail reached a hand out for her phone, checking it. "Do you have any cases?" Holly let her hand wander over the available skin.

"Nothing that can't be worked at home." She tapped in something and tossed the phone back onto the nightstand. "You?"

Holly thought about it for a moment, her hand pausing on Gail's ribs briefly. "Nothing. Cleared my list, and I doubt anyone will come in for a few days." After the storms were always busier for the labs.

With a sleepy smile, Gail stretched out. "Good," she decided. Her eyes drifted closed as Holly's hand smoothed over her stomach and arms. "I used to hate storms. Stuck inside with people."

Scooting closer, Holly kissed Gail's shoulder. "I'm not people?"

"No." Gail grinned. "You're not."

"I think that was a compliment." Holly let her hand drift higher, suggestively, and was pleased that Gail turned towards her with that soft smile Holly knew was hers and hers alone.

Gail reached up and took Holly's glasses off, "It's early. We should go back to sleep."

And they did, a while later. When Holly woke up again, the light hadn't changed but the bed was empty. The wind was still howling and the pelting of the snow beat the window. It was going to be a long, cold, winter. Holly fumbled for her glasses and looked out the door. There was light in the hallway and Holly considered going back to sleep. She had no reason to be up after all. Stretching, she felt wonderfully sore and languid.

"Coffee?" Gail was in the doorway holding two mugs. She wore a long shirt and sweatpants.

"Please." Holly wriggling to sitting up, keeping the sheet covering her and holding out a hand.

Handing over the mug, Gail scooted in next to her. "Modest? I've seen your boobs, Holly," teased
"It's cold." She stuck her tongue out and sipped the coffee, which was doctored the way she liked it.

"You should try the garage." Gail made a face. "Found your sled. We can go be silly and romantic when it lets up."

"That sounds fun." Holly leaned into Gail. "Won't be till tomorrow at this rate." They sipped the coffee in comfort. "You're thinking about work?"

"I have to finish writing up the robber bashing heads case. And now that Frank's gone, I've got to check on what cases we might need uniforms for." With a grumble, Gail pointed out, "I have a real job."

Holly giggled, "Honey, you've always had a real job. Now you have responsibility too." She turned and kissed Gail's cheek. "Go finish your work. I'll make some breakfast." Gail sighed and turned to kiss Holly. Coffee and morning breath did not lead to a desire for making out, and the chaste kiss was brief.

Once Gail was done working, they could enjoy a nice, lazy, snowed in day.

Late. Damn it. Gail rushed through the division, yanking at her coat as she did. "I know I'm late, Ollie, they didn't plow my street." She caught sight of her brother frantically signing at her from the bullpen and pointing towards Oliver's office. The Commissioner was there. Shit, Uncle Al did not need to see Gail being late the one time in the month she was supposed to be there for parade.

"You missed parade," said Commissioner Santana, aka Uncle Al, smirking. "Didn't I tell you to get a car with All-Wheel-Drive, Gail?"

If he was teasing her, Gail didn't need to be too worried. "I did and heated seats too. Holly's car lacks these wonderful inventions. I had to drop her off." Gail took her coat off, "Do you know anyone in snow removal I can complain to?"

"I'll check. I need to see you in Sgt. Shaw's office." The phrasing grabbed Gail's attention in a bad way. He needed to see her? He still wore the smile Gail knew from growing up, so she wasn't too worried, but...

Gail glanced at herself. Skinny jeans, boots, slouchy sweater under her leather jacket. It had become a uniform of sorts before changing into her uniform. "Should I change first, sir?"

Her godfather noted the emphasis and shook his head, "No. Not today." He had a cryptic look and gestured for Gail to follow him.

Both Oliver and Inspector Butler sat in Oliver's office, a box of donuts and cups of coffee on the coffee table. "Peck," grinned Oliver, his eyes bright. He held out a cup, and Gail took it, because it was always going to be better than the division brew.

"How many cases was it, David?" Commissioner Santana picked up his own cup and sat on the couch.

David. It was weird to think of Butler having a first name. Gail supposed his wife used it. "Depends on if we count the one." They briefly dithered, but decided to. "Then four. In five months."

"I told you she used resources to her advantage," noted Oliver, sitting behind his desk.
No one talked to Gail, so she stood there, watching then men discuss... Her. She frowned as they pointed out how long she'd poked at the ambulance case, and Ollie was the one to argue no one had believed her. The Russians wasn't her case, Butler agreed, but she'd been instrumental. The college robberies were all her, as was solving the basher, and Butler got to the meat of his argument.

"It's no good. Having her in uniform messes the chain of command. Officers don't know where she fits, because she's not a sergeant, detectives ignore her because she's in uniform."

Gail held her breath for a moment. This was not the year she'd been told to wait. This was four months. "Sirs... I'm sorry, but I thought, because of the Superintendent..."

"Good lord, your mother," groaned the Commissioner. "Elaine has been remarkably trouble free lately. It's like she's an inspector again." He picked up a donut and waggled it at Gail. "This has nothing to do with her or Bill. They no longer have a say in this." He took a very decisive bite from his donut.

She swallowed a dry throat. "You're my godfather."

To her surprise, Inspector Butler startled. "You are? You didn't say-"

"The fact that I changed Gail's diapers has no bearing on any of this, any more than Oliver being her partner once, and you being her Inspector, Dave." He frowned, "I wasn't wrong about Steve."

Oliver spoke up, however, "Duncan."

The wince was funny and Gail covered her face with the cup of coffee. "He did most of that on his own, but he wasn't going to sort himself out without you, Oliver. I owe you." Santana pointed at Gail, "And she did that. Gail, what do you call him? Gary?"

"Gerald, sir."

"Gerald. She took it out with style and made him learn. She'd be a great T.O. as well, but ... Understand me, gentleman, I see no reason to make her wait when the one black mark on her career is understandable. And this is entirely her mother's fault. I don't want to punish her for it."

Butler held up his hands, "I'm not arguing, sir!"

The door opened again and Inspector Jarvis walked in, solemn faced. "Are you done arguing?" He glanced at Gail, "You were late. And that's not what detectives wear."

"Give it a rest, Jarvis," grumbled Butler. "There isn't a detective mould."

"Peck- other Peck wears a three piece suit every day." He frowned somewhat, "There's that too, what do we call them?"

From his desk, Oliver suggested, "Detective Peck from guns and gangs, and Detective Peck from major crimes."

"Too long." But Jarvis pulled out a badge case and held it out to Gail. "I'm just going with Detective Gail Peck."

The shouting was crazy, but Holly found the sheer happiness of the group to be more fun than any sports game she'd attended in her life. Gail's friends were cheering and hugging her, way more than Gail would ever normally allow.
Traci had picked Holly up at the end of her work day, too excited to even consider keeping anything a secret. "She did it," Traci had sang, all but dancing. "Detective Gail Peck."

After Holly got over the shock and the annoyance that Gail hadn't texted her or called, she understood what was coming next. Unlike the promotion party, or the one for Gail being transferred, this was a relief. A changing of the guards was complete. The reign of Herr Peck, as the Peck siblings might have said, was clearly over, and the new guard was rolling in to take over.

Even Sam Swarek, who was not one of Gail's biggest fans, was there to celebrate (and apparently apologize to Andy about something involving Detective Cruz). Gail had tried to diagram out Andy's relationship tree for Holly, but it had proven to be more confusing than Lisa's Lesbian Sex Web. Duncan arrived with a present, a donut cake, which actually meant Gail called him 'Duncan' for a change.

Some of the higher ups also arrived, Pecks and Peck-adjacents whom Holly had heard of but never met. They were polite, as much as could be expected. Neither of Gail's parents showed, but Holly hadn't thought they would. Steve, in his suit, ribbed his sister about her clothes for much of the night, telling her to wear a suit, until Gail's boss told Steve that the newest detective didn't need to wear one to look like captain of the universe, she just was.

"I think your boss has a man-crush on you," Steve muttered after Butler left.

"A bro-mance?" Gail laughed and shoved Steve.

Traci leaned in, "What are you going to wear? I can't imagine you dressing like me."

Teasing, Gail suggested, "Jenny from the block?" That seemed to be an old joke. "Jeans, shirt, probably a jacket. I'll figure it out."

"Mom would shit herself if you went to work in that leather jacket every day."

"Don't care, Steve."

Holly smiled, "We'll take her shopping, Traci. Don't worry."

Gail turned to her and kissed her lightly, "Says the woman who wears boob shirts to work all the time." They shared a smile and kissed again, this time getting a hoot from someone to the side. "Bite me, Nicholas!" Of course Gail knew.

The uniforms of fifteen seemed equal parts sad and thrilled, except for Chris who looked morose. "This doesn't mean you get to boss me around," Dov stated firmly.

Coming to Gail's defense, Nick pointed out, "Actually, that is what it means."

"No it's not!" Dov scowled. "Tell me it's not?"

"That's exactly what it means," smirked Gail, winding her fingers with Holly's. "You're all my bitches now. Except Traci." Gail lifted her glass in that direction and Traci's clinked in a quiet cheers.

Chris looked away, "I'm getting another round."

As he left, Gail sighed, "What's wrong with your son?"

"You broke up the band, Casper," grumbled Dov. "That's what he thinks at least. I'll talk to him tonight."
The strange relationship between those three confused Holly, but she rested her head against Gail and whispered, "Should Chris be drinking?"

"Shirley Temple," replied Gail, equally quietly and then kissed her again. "How’s it feel to date a detective?"

Smiling, Holly's eyes darted to Gail's lips and that toothy grin. "Depends on if you can still get me out of parking tickets." Muttering that was an abuse of power, Gail's lips brushed hers again and she leaned away, accepting the next round of congratulations from a group of people in white shirts.

But if she asked again, Holly had an answer. It felt great to date a detective.
Gail stared at her closet. "Shit," she muttered for the tenth time. "Fuck!" The bellow magically summoned her girlfriend and the brunette popped her head in first, followed by Traci. "No, no, I am not having a girl intervention."

But Traci ignored her and eyed Gail's closet. "Wow, all the girly Peck stuff is missing. Where are your ruffled shirts?"

"Bite me," snarled Gail, moving to shove Traci out of the bedroom. Holly intercepted the move and pulled Gail into a hug. "Holly, what the hell am I going to wear to work?"

For six years, almost seven, Gail had worn her uniform. She knew what to wear when she got up every day, rain or shine. The times she'd been undercover, similarly, were simple. Wear what the op runner told you. Before that, she'd lived and home and her mother both bought her clothes and told her what to wear.

This was the first time Gail ever had to dress herself for success.

She was having a freakout.

"Sit down, honey," soothed Holly, kissing her gently.

Gail all but collapsed on the bed with a groan. "Those shirts were Herr Peck's," she told Traci, covering her face with her hands.

"Your mother dressed you?" Traci was seconds from laughing.

Before Gail could reply, Holly coughed. "Traci, all her guns are in the next room. And her tazer. Don't poke my bear, please."

With an apology, Traci went back to the closet and she and Holly went over the clothes, pulling out shirts and pants. They quickly determined most of the pants would work, but the shirts were a problem. Too many slouchy, oversized overshirts. Not enough jackets.

They managed to find two good jackets, a green and a grey, but were stumped on the shirts. "Jeans, she's got to wear jeans," decided Traci.

"In Organized Crimes?"

"I've seen her boss, he has that math teacher vibe with the jackets and his jeans and his boots."

Holly made a 'huh' sound and pulled out the black T-shirts that Gail had a million of. "She could get away with this."

But Traci wasn't sold. "A nice button down. Can't she borrow one of yours?"

"Too much flannel," grumbled Gail and Holly snorted a laugh. "I have button downs. They're behind the red dress."
Moving the dress aside, Traci exhaled. "Okay, this can work. Why don't you wear these?"

"I do. I wore the blue one when we went to the musical." She glanced at Holly who was blushing. That might be a problem, she realized. Or maybe it would be less of a problem. Gail had worried that since Holly found her uniform so sexy that there would be less appeal of her in a suit. Apparently not.

Traci put together three outfit choices before pulling out one that would work with Gail’s leather jacket. "In two months, you can wear leather and boots, not before."

Nodding, Gail looked at the three choices and picked the dark shirt with green jacket. "Right. I know we're casual but not too casual. And have good things for big cases." She was going to have to go shopping for shirts. "The non chunky boots."

"Yeah, that'll work," agreed Traci and she hung up the outfit in front.

Holly fingered one of the discarded tops. "Why not the white shirts?"

Together, Traci and Gail replied, "Targets."

That surprised Holly. "But ... Oliver wears a white shirt."

"Not in the field, not without a vest on," Gail explained, sitting on the edge of the bed. "A white shirt makes your center of mass an easy target. Stands out."

Thoughtful, Holly hung the shirt back up. "That brings a new level of terrifying to your work," grumbled the doctor and Gail winced. "There is not a single job you could have where I won't worry."

"SIU," suggested Traci.

Gail shook her head, "Ask Mills about the time the guy she was investigating tried to choke her." She held her hands out to Holly who stepped between her legs and let Gail hug her.

"You guys are cute," smiled Traci.

"The tazer is in my nightstand, Nash," growled Gail. It wasn't. It had been, until Holly almost made a horrible mistake one night. Other things were also kept in nightstands, after all.

Holly sighed and leaned down to kiss Gail lightly. "Stop." She kissed Gail again and sighed. "Dinner. I'm going to order in?"

"Or make some rice. There's leftovers from the baingan I made yesterday." Holly nodded and headed down to do that.

"Gail Peck cooks?" Traci looked thrilled. "I know you can bake. Chris bragged to everyone that you knew how to make bread. I don't even know what a bang an is, but I want to try it."

Gail rolled her eyes and stood up. "Of course I know how to cook. I like cooking. And it's a baingan, it's eggplant and vegetables and stuff." She shoved Traci out of the bedroom, "Thank you, but get out. This room is for sex."

Of course Traci mimed gagging, but she stayed for dinner and agreed that the food was awesome. Holly gave her a hug, thanking her for helping and then walking her to her car. Without being asked, Gail cleaned the kitchen and started the dishwasher. They had that healthy, comfortable life now. A
life where they could be themselves and achieve a future.

Catching sight of herself in a mirror, Gail smiled. "Detective Gail Peck." It sounded right. She felt like this was a real thing, that she was a real success now. "Detective Gail Peck, Organized Crimes." That just sounded like a fucking badass.

"Detective Gail Peck, raging narcissist." Holly's voice was way too close and Gail flinched. Cool hands rested on her hips and Holly nuzzled the back of Gail's neck. "I totally snuck up on you," she teased.

Gail sighed. "Yes, yes you did." The hands moved forward and Holly hooked her thumbs through Gail's belt loops.

"Say it again," murmured Holly, breath warm against Gail's neck.

"What? Detective Gail Peck?" She could feel Holly's smile, the lips curving. "I know why I like hearing it, but what got you so eager?"

Holly made a soft noise and kissed her neck again. "I'm in love with you."

"I know that," laughed Gail.

The lips on her neck moved to behind her ear. "You're happy. And you're excited. And you're going to be amazing. And I get to see you, this happy, every day. It's ..." Holly stopped and leaned back, putting her chin on Gail's shoulder. "You're complicated, Gail."

Leaning back against her lover, Gail smiled. "Thank you." Simple was boring.

"You are complicated and deep and brilliant."

"Keep saying nice things and I'll let you have your way with me."

Holly pinched her. "I'm trying to say something deep here. Shut it." Holly paused and only continued when Gail said nothing. "I love your complicated. I love that I get to see this secret you under all that snark and bite. And every day I learn a little more about you. About your dreams and passions and layers and ... You're a puzzle I could spend the rest of my life with."

Involuntarily, Gail stiffened. The rest of her life? She tried to keep her voice light. "Is that a proposal?"

"What?" Holly sounded startled. "No! I mean, yes, if you, uh... Okay so it's the whole we tell each other stuff, and I was thinking aloud about why I love you and wow, yeah, I totally sound like a psycho girlfriend stalker." Carefully removing Holly's hands from her belt loops, Gail turned around to kiss her. It was a long, slow kiss. Like they had years to kiss. When they stopped, Holly's eyes were closed and she was calmer. "No, I'm not asking you to marry me at this moment."

"Okay," replied Gail, kissing her again. "I love you. I don't know if I want to get married at this moment." She wasn't sure she'd ever want to get married. She knew the idea of a wedding was absolutely abhorrent, which was another drama.

Squinting her eyes open, Holly chewed her lip. "How did Nick propose?" When Gail's eyebrows jumped, Holly explained. "When I do propose to you, I want to make sure I get it right. White horse, bended knee..."

Gail laughed softly. "We were drunk, I thought he was kidding until the next day when my mother
asked him if there was anything new and he said we were getting married. Next thing I knew, Mother was planning a wedding.” She sighed and kissed Holly again.

"Would you have married him?"

"And divorced in a year probably, yeah. I didn't stand up for myself then. Not to my mother at least.” She sighed and leaned against Holly again, drawing her in to hug tightly.

"It's easier," agreed Holly. "Not making the choices and letting things happen." She kissed Gail's cheek. Holly had once called herself the queen of letting things happen and then jumping on impulse. It was amusing and infuriating. Gail wondered if her parents felt that way about her.

"Can we not talk about Nicholas? I want this to be a Nick free zone." She smiled softly and was surprised to see Holly blush.

The doctor leaned in and kissed her. "That smile made me love you."


"That soft smile. The first time you made it at me, I was a goner," sighed Holly. "Took me right from mad crush to weak in the knees."

Words Gail could remember. She frowned, trying to think of when she'd smiled like that, and how she'd smiled. Holly's lips touched her own again, a brief kiss of promise. "I don't remember that..."

"In bed. The morning after your hair. You woke up and looked at me with this absolutely tender face." Holly looked fondly at Gail. "And I remember that I just stopped freaking out about having a made out with a straight girl in my bathtub. Because you looked at me like that and you wanted me for me. Not just sex."

Gail felt awkward. She felt exposed and timid, actually. "I wanted the sex too," she pointed out. "But you... You're the first person I felt like I could have more from."

Now Holly went a little stiff, but she smiled shyly. "I want to give you more." And she tucked her head against Gail's. They stood like that, holding each other in a small bubble of... Love. Not that Gail would say that out loud. Actually, they didn't have to say anything out loud for a while. They could just be with each other and in peace.

Paperwork was going to be the death of her thought Holly as it invaded her dreams. It came with the new role, which Gail called a promotion but really wasn't. Holly had responsibilities, duties, and no change to her pay or title. She was one of the senior pathologists in the lab which gave her a lot of freedom, but now she was a shift supervisor as well. And worst of all, a night shift contact.

When Holly had been promoted and assigned to work the cases on the East side of Toronto, she'd reveled in the fact that night calls were no longer hers to suffer. Then she'd met Fifteen division and after almost a year, Gail Peck, and Holly thanked a God she didn't really believe in for keeping her nights free for that amazing woman. Not that Gail's schedule was so set in stone in the beginning.

Now, though. Now they both had semi regular hours which meant semi regular schedules which meant a sort of complacency in life that Holly never realized she'd craved before. Actually she was certain she'd never wanted it with anyone else before. None of her exes ripped at her heart the way Gail did. Maybe it was because Gail's initial unattainability wasn't just her unknown sexuality but her walls. The desire to pull back Gail's layers, to learn more about someone who was so different struck Holly early on.
That feeling had quickly turned from desire to outright lust when she spent more than an hour in Gail's presence. Beautiful, smart, sassy, and absolutely unflappable. Also Gail was a great kisser. Gail picked up new skills insanely fast, much to Holly's delight, and she didn't actually have any hang ups about being with a woman. Sure, there had been some practical considerations to take in, a lack of experience in certain matters, but nothing deal breaking. Gail was, in a word, amazing.

And also really bratty when woken up at three AM. "Holly, answer your phone or I swear I'll shoot it."

"Dr. Stewart," she slurred into her phone, memories of being chased by sheafs of paper floating away.

"Sorry," began Rodney. He had been assigned the night shift as the new lead pathologist for that shift. That had been a promotion. "We got a body in cement. Half in, half out. I'm getting the slab brought in as whole as possible, but how do I make sure the vibrations don't destroy evidence?"

Holly's brain kicked in and she walked Rodney through how to most safely collect the evidence, but also to feel free to leave the body for her in the morning. In general, his evidence collection skills were beyond reproach. Rodney just had a tendency to be skittish when presented with something new that he had not yet personally experienced.

As she hung up and curled back under the blanket, the surly voice behind her complained. "Not even a sorry for me."

"You threatened to shoot my phone," Holly yawned, trying to relax. Her eyes were heavy and droopy but her brain was working.

A warm arm wrapped around her waist, pulling her close. "If thy phone doth offend me, shoot it out," Gail said, weirdly poetically. It made Holly laugh. "Do you need to go in?"

Scooting back to touch more of Gail's warmth, Holly muttered a no. "I want to sleep," she added, feeling petulant.

"Is that brain of yours up?"

Clearly Gail knew her too well. "I'm going to go read," she sighed, but the arm on her waist did not let go. "Gail, I know you can sleep with the lights on but I'll just keep you up."

Gail did not reply with words, instead she ghosted her lips on Holly's neck before snuggling back up against her to try and sleep. Normally it was Holly who was raring for morning sex. There was something about the morning that got her engine running and definitely something about Gail in her bed that encouraged it. This didn't feel the kind of frisky that Holly often succumbed to, looking at the blonde in the bed. This felt like the slow burning desire Gail swore Holly built up for her.

What Gail had said was that Holly drove her crazy like no one else before. That was about as deep into her feelings about them that Gail would get early on. Before moving in, on their second chance, Gail had been more forthcoming about her emotions and how she wanted Holly. Definitely there was want. Gail had been passionate before but not romantic, driven by wants.

Nothing wrong with that, of course. Except the part where you didn't think about what things meant and how that ended you up having a stupid fight after your friends said dumb things.

"Holly, you really need to learn to stop thinking." Gail's words interrupted her train of thought.

That had been a complaint of many a girlfriend. Holly sighed. "Sorry." She rolled towards Gail,
lying on her back. "It's just ... On."

Gail propped herself up on one elbow. "Okay, what are you thinking about?"

"Us," sighed Holly, reaching up to caress Gail's cheek. "Sex instead of talking."

"We talk," Gail replied, a little offended. When Holly gave her a wry look, Gail coughed. "Now. And we talked before we went out. We tell each other stuff." With a smirk, Gail kissed Holly's forehead.

Holly groaned, "You remember exactly what I said, word for word, don't you?"

"Can't help it." Gail snuggled up against her. "You can't turn off your brain either."

It was a simple statement. For as different as they were, Gail and Holly were very similar. They ran away from relationships when they were scared, they were defensive, they were impulsive, and they had brains they couldn't turn off. And Gail understood that. She understood the obsessive nature of Holly's work, the incessant need to solve the puzzles and research and everything else.

Smiling, Holly closed her eyes and lay still in the dark. Someone who understood her. That was the part that was missing from all the rest, all the failures. She didn't have to change to be with Gail. Gail didn't have to change to be with her. While they did, it wasn't because the other demanded it but because they wanted to change to be better for each other.

Gail quickly slipped off into sleep, her body weight growing heavier as she did. Eventually she rolled to her other side, breathing deeply in a near snore. Holly followed her, wrapping her arm around Gail's waist to hold her close. Her hand toyed with the edge of the T-shirt Gail wore. It was one of Holly's. Most of what Gail wore to bed was Holly's, and had been since they started dating.

When Gail had moved in, there was a bevy of boxes with clothes Holly had never seen. They had been the clothes Gail hadn't worn but her mother continued to buy for her, and they were all girly. It was a stark contrast to what Gail wore in her day to day life. In fact, most everything in those boxes had been donated to charity. The exception had been some surprisingly slinky sleepwear that Gail did put on from time to time.

It was with thoughts of that attire that Holly drifted back into the comfort of sleep.

"He's checking out your ass," muttered Dov, clearly offended on her behalf.

"Flashlight," Gail ordered. That the cop from 27 was checking out her ass wasn't a big deal. That it happened to be Chloe's ex-husband sent Dov a little off the rails. They were on the dividing line between the divisions, in contested territory. Dov and Snowflake had tumbled onto motorcycle chop shop while arguing with Wes and some dimwit Gail didn't know.

A moment later, Dov's hand appeared in her line of sight with his big mag light. "Don't you have your own?"

"Yup," she replied, popping the P loudly. "Tell Griggs he was right, would you?"

Dov turned and told Snowflake to do that, and extended his hand again to help Gail out from under the lift. "Is that your partner?"

Dusting off her pants, Gail sighed. "For now." Butler had made sure Gail understood she was not anyone's partner, yet. She was loaned to anyone who was short a partner for whatever reason. Like
Griggs' regular partner was taking a personal day, so Gail filled in. She didn't mind. It got her out, working on cases, and learning new things.

"Can I shoot Wes?"

"No."

Scowling, Dov clipped his flashlight back into place. "What was Griggs right about?"

"There's blood under the lift. He's got a good eye for that." Gail stood with her back to the lift, thinking up the spatter pattern. The shape of the drops. Holly had told her about that. They weren't cast off, though, they were drips. That didn't make sense. Why would there be drips on the underside of the lift? Gravity was a constant.

After a glance to see that Griggs was on their half of the floor, she looked up slowly. "Hey, Griggs. They hosed the place down." Never phrase it as a question.

"How's that?" The burly man waddled over to her and followed her look.

"Floor's clean." She aimed her flashlight to the chains above them. "Blood's a splash back. Bounced off the ground and back up."

"So- oh."

She and Griggs stared up at the ceiling. After a moment, Dov and Snowflake joined them, staring up. There. "Got it," grinned Gail and Griggs snorted. He saw it at the same time. "Hey, nerd squad. We got a body."

Of course Gail was still there when Holly showed up for the body. At the silent question, Gail pointed up and enjoyed watching Holly's confounded expression. "How the hell did it get there?" Rarely did Holly swear at work, but today called for it.

"I'm trying to figure out how we get it down," muttered the forensic tech.

"There's a mobile lift," Gail suggested, pointing over to the side. "This one has blood spatter under it, so they probably used it to hoist our victim up there." She caught a smirk from her girlfriend and smiled. She had to be a professional at work.

It was hours before they managed to get the body down. Gail was disappointed to find the case insanely simple. The dead man was a mechanic who got into a fight with the owner, who hit him over the head with a wrench. He confessed to everything before Holly even got to the autopsy, which frustrated the pathologist. Even with a confession Gail was stuck at work late because Griggs dumped the paperwork on her. The rookie.

By the time she got home, Holly had dinner sorted out. The food smelled alright though Holly had a gift at overcooking the meat. With that in mind, Gail called upstairs that she was home and promptly checked the oven. Holly's timer had eleven minutes left, but the fish was done. Always with the extra time.

"Hey, I'm cooking dinner!"

"Over cooking!" Gail smiled and turned to tease her girlfriend, only to have thought chased from her head. Holly was wearing her button down shirt, half unbuttoned, and running shorts. "Uh. You were not wearing that at work," she managed.
"Well spotted, detective," laughed Holly. "I spilled tea on my pants." She sauntered into the kitchen to look at the fish.

Gail gestured with a hand, motioning up and down. "Shirt?"

Looking down, Holly sighed. "Okay. I had this idea about being all super sexy librarian when you got home." She started to fix the buttons on her shirt and Gail swatted her hands away.

"No no, I want to know what I did to get super sexy scientist," she growled, running her hands up Holly's shirt to her collar. The bra was fancy too.

Holly blushed. "You know how I think you're totally hot in uniform?" Nodding, Gail leaned in to kiss Holly's throat and was thwarted momentarily. "Wait," sighed Holly. "What did you tell me about being a detective?"

Blinking, Gail tried to think through all their conversations. "It'd be fun, I wanted this, uh, I'd be good at it-" She stuttered to a stop as Holly removed her glasses. God, she was stunning in and out of the glasses. "That me being a badass cop who was smart would totally turn you on?"

And Holly nodded. "You were right," she said softly and kissed Gail. "Detective Gail Peck is sexy. I knew women in uniforms with short hair was my thing," she added, running her fingers through Gail's hair to emphasis her point. "I did not know that brilliant detectives solving crimes in front of me was so fucking hot."

Her throat went dry and Gail felt her skin heat up. That was the most unexpected fringe benefit of her job that she had ever heard.

They ended up reheating the fish a few hours later.

Chapter End Notes

And that's part four! Chapter 39 was the original end to the story. I started posting it on FFN and realized there was more to it than just making detective.

Coming soon, to this fic, is a mystery! Yes, a real, honest to goodness, needs solving, mystery! Check back this weekend. I'm going to slow down a little, trying to post Monday and Friday only. We'll see how that goes.

Part 5 is a mystery called "You Khan Take it With You" where we meet Gail's partner and they save Rob Ford from serious embarrassment.
Before we start, no you didn't miss what happened to Gail in kindergarten. We have to talk to Elaine again to get that story, so it'll be a while. Now that that's aside, let's get into a change of pace.

Part Five: You Khan Take It With You

Gail is now a detective and gets to have a real, grown up, case. This plot was intended for another series, but since that never happened I've repurposed it for this. There are two cases, actually, pairing up to make the fic. The chapter titles have a theme. You'll get it soon enough. This could almost be a stand alone, but it flows from everything you've seen before.

In her years of being a police officer, Gail thought she'd seen every slice of life to be had in Toronto. Even before she was a cop, there'd been so many diverse people, it was like a who's who of losers in the Province. But in the near year she'd lived with Holly Stewart, her world had broadened more to encompass the most terrifying group of people known to exist. A motley collection of freaks and geeks and cosplaying nerds.

Fans.

Looking up at the banner over the convention center, Gail frowned, "What does ToSCon stand for?"

"Toronto Science and Fantasy Convention," smiled Holly, looking like she was deep in her element.

"Wouldn't that be TSF Con?"

Tugging Gail's hand, Holly dragged her to the door. "No negative Nancy today, Peck. You promised."

Gail snorted, "I did not! I said you could pick whatever you wanted to do Friday, if I got to pick Saturday."

"And I want to go to a geeky nerdy convention." Holly started to chew on her lower lip and Gail sighed as her walls crumbled. She was never able to win a fight when Holly pulled out the sexy/cute pout like that.

The moment she let her shoulders droop, Holly hauled her inside to get their badges. The entry was filled with people, top to bottom, all over. "You didn't say there'd be this many people."

A trio of Japanese schoolgirls, with hair far longer than was humanly possible tied in ways that wasn't at all practical, rushed passed them. Coming another direction was a Jedi Knight and six Stormtroopers, talking about lunch plans. Four men, shaved bald, in identical black suits with hats, marched by, crossing paths with a manic man in a bow tie and a tweed jacket with elbow protectors which simply screamed Math Professor, who wanted to know if anyone had found his fez. A weird conversation about 'wolf penises' could be heard, overlapped by comments about how the 'new
fangs' felt weird, and jokes about a bilious green sports bra, while two men with sideways mohawks laughed loudly.

Gail was in her own private hell, and she was using a vacation day to be there.

"It's the third biggest science fiction and fantasy convention in the Province," explained Holly. "I like it better, there's less mass media and more fun."

Fun, right. Gail sighed. "You have a strange idea of fun, Holly."

"It's all that formaldehyde," quipped Holly. But she was happy, excessively so, and Gail would put up with anything like this for a few hours. Saturday was her night. Early dinner at a fancy restaurant, followed by a show. While she wore casual jeans and jackets most of the time, Gail did still love to dress up to the nines and squire Holly on a night on the town. After all, the woman was just drop dead sexy and officially the coolest person Gail knew, especially when she was threatening to undress Gail with her teeth.

With thoughts of Holly dressed up (and undressed) in her mind, Gail followed her girlfriend around from stall to stall, looking at wares that Gail couldn't possibly fathom showing up at their home. Their home. They'd just finished the process of getting Gail's name on the house, which meant renegotiating the mortgage. Those were such grown up things that Gail never in a million years would have seen coming, but she delighted in them none the less.

The look on Steve's face when she told him had been epic. Gail Peck, owning a house with her girlfriend. He'd warned her that they'd be common law spouses if she didn't watch out and Gail scoffed at the idea. She was never going through another wedding, ever again.

"Earth to Gail, please confirm existence," Holly said, appearing at Gail's elbow.

"Sorry, what?"

"Do you think Sophie would like this?" It was a Wonder Woman tiara. "She was all over my Lynda Carter DVDs, so I thought... No good, right. You're right. No good at all. The tiara is a silly idea, she's too big for this, and the current comics are weird." The babbling was adorable and Holly stopped as she saw Gail's smile.

It worked almost as well as kissing, sometimes. "How much is it?" Gail took the tiara and turned it over. "Are you kidding me? $250! What's it made of? Platinum?"

The booth runner looked disgruntled. "That's hand crafted. I made the mould myself exactly to the specifications of the TV show."

"It's for a nine year old girl!" Holly covered her mouth but did not jump in as Gail yelled. "This is not age-appropriate."

"You want plastic and pleather, you can go to the HeroWear booth. You want real, artesian, craft, this is the booth."

Oh come on, Gail rolled her eyes and snapped, "It's artisan, you moron." Holly's hand touched her arm. "I'm sorry, but his grasp on English is worse than Chris when he's drunk!" Putting the tiara back down, Gail tugged Holly away.

A few booths down, Holly broke into giggles. "Okay, so not that vendor."

"Seriously, Holly, they're ripping you off!"
Eyes sparkling with merriment, Holly explained, "The booth fee is tremendous. So they charge
more, but you can never find these things anywhere else!" Gail opened her mouth to comment and
Holly kissed her. "How about you haggle for me."

"Pretty sure I've got you already," teased Gail. But she had to allow as how Holly had a point. She
could probably get better prices, after all.

Holly put away the last of her swag and smiled. She probably would have spent much more, if she'd
been there alone or with Rachel. Once, back in school, they'd brought Lisa and she'd scorned her
way through the entire place. Never again. Usually Rachel only went because there were cute boys
and she was a huge fan of the Hawkeye Initiative.

Getting Gail to go was easy, if you asked at the right moment. In the last year, Holly had figured out
exactly how to get the prickly woman to do her bidding. It wasn't a skill to use lightly, or in non-
meaningful moments. When Dov called it a super power, Holly had just smiled, but she knew how
true it was. The trade off was going out to a show with Gail the next night, and Holly was just fine
with that. She'd taken Gail out to things her girlfriend loved and Gail had taken Holly out to sporting
events. It was all a trade off.

Collecting the trash, Holly brought it downstairs where Gail was talking on the phone. "Uh huh.
Okay, thanks Chloe." She paused and tilted her head back, looking at the ceiling, "Sorry, you're
right. Bite me, Price." Gail's shoulders shook in mirth. "Just let me know if there's anything I can
do... Yes, I know, but when has that stopped me? ... Right, night."

"Are you following up on the crime, Detective Peck?"

While they'd been at the convention a few of the artisan stalls had been robbed. They'd been in a
room, watching the Doctor Who and Torchwood bloopers with Kai Owen presiding when it
happened. They didn't even know about it till after the q&a, when Gail's head snapped up like a
hunting dog. She spotted the police and dragged Holly to see what was going on.

That the vendor who tried to sell them an overpriced tiara had been robbed cheered Gail up
considerably.

"I was just wondering." Gail put her phone down and pulled the trash from under the sink. "Can we
order in for dinner? I'm tired."

"Sure. Thai or Italian?" They haggled over food for a little bit, settling on Thai, and Holly took the
garbage out. When she came back in, Gail was making their usual order, and asking if there was
anything new they should try.

Holly washed her hands and smiled when Gail slid up behind her for a hug. "Did you have fun
nerd?"

"I did." She turned around to push her wet hands through Gail's short hair, getting a wry face from
her girlfriend, but no move away. The color was back to Gail's natural red-blond hue, darker than
the platinum she liked but healthier. No doubt Gail would get bored and dye it again sometime soon,
but she kept it on the short end now, in deference to Holly's taste.

They kissed briefly. "Good. Lot of nerds out there for a Friday day."

"It's running through Monday, too."

"How horrifying," laughed Gail. "Why did you want to go today and not the weekend?"
Holly sighed and headed to the living room to put her new DVDs on the shelf. "You never would have lasted a weekend there without shooting someone." Holly put the box set of *The Guild* on the TV shelf. She contemplating moving it to a new shelf for internet television like *Orange Is The New Black* when she remembered something. "Thank you for not bringing your gun."

Knowing Gail was carrying a weapon most of the time was daunting and not something Holly was comfortable with at the moment. "Well, I'm not on call till tomorrow." That had been Gail's concession. She would only carry a weapon to a date when on call, or if they happened to be in the woods again.

"Speaking of tomorrow, what are you wearing," grinned Holly. That had been the trade for the convention.

Gail fell onto the couch. "Either the black halter dress or the burgundy red one with the neckline you like. Depends on the weather."

Definitely needed a new shelf, Holly decided, and pulled the internet shows off to re-file. "Not the blue one? With the deep V?"

"And the nearly bare back? No, not to the opera," laughed Gail. "But I'll keep that in mind."

Holly pouted and glanced over. "You're going to wear one of those shawls anyway aren't you?"

"Yes." Gail sat up, amused. "But you'll spend the whole night touching my back and *neither* of us will pay any attention to the show. And I'd actually like to see this one, it's new to me."

It never ceased to amaze Holly that Gail actually liked things like classical music, opera, and the ballet. After all, Gail liked loud music and tequila and all sorts of silly, gritty things. She just also liked fancy things. Holly's initial cultural depth was musicals and sports, and as she introduced Gail to pop culture and science fiction, Gail demonstrated the fun of dressing up for a night listening to music. And it was, indeed, fun.

But Holly did often (always) get distracted with dressy Gail. Be it her dress uniform or her fancy shirts or the incredibly sexy dresses, it always melted Holly's brain a little. She just got so used to Gail in jeans, which was heart stopping enough, that seeing her put in the effort for sexy was going to kill her one day.

"You went to a dirty, dirty place, nerd."

"I'll be in my bunk," sighed Holly, looking back at the video shelves. "I think the best TV in years has been online first."

Gail made a thumping noise, probably flopping back onto the couch. "Still not watching the orange thing. I am not obligated to watch everything just because a lesbian is in it."

The initial argument was that Gail refused to watch comedy about anything police related. That was the reason she'd flat out refused to consider the *21 Jump Street* movie.

"Gail," Holly looked over, thoughtful. "Why am *I* the nerd?"

"Glasses, degrees, technical medical job. A hundred fantasy and make believe books. And I'm pretty sure you and Dov are the only people I know who can read Elvish."

Holly decided not to point out the language was called Quenya. "You have three copies of the *Star Wars* movies."
"Which is perfectly socially acceptable," giggled Gail.

Rolling her eyes, Holly got up and sat down on Gail's legs on the couch. "Somehow I think you're changing the rules based on whim, Ms. Peck."

There was a squirm as Gail freed her legs and put them on Holly's lap, making herself comfortable. "That's Detective Peck, Dr. Stewart." Holly tickled Gail's foot briefly, but quickly changed to rubbing it.

On her feet nearly all day, even as a detective, a faster way to Gail's heart than her stomach was to massage her feet. Gail's head tilted back, sighing with absolute relaxation. "Thank you for coming with me, honey."

"Welcome," smiled Gail, eyes closed. "How are your feet?"

"Tired." Holly was less used to the walking than Gail was. "Are you going in tomorrow?"

"At least for the morning. Have to talk to Oliver about patrol rotations." Holly nodded. She wasn't entirely sure what Gail did with regards to Oliver and rotations, but she did regularly meet with him about getting people sorted for something.

Holly was burdened with getting back to her old position again and that had been complicated enough. Her boss was still grumpy and distrusting since her 'defection' but had recently given her all her old responsibilities back. No more scut work but she was saddled with a new assistant replacing Rodney. He had finally made it to a full fledged pathologist.

Dinner came promptly and for a change was eaten at the table. The attempt at adultness was spoiled as they ate from the takeout cartons, sharing bites and sampling the new appetizer. It was no good being grown ups all the time, no matter how close you were to 40.

Leaning against the back of the room, beside Gail, Traci smirked, "Are you ever going to dress nicely?"

"These are my nice jeans," replied Gail, sipping her coffee innocently.

"And your chunky boots and leather jacket. You actually make Swarek look like a well dressed detective."

Gail smiled, "You say the sweetest things." At Traci's laugh, Gail added, "Holly picked up something for Leo yesterday. We went to a total nerd thing, but she swears he'll love it."

Neither Gail nor Holly liked working weekends, but sometimes you had to make concessions. Traci was putting in extra time to take off Monday and Gail was paying back time for Friday's adventure. It all worked out. They made plans for a dinner, with the kid, and Traci noted, "You cut your hair again."

"I have a hot date tonight, and she likes it short." Gail had been keeping it somewhere between the pixie cut and the floppy bangs for a year now, and it was always clear that Holly loved the shorter do. Hell, she lost her ability to speak on occasion when Gail came back from the salon, just staring with her mouth open.

"Dinner and a movie?"

"Opera. Got box tickets from Uncle Al."
Traci looked jealous. "Steve could do that too, right?"

"Sure," agreed Gail. "Where do you think he got the court side seats for the Raptors game?"

"I am so proud you actually know what that means," Traci laughed. "I'll talk to him. Meanwhile, why are you slumming it?" With a nod, Traci gestured to the room of uniforms.

The coffee was empty, so Gail tossed out her cup. "Monthly review with Oliver. Gotta make my pool." Since taking over Frank's role as liaison between Major Crimes and the uniforms, Gail had set up a system where she and Oliver checked in and picked the best people to work with for the month. She tried to rotate them through, get more people involved, and it made it easier to grab unis when a crime hit. So far everyone was happy about it.

The conversation paused as Oliver walked in, "Okay boys and girls, it's spring and you know what that means."

Whispering "Assless Chaps" to Traci, Gail looked at the rest of the room. There were new rookies, including someone named Jones working with Chris, and her little Snowflake was with Dov. Nothing really important or new that she had to concern herself with. The robbery at the convention was mentioned, being worked by robbery obviously.

As Oliver wrapped up, he slapped the table. "Okay, assignments are on the board!" Spotting Gail in the back, Oliver beamed.

"Gotta go, my boyfriend misses me."

"Try dressing nicer," teased Traci, affectionately patting Gail on the arm.

Grinning toothily, Gail leered, "Oh I will tonight. You should get Steve to take you someplace fancy."

As she wove her way through the group of uniforms, Gail marveled at the faces she didn't know. "Detective," greeted Oliver.

"Sergeant," replied Gail. Her eyes fell on the pairing of Collins/Moore. "Ouch, what'd Nick do?"

"Asked for him. He thinks he can be a good role model for the kid."

Gail pondered that and realized she wasn't sure who she felt more sorry for, Nick or Gerald. "Good luck," she finally said, feeling ambiguous.

"When I had Epstein and Moore, Duncan called them the Double Ds."

They walked to Oliver's office, talking of little more than Oliver's daughters. Gail had been the one to teach Izzy to drive, much to Oliver's relief and concern, and while the girl had passed with flying colors, she was begging to let Aunt Gail take her on the police course. While Gail thought it was fine, considering she'd memorized it at fourteen, Oliver was more of a stick in the mud.

Ensconced in his office, Oliver sighed and fell into his chair. "I love my girls, but they are making me old, Gail."

"You have three, they would."

"You and Holly should have one."

God, Gail looked heavenward. "Drop it, Oliver." The situation was still complicated. Holly was
slowly getting to a point where she wasn't opposed to the idea of children, but she still balked. For now, if it came down to Holly or children, Gail realized she was okay with being children-adjacent. She regularly borrowed Leo and Sophie, or any of the others, when she needed kid time. It worked out well. Pretty soon, McSwarek was going to give up and churn out a couple, or maybe even Dov and Chloe. Gail feared for the Dork Children.

Oliver held his hands up. "Okay, okay, business time. We have some new kids. The rookies from before are all real cops now."

"I saw Chris had a new one. Jones."

"Oh you don't want her. Take the worst of Dov and you and Chris combined." When Gail gave him a skeptical look, Oliver grew serious. "Know-it-all super-cop wannabe. Oh and toss in Andy's absolute earnestness. She's Noelle's rookie, and thinks I'm punishing her for Frank leaving." Oliver grimaced.

Trying not to smile, Gail asked "That totally would've been my rookie, huh?" At the nod, she did grin, "Look, the problem is I can't keep picking people from my rookie class. We are the best, but it's not fair." "What about Nick? He's not from your class and getting Nicklepeck back in action-"

"Jesus, Oliver, I nearly married him."

"Right!" He beamed as if that meant it would be okay. Gail glared and he sighed, "Duncan? He did okay on that college case."

"Maybe. If I can get someone to sit on him." She liked the kid, now that he had decided to be a real cop and not just fill in space. They went over the rest of the list of people and came up with a handful that Gail would be able to use.

A day home alone was relaxing. She called Gail a force of nature, but the comparison of her girlfriend to the storm which shared a similar name was very apropos. Getting to have one day, alone, in the quiet of the house, was like a spa day. Quiet, calm, and with space to read a book Gail might tease her about, Holly stretched out on the deck chairs to enjoy her day.

The damned thing was that, by noon, she was dead bored. This was clearly Gail's fault, having thrown her life topsy turvy. Not to say they didn't have quiet days at home together, but generally there was something going on besides just work. Considering starting a new article, Holly put the book down and wondered what she could write about that was new.

It was almost a relief when her phone rang, and Holly grinned when she saw the caller ID, "Hi, Mom!"

"Hi, sweetie," replied her mother, Lily. "How's are you? Unthawed yet?"

The winter had been exceptionally long and cold. "I'm actually sitting outside."

"In fleece, I presume." Once Gail had made the fleece joke to Holly's mother, the Stewart Matron had used it mercilessly.

Holly looked at the fleece deck shoes Gail had bought her for Christmas and said nothing about it. "Thank you for the new comforter," she said instead.
"How's your little blanket thief?"

"Good, she'd say hi, but she's still at work. Actually…" Holly eyed the time, "She should be home any minute."

Lily clucked her tongue, "Why is she the only one working on a weekend?"

"We're going out tonight." Not that she hadn't done a little work, but that was hardly the point. "Gail's taking me to the opera."

There was a pause while her mother processed that. "You're missing ToSCon?" Her mother knew her very well. "For the opera?"

Smiling, Holly pulled a knee up to hug. "We went yesterday. I found that watch you wanted for Dad."

Her mother sounded elated, "The Master's? Not the Doctor's? Really classic?"

"No batteries, no lightups. All 100% hand-made, silver. It's gorgeous, Mom." Gail had been aghast at the price, but once the artisan explained that it really was silver with gold gears, she'd clammed up and been impressed. "Do you want me to mail it to your office?"

"I suppose now's a good time to tell you we'll be in town next week," Lily mused.

"Oh. That would work too. Both of you?" Holly's father rarely left Vancouver once they'd moved. He hated travel.

Lily made a 'hmm' sound. "He's a last second speaker at University of Toronto."

"How did they talk him in to that?" Holly couldn't help but laugh.

"Tenure." That would do it, Holly had to agree. "He's speaking a week from Tuesday, so we thought we'd come in early, see you two. He hasn't met Gail, after all. Maybe we could all have a nice dinner? Both families?"

Holly winced. "Her brother might be free," she temporized.

"Holly, you've been living together for almost a year. I think it's fine to meet her parents."

"They're really busy, Mom. I'll ask her, but I really doubt it."

This did not please Lily Stewart, who believed a parent should be involved in her children's lives. "Have you met them?"

How the hell was Holly going to get around that? "Well. Yes, but we live in the same city, Mom."

That worked well enough and Holly wrote down the details of her parents' upcoming visit, hoping Gail would enjoy meeting her father.
John Simmons (played in my head by Kevan Ohtsji) is someone I've made up as a partner for Gail. I'd rather reuse throw-away characters than make new ones, but the show generally doesn't name detectives or other officers unless they're evil. This chapter is all Gail and all casework and was the first chapter written.

The phone in her purse vibrated and Gail scowled. It was only the first half of the show and she was enjoying both the show and being out with her girlfriend. It was a damn sight better than the stupid convention, she felt. But technically she was on call so she eased her phone out of the purse pocket.

Holly leaned in, "What is it?"

"Phone," sighed Gail and she peeked at the face of her phone. The name 'Simmons' was on her screen. Shit. After a few months flying solo, being assigned to whomever needed a sidekick, Butler finally assigned her to a partner. It was a strange pairing, as John Simmons had been a detective for years, since longer than Gail had been a police officer at all. But he was brand new to both Fifteen and the Major Crimes unit so Butler felt the balance of experience would work well.

She didn't dislike Simmons, but it wasn't quite as fun as working with Oliver, or even Dov. He had a far calmer sense of humor than Gail, for one. He was able to take a hit, when she'd slung some of her better insults at him he'd returned in kind. Butler found that odd, as most of Simmons' other partners had complained about him being a bit of a cold fish. Like or dislike, she didn't want to have to work right now.

Poking her ribs, Holly hissed, "Go answer it."

It was rude, but Gail slipped out as quietly as possible. Once she was in the hallway, she dialed John back. "Did I interrupt anything fun?"

"I'm out, John," she sighed. "What's wrong?"

"Death at a hotel convention. It might make the front page, so it's us."

Wonderful, Gail groaned. There went her night. "Where are you?"

"Just leaving the house, Butler told me to call you. You?"

Gail looked up at the beautiful ceiling, "At the opera."

"The Opera House? Who's playing?"

"Blackbeard and Erwartung." There was silence on the phone. "The actual opera, Simmons. Pick me up at the Four Seasons Center, will you?"

"I'm ruining date night. You sure you want me to get you? I can fly solo."

"Butler has a hard enough time with how we do things already, John," laughed Gail, forcing the
levity where she didn't really feel it.

His car started up in the background, "Need a gun?"

"Nah, I'll just use yours. I shoot better anyway." Gail hung up and chewed her lip, trying to think of the right way to explain this to Holly. And they had fantastic box seats too. She sighed and slipped back in.

Holly looked up and tilted her head slightly. "You have to go?" Her voice was low enough that the other couples in the box didn't stare much.

Nodding, Gail pressed her lips to Holly's cheek. "Crime calls. Stay and watch." Holly reached up and touched Gail's chin, drawing her in for a proper kiss. Pressing the car keys into Holly's hand, Gail fixed her shawl over her shoulders and went to wait for John out front.

"Damn, Peck," laughed her partner as he pulled up. "You clean up good."

"Bite me, Simmons." She buckled in.

"You really have a gun in that outfit?"

"Purse." She pulled out her badge, hanging it around her neck. Her parents always told her to never go out without being prepared to be called in, and Steve had told her stories about dates interrupted by work. He was in a suit at least when that happened. Gail could tell already that her feet were going to be screaming when she got home. Next time she was loading the car with a change of clothes.

They parked with the police officers and headed in. Immediately, two people in strange flightsuits with octagonal decals, stopped right in front of them and said, apropos of nothing, "Awesome costume!" to Gail. "You're totally Six! Just need longer hair!"

"I'm a ten, not that it's any of your business," snapped Gail, feeling her mood go from sour to worse.

Their reply did not help. "There's no such thing as ten," said the woman, a fake cigar clamped between her teeth. Because that was sexy and phallic.

"Yeah," said the fellow next to her. "There's the seven and the final five, but there's no ten." Then he looked Gail's partner up and down. "Who are you supposed to be? Zak?"

Before Simmons could make a comment, Gail pulled out her cop voice, "We're both detectives. Toronto police." On cue, they held up their badges. "It's not a toy. Where's the Wellington Room?" demanded Gail.

Both flyboys looked stunned. "Wow. I thought it was a rumor... Uh, straight down this aisle, turn right at the Wonder Woman booth."

Letting the losers go, Gail sighed. John smirked, "It's your own fault for wearing the dress."

"Some of us have lives outside of work, John." She rubbed her arms, wishing she'd had a warmer shawl. She'd left her coat in the car and, of course, Holly had the car, having not been called in to pick up the body. "Come on, Wonder Woman's halfway down."

With a surprised look, John followed her. "And how do you know that?"

"I was here on Friday." Not that she was much for sharing her personal life with her new partner,
Steve reminded her that a connection between partners could mean life or death. Gail chose not to remind her brother that one of his partners had been fired.

"Oh. Holly, huh?"

"That's Dr. Stewart to you," corrected Gail. "The nerd fest is her thing. I can only spot Trekkies and jedis." Gail shifted her purse to her shoulder. "You know… there was a robbery here this Friday," she remarked, passing by a booth she remembered as having captured Holly's interest with the overpriced tiara.

"Think it's related?" That was one thing Gail truly appreciated of John, he trusted her intuition and observations.

"No idea," admitted Gail.

Even though it was nearly ten at night, the convention was going strong. They passed a hastily written sign on a door, saying that various events have been moved around, and a group of robed people stood by the sign, complaining. As they reached the Wonder Woman booth, they almost ran into a man dressed in Jedi robes, who was hustling down to get somewhere.

Frustrated, he shouted, "These aren't the droids your looking for! Move along!" Everyone around him laughed and suddenly made a path for him to get wherever he was going.

Finally, for Gail's sanity, they reached the Wellington Room. The sign, reading 'Reenactment Fight Scenes - ToSCon Exclusive!', was marred by the big red 'canceled' notice. Outside the door, more people, now dressed as Trekkies, Gail was pleased to note, were complaining about how they knew it wasn't going to happen. Beside them were two similarly dressed men in pointy ears with blue shirts, arguing as to which Spock was better, the 'ToS' one or the 'Reboot' one. The argument got heated when one shouted, "Zachary Quinto can suck it!"

"I think we should get inside," muttered John, opening the door for Gail.

"Are you sure? There might be another homicide out here."

"We'll risk it."

It was a relief to step inside the Wellington Room, Gail felt, as it was filled with her people. Police officers, crime scene techs, and a dead body. "Lookin' good, Peck," announced Salvador. "Is that a new detective thing? Dressing up for crime scenes?"

"That's more than I can say for this guy," Gail remarked, ignoring the jibe and walking to where Rodney was poised by the dead man. "Bright red onesie? Did he lose a bet?"

Lying on the floor, dead as a doornail, was fit, powerful looking man, clean shaven, with longish black hair swept back into a tight ponytail. He looked like an MMA fighter, except for the fact he was on his back with a knife sticking out of his gut. The clothes were, to Gail, the weirdest part. A jumpsuit with a belt and gold accents wasn't cool by anyone's book.

"That's a lot of blood," John commented, carefully stepping around it. "And what the hell kind of knife is that?" It looked familiar, but Gail couldn't place it.

A very disgusted sigh came from a blue-skinned guy wearing a staff badge, with small blue … horns. "It's a Klingon prop knife. And it's not even the right one!"

Multiple heads swiveled to look at the man. "I'm sorry, what?" asked John, sticking his pinky in his
ear, as if that would cause the sentences to make more sense. Gail's eyes widened and she started to think that perhaps the robbery was related. Who had been the victims again?

The blue guy had the grace to look embarrassed. "I'm sorry, but the knife's from the movie, The Undiscovered Country, which was just terrible." Pointing at the dead man, he continued, "He's from the original TV series, and while the first set of movies were the same generation, it's gauche to movie-cross with the original series because of the Klingon Ridge effect."

Gail did a double take at the man and the memories clicked into place. "Andorian?" Shit, she looked at the jump suit. "I really only watched DS9," she muttered. Why had she watched it at all? Oh, right. Insomnia. "But that makes this guy Khan." She caught a look from Rodney and rolled her eyes at the man.

John frowned, "No he's not. I saw that movie, Khan's played by that Sherlock guy. Benedict Cumberbatch."

"Cumberbatch," corrected Gail, having been subjected to the movies with Holly, as well as the TV show. In so far as police related shows went, it wasn't as horrible as most.

Rodney piped in, "Original series Khan. Kahn Noonian Singh."


Squatting by the body, Rodney now joined in with his own opinions. "Khan's the most famous Star Trek villain of all time, from the best movie, hands down. It's too bad that Cumberbatch isn't going to be back in the next movie."

To this, the Andorian disagreed. "No way, he doesn't look like the embodiment of human physical perfection. Mental, I'll give you, but he looks like a stiff wind would blow him away."

"Did you even see him in that fight with Quinto?" countered Rodney, clearly the same level of nerd as Holly. Gail wondered if it was a requirement for the lab, and made a note to ask Holly later.

"So he can hold his own against a half-Vulcan, big whoop." The staffer paused and looked around. "Don't let the Spock Factions hear you, by the way. If I was going to pick a murder at the con, I'd have said one of them. Old versus new versus prime? Man, it's worse than listening to people complain about Jar-Jar!"

"At least Quinto's Spock is interesting. Nobody likes Jar-Jar," pointed out Rodney.

Gail pinched the bridge of her nose. "Hey, Trekkies? You can geek out later. Are you telling me you can make a living playing this guy?"

The Andorian nodded so hard, his horn thingies bobbled. "He could. He was really amazing. But that's not all he does. He was also a freelance web designer. I printed up all our stuff on him."

The papers were handed over to John, who flipped through them. "Wife's in the hotel upstairs?"

"Yes," replied the staffer. "The room came with the gig, so, I guess they wanted a weekend away from the kids. No one's told her yet."

Gail turned to Officer Andrews, "Go up and watch her door."
John folded the papers and put them in his suit pocket, "Who was the last person to see him alive?"

"His fight partner, Kirk."

"Are you kidding me?" asked Gail, who knew this one. "James Kirk is the name of the character who's Khan's mortal enemy."

The Andorian sighed, "That's coincidence. Todd changed his name about seven years ago. Kirk Hale was born Kirk. And yes, he plays Kirk, but he also does other roles."

Looking between them, John shook his head. "And where's Kirk Hale?"

" Sitting with the security guard over there." He pointed to the far end of the room, where a haggard man in jeans looked despondent.

They walked across the room and John leaned in. "What do you think? Crier?"

"Drama queen," replied Gail thoughtfully.

She was right. It took two questions before he burst like a balloon.

"We rehearsed last night, it was the first time we could get the room to do a rehearsal in the space, which is always really tricky." Kirk looked frustrated and went on without prompting, "We've been working on this new fight sequence for months, it's a perfect reenactment of the scene from 'Space Seed.' We were going to be showing it for the first time today at one, so after we rehearsed, I went to bed to rest up. Khan, I mean Todd, he stuck around to make notes where we were going to put our set props. Boxes, you know, that sort of thing." Kirk paused and looked away. Then he said in a low, stilted voice, "Those damned Klingon bastards. First they killed my son, now they stole Khan from me! KHAAAAAAANNNNNN!"

As the man shook his fists at the sky, John looked concernedly at Gail. She had seen the movies at least, and once reminded of the plot, the entire story rushed back into her brain. "In the third movie, it's Khan's actions that caused Kirk's son, Marcus, to be on the planet Genesis, which is where the Klingons killed him."

"Movie? You mean his son's not dead?" blinked John. "How the hell do you know this, Peck?"

"I saw the movie," she sighed. She'd watched a lot of terrible movies on nights when she couldn't sleep, and living with Dov, she'd made it through his entire Star Trek collection. "So none of that was real?"

The staff alien shook his head. "Not— No, Kirk's not even married, not that it stopped the real Kirk. I mean, he gets really into his role and forgets."

Kirk Hale had the grace to look embarrassed. "Sorry. I really loved Todd, he was my best friend. I don't know any way to… express what I'm feeling except as Kirk."

Gail counted to ten before she replied. "Salvador, you get statements down here. We're going up to talk to the wife. And call for backup. You're going to need it to round up all the Klingons."

Leaving the policemen to do their work, and being pleased she didn't have to handle the hordes, Gail and John took the elevator up the hotel itself. "Do they always have these things in hotels?"

"I'd have to ask Holly," admitted Gail. "I've never been to one before."
"How come you get to call her Holly?"

Gail eyed John, "At work she's Dr. Stewart, even to me. You know that." He smirked. "What?"

"I'm just saying if I worked with my wife, I'd call her by her name."

"If you worked with your wife, you'd be an actor," quipped Gail. Her partner was, currently, single. There had been a string of unsuccessful first dates before he'd come to Fifteen, and when their coworkers asked about setting him up, he declined. "Comedy." The elevator door opened, "And besides, she's not my wife."

"How long have you two been living together anyway?"

Gail grimaced. "Can we not have private life conversations at crime scenes?"

John held up his hands. Frankly, Gail had no interest in another wedding. They were to happy and perky. Not Gail's thing at all and thankfully not really Holly's either. "Sorry."

"It's fine, whatever," muttered Gail. "Eight months. I moved in last April."

Her partner did a double take. "Oh." The doors dinged open and he held the button for her.

Gail sighed. "Come on, let's just get this over with."

They relieved Andrews at the door, telling him about the incoming backup and to go help poor Salvador. John rapped on the door. No answer. He knocked again, louder, "Becky Mitchell?"

There was a sound from inside. "Jesus, can't someone sleep? Todd's not here."

John sighed and said firmly, in a tone that would carry without being too loud, "Mrs. Mitchell, it's the police. We need to speak with you."

The door opened to a rather pregnant woman, "What?" Her eyes were wide.

"I'm Detective Peck, this is Detective Simmons. May we come in?" Gail took the role of gentler cop in this moment, not needing to ask John which part was hers. That much, working with him, went easily.

Becky Mitchell nodded and let them into the small room. It had a chair, which Gail gestured for Becky to sit in. "What happened to Todd?" Her voice was thin.

Sharing a glance at John, Gail sat at the edge of the bed. "When did you last see your husband?"

"Six or seven… No, six. I was watching Entertainment Tonight." She wiped her face, seeming to know exactly what having two detectives come to your hotel room in the middle of the night meant. Gail studied her quickly and found her eyes drawn to the dots on the neck. The only Star Trek series she'd watched much of was DS9, but she knew those dots indicated a Trill. The woman had fucking Trill marks in henna on her neck. At least she hoped it was henna. If those were tattoos, the world was an evil place.

"Mrs. Mitchell, your husband was found dead, earlier tonight, in one of the meeting rooms."

The woman's eyes filled with tears and she nodded. "How?"

"He was stabbed. By a Klingon knife. Do you recognize it?" Gail held out her phone and was bemused to see Becky's distaste. The knife, Becky pointed out, was the wrong era. "That's not the
knife used in the fight?"

"The fight? You mean with Kirk? No, there's no knife at all. It's just Khan and Kirk in the engine room." She started to cry a little. "They worked so hard on that scene. When Todd came up with it, Kirk was so happy. They're best friends." John went to the bathroom and returned with a box of tissues for her.

Gail hesitated, "I'm sorry, but it sounds a little…"

With a sad laugh, Becky nodded and blew her nose. "Kirk and Khan, I know. Everyone laughs. Kirk lives with us, though. He bought half the townhouse when the market crashed, but we knew him through an acting class."

The story matched much of what Kirk had told them, though Becky added on that he was the godfather to the children. Gail sighed, "Mrs. Mitchell, can you think of anyone here who might want to kill your husband?"

"No, no one. I don't know of anyone at all."

Well that was it for now. John gently asked, "Is there anyone we can call for you?"

"No, I'll call my parents. The children are with them." She wiped her face and gave the name of her children unasked for, Montgomery Scott "Scotty" Mitchell and JoAnne Uhura Mitchell. "The baby was going to be James Tiberius Mitchell or Leonard McCoy Mitchell. James for Kirk, or Leonard for Todd's father. And Bones."

"What if it was a girl?" wondered John, clearly finding the whole thing hilarious.

"Lawaxana Chapel Mitchell. After both of Majel Baret's most famous characters. I was thinking of 'Lawaxana Number Two' but that's just silly."

The detectives nodded in agreement, but as they left the room, shared a look. "Peck, if you and Dr. Stewart have kids, don't let her name them."

"Clearly not safe," agreed Gail, smiling as she thought of her nerdy girlfriend who probably spoke Klingon. Where Gail enjoyed nerdy things, Holly loved them passionately. Gail's phone beeped and she eyed the text from Chris.

"What the hell does 'I have four eggless' mean?" John asked, peering over her shoulder.

"I think he has some witnesses," Gail decided, and called Chris. "Hey, what've you got?"

"Gail! I mean Detective Peck. Hi, we talked to the security guards who found the body."

"We who, Chris?"

"Oh, sorry. Me and Andy. She's getting the Kingons."

"Klingons," corrected Gail. "And who, exactly, do you have? Autocorrect thinks it's four eggless."

Chris sounded startled, "I didn't know how to… Hang on, what are you guys called?" He paused and repeated, "Ferengi. And I have two. They were bugging the security guards and staff about the signs being wrong. The guard walked in and found the body. Do you want to talk to them or should I just take their statement?"

Given how poorly Chris was doing with the names, Gail decided it would be better if she and John
talked to them. "No, get Andrews to watch them and go help Andy with the Klingons. She'll need it."

When they got downstairs, the Ferengi were horribly bouncy. One was overly excited to help them, which promoted them to copy his ID information. "The sign said 'Room off limits till 9AM' which didn't make any sense, since the Klingon Opera demonstration was supposed to be there at 8:00 AM. Which is an ungodly hour for Klingon opera, if you ask me."

His friend, also a Ferengi, joked, "There's a good time for Klingon Opera?"

The first Ferengi rolled his eyes. "Anyway! We noticed the font was wrong. It was Verdana, but all the other signs are Trebuchet MS. They're not even that similar! So I finally got that guy to go look and I saw Khan, dead, over his shoulder! Can you believe that? I mean, it's Khaaaaan!" He even did them all the disservice of trying, and failing, to imitate the Kirk intonation. "Who's bad-ass enough to kill Khan?"

Not having an answer for that, John took that down quickly. He knew shorthand, and Gail cheerfully let him do the writing while she checked in with Andy. They had found all the Klingons, even some who were asleep. Andy even sent a photo of Chris being flirted with by a group of women in full regalia.

"We better go back and help." She showed John the photo and he snorted a laugh. "After I send this to everyone I know..."

"Oliver's gonna love it."

Back at the Franklin Room, Andy and Chris had brought in all the Klingons they could find. Most were still in some degree of costume. "You want this, John?"

He nodded and cleared his throat. "Hello, I'm Detective Simmons, this is Detective Peck. We're looking for someone who's lost a knife -" As soon as he said that, John found himself cut off by growling and hissing Klingons.

"It is a matter of honor!" shouted one. "No Klingon would lose a knife!"

There was no one on the planet who would believe this conversation, thought Gail, rolling her eyes. Maybe Holly. John pushed on, "Maybe it was stolen."

Another Klingon, this one female (or so Gail presumed, it didn't have a mustache) asked, "Is this about Khan?"

Well that was out of the box. "Yes," said Gail. "He was stabbed with a Klingon style knife. It's a replica of the knives used in 'The Undiscovered Country.' So if you can check your gear, that'd help."

There was a heavy silence as everyone stared at Gail. Finally one small Klingon stated, "Our honor demands it, we must clear our names. tlhIngan maH! My fellow Klingons, inspect your weapons."

That seemed to be the magic cue, and all the Klingons inspected their weapons. None were missing anything. Of course. The small Klingon walked up to Gail and John as the others kept checking, "You know, we don't actually carry sharp weapons."

Both detectives nodded. "I wouldn't think so," Gail sighed, holding back a yawn. "Still, anything with enough force, so."
"Did you check out all the vendors? Some of them sell replicas, but I don't think they're edged. You can order them special, though. I've got a functional bat'leth."

Gail half listened as the man droned on and on about his collection, and glanced down the showroom floors. There were hundreds of vendors, and she was going to have to check all of them. No. Wait. She slowly turned to Andy and Chris and felt a wicked smile cross her face. John caught the look and shared it.

When CSU came in to swab all the weapons on the Klingons, John touched Andy on the arm and explained the situation. It was delightful to watch Chris and Andy's faces fall, as they saw their night fly away on brokenhearted wings.
The sound of the shower turning off was what woke her up. Holly had slept lightly anyway, keeping an ear tuned for a text from Gail, though that hadn't come since near 11pm when Gail sent her a photo of Chris surrounded by Klingon women and a note saying it would be a long night. Forgoing her glasses, Holly brought the phone on her nightstand close to her face and squinted at the time. It was only 2am, which wasn't that bad, and there was a text from half an hour ago saying Gail was on her way home.

Whoops. Maybe she had been sleeping harder than she thought. Holly turned a light on and sat up, hugging her knees and looking at the doorway until Gail came in, wearing only a towel. Her hair stuck up adorably, having only been towel dried, and Gail looked surprised to see Holly awake.

"Shit, I'm sorry."

It was endearing, the way she hated imposing on Holly's sleep schedule. "It's okay, I planned to be up late anyway."

Gail smirked and sat on Holly's side of the bed, kissing her warmly. "And I'm ruining another fancy date night with a stabbing."

"If this becomes our 'thing' we're going to have to rethink date night," teased Holly, running her fingers through Gail's hair to smooth it down a little. "You okay?"

Nodding, Gail leaned in again, kissing the side of Holly's neck. "Just promise me you won't name any hypothetical children 'Lawaxana' or 'Cosima.' Okay?"

Holly blinked, "That's oddly specific."

"It's been a very odd day." She rested her head on Holly's shoulder. "I had to interview Klingons and Ferengi."

"You went back to the con?" Holly felt hurt. She had wanted to see the con at night. Two years ago, she'd spent the night at the hotel.

"Oh my god, Stewart," laughed Gail. "Focus!"

"I am! The con is so fun at night," pouted Holly. "Lucky."

Gail sighed and brushed her cheek against Holly's, her lips ghosting a kiss by Holly's ear. "Can I make up for ditching you?" The whisper tickled Holly's ear, sending shivers down her spine. Clearly Gail had something other than talking about the con on her mind.

It was hard to play coy, but Holly tried, "I don't know. You seem to have some firm ideas about the names of our future progeny." But further thoughts along the topic were derailed when Gail loosened the towel.

At least the evening wasn't a total loss, decided Holly, pulling the sheet back and dragging Gail onto the bed properly. The towel proved less problematic than Gail's wrap things, though it did get caught between them for a short while. Gail more than made up for abandoning Holly at the opera.
Come the morning, which was far too early for Holly's tastes (up at 7 on Sunday was even against Gail's religion), Gail explained the nature of the case over breakfast, and Holly was agog. "I think your lab will kill me when they get all the knives in, though," Gail mused, making another espresso.

"How many Klingons?"

"Twenty something," shrugged Gail. "Refill?"

"Please." Cups were exchanged and Holly smiled fondly as Gail gave her the first cup. "What's the collective noun for a band of Klingons, I wonder."

Making her own coffee, Gail offered, "A pain in the ass."

The term 'army' came to mind and Holly would have to look it up later. "Did Rodney stay?"

"He went back with the body." Gail yawned deeply. "I'm going to have to go back today."

"Think you can solve it in a day?"

"Real glad I don't have to," smiled Gail. "Never thought I'd be glad for two more days of this crap."

Holly toyed with her cup. "Is now a good or a bad time to tell you my parents are coming over?"

Gail startled, "Now? Holly, your parents live in Vancouver!"

"No, next week," grinned Holly. "Dad has to do a thing, so they thought they'd come early and meet you… your parents…"

The wince was predicted. "I told you to just tell them if they asked."

Poking her napkin, Holly sighed. "I really don't want to, honey. They're your parents." Gail shot her a look and Holly went with her other suggestion, "Steve and Traci?"

"That's not a bad idea, actually," mused Gail. "I'll ask when they're free. Though I have a real case now, so …"

"A real case with a fantasy cast. I know. They'll understand." Early in Holly's career, she'd had to break plans with her family to get work done. Her parents were both dedicated workaholics, so they understood that kind of passion.

Gail sighed but nodded. "Okay. I trust you, baby." She kissed Holly's cheek and finished her coffee. When her phone rang, Gail did not look surprised but took the call upstairs. Holly heard the name 'Simmons' and smiled.

She'd met John outside of work twice. The first time was at the Penny, when Gail made him meet her friends and the locals to Fifteen. John had been stuck across town for the last four years, so Holly somewhat knew him. At least, she knew him as well as she knew any other detective. The second time, Gail actually invited him out for a non-work dinner with her and Holly.

In their time together, Holly had gotten used to Gail not bringing people over or really going out just to hang out with her co-workers unless it was for drinks at the Penny. Besides just being generally misanthropic, Gail explained she liked to keep Holly to herself, something private and cherished. But since John was going to be a large part of Gail's life, her work-husband as Dov called it, it seemed important to forge some sort of kinship. John was nice enough, far more experienced than Gail when it came to being a detective. But there was something lacking about his drive which balanced out
Gail's newfound passion for work.

He'd been polite and friendly, but Holly didn't really have much of a bead on him besides him being pretty attractive as men went. Gail certainly tolerated him and said he wasn't as awesome as working with Oliver, but he'd do. She tended to describe him as less annoying than Steve, with less annoying of a sense of humor, but she was working on that. Once or twice Holly had caught Gail giving him her bitchiest mood and he hadn't run off, so that was alright.

Holly cleaned up the kitchen and startled when her own phone rang. Why was Rodney calling at this hour? Technically she was the emergency night shift supervisor, a veritable punishment for quitting, but the lab tried not to call her often. Also it was seven in the morning. "Everything okay?"

"Your girlfriend is evil," he growled, sounding pissed. That was new. Rodney never got mad, even when Gail did her best to make him uncomfortable.

Of course Rodney had recently started being the lead on the night shift, which meant he was likely the one stuck with Gail. Oh dear. "How bad is it?"

"Forty-seven Klingon knives! And we had to get samples of all the blades. Do you know that all those stupid knives have three blades? And the stupid Mayor's lighting a fire because his niece was there."

Holly sighed. "Let me guess, they want me to do the autopsy?"

"I'd be mad," grumbled Rodney. "I can handle the lab work, but I can't... I'm in over my head, Holly."

She smiled, "It's okay, Rodney, that's why you ask for help. What kind of time table am I working with?" She knew he'd understand the heart of the question. Come in now, or come in tomorrow.

"It'll keep for a day. I may actually see the end of the stupid knives by then."

Promising to take over the body on Monday, Holly pondered the amusing fact that she and Gail were now working on the same case. Maybe they could finish it before her parents arrived.

One thing Gail hated was losing her Sundays. Sunday was a lazy day, with no running and no pressure, where she could curl up with Holly and read, or watch something stupid on TV, or sleep. Or not sleep. Sometimes Gail dreamed of having a house with a fireplace and spending lazy winter Sundays on a fur rug in front of the fire with Holly's head in her lap, reading. Or not reading.

What Sunday was not for, was getting up early and then going with John to the stupid convention again. And yet that was precisely where she was going.

This time she was driving, and had just downloaded Khan's record to her iPad before picking up her partner, so he read the highlights for them as she drove. "Two arrests, assault and battery," mused John. "Mitchell was a bad, bad, boy."

"Anything juicy? Like he punched the son of a marine?"

"No, just stupid college shit, it looks like. He got in a bar fight and crippled a guy's hand, slamming it in a car door."

That didn't sound like just college shit. "Did you even go to college, Simmons?"
"Does two weeks count?" He didn't wait for Gail to diss him and asked, "You mean that's not normal?"

"Only on TV," Gail shook her head. "How much time did he serve?"

"Nada," replied John. "Judge sent him to anger management. The kid he crippled didn't want to press charges, and kept trying to back out."

"That sounds juicy."

"He started the fight, it looks like. People are messed up, Peck." They alternated calling each other by their family and given names based on whims, and neither one minded it. One more of the reasons she liked Simmons.

"How'd he end up acting?"

"Therapy!" John laughed. "His anger management therapist told him to get out his demons fighting on stage, so he became a professional stage fighter."

Gail frowned. Okay. That was weird. "Creepy." Clearly they were going to have double check on that therapist later.

Her partner agreed and they headed into the convention. Gail felt much better being in her normal street clothes. True, she was in boots, jeans and a nice jacket, but she felt armored. Also her gun was on her hip this time, which was way better. She had felt horribly under-dressed last night, which admittedly had been the point of the outfit. It was easy enough for Holly to unzip without wanting to curse, and slinky enough to distract her.

Two women getting dressed was still as much fun as a man and a woman.

Dov and Nick were on site, canvassing the crowd, and collecting people that Gail and John would probably want to talk to. "I have a list of people who signed up for the show," explained Dov, holding it out to Gail with a grin.

"It's a free show," she replied, surprised.

"They like to try and get good seats, so they wait to sign up all day. Apparently these people waited in line all day Friday. Some of 'em are working here."

The patience of nerds was astounding. "Split the list?" She held it out to John who tore it in half and took the non-vendors. "Dov, you're with me."

"Come on, soldier boy, let's go talk to some geeks." John clapped his shoulder and they started off to hunt down the people who were simply attendees. He was much better at that sort of thing, finding random people. It was a gift that had made him insanely valuable to missing persons for the last six years.

Studying the list, Gail sighed. "We need a map." Dov whipped a piece of paper out and grinned, all the booths marked off with numbers that matched the list. God bless that precious, geeky, boy.

After five hours, they had a whole lot of confusion and went back to the station to draw out their thoughts on a white board. John, with better handwriting, stood up front while Gail slouched in her desk chair, both leaving Dov and Nick to their own devices back on the main floor. The uniformed boys were less than used to being on the third floor, and it showed.
"Time line," Gail started, propping her feet on her desk and reading off her iPad. "Six PM, Todd Mitchell leaves the room to do a final dress rehearsal on site with Kirk Hale. Becky Mitchell, didn't hear back from him by seven and went to sleep." She paused so John could scribble that down. 
"Kirk Hale is seen on the elevators at 5:45, headed down to the floor for that rehearsal. Kirk is seen again on the elevators at 7:23, alone. About nine PM, the Ferengi notice the sign, security guard goes in, calls us."

John capped his pen. "Did we get any information on the sign?"

"Printed in the hotel's business suite," Gail noted. "Dov checked the logs and it was printed at 8:39. Nothing on the cameras, which are just for show." The number of places using fake cameras was annoying, but this hotel was not particularly high priced. "Probably printed after the murder," mused Gail. "75 minutes to kill someone. And we don't know why."

"My interviews were a bust," John sighed. He started to write down reasons why anyone might kill Todd Mitchell. Other than the record, he was insanely clean cut. No affairs, no arguments. They worst anyone had to say was that he was too campy when he played Khan. Of course other people said that's what made him awesome. "Did you get anything good?"

"Just one. He had a crew. Some of them came in for the show, too."

"A crew?" John looked surprised.

"Yeah, in the series, Khan and his whole crew are woken up. So these guys play some of the crew. They're all in town till Wednesday, so I thought we could talk to them after the autopsy tomorrow. Maybe we'll know what we're looking for."

"When's the autopsy?"

Gail pulled her phone out to double check. "8am."

Nodding, John stretched. "I say we call it a night, meet up at the lab at 7:30?"

It was already eight at night and Gail abruptly was aware of her stomach gnawing on her spine, "Sounds good. Maybe I'll get some sleep."

John smirked. "Really? Stayed up all night?"

Flipping off her partner, Gail shoved her iPad and laptop into a bag and headed home. At least she could get a meal and some sleep with her girlfriend.

When Holly left the house at five AM, Gail was so soundly asleep that not even the accidental drop and clatter of Holly's laptop made her twitch. It was so rare for Gail to sleep that hard, Holly made extra certain to be quieter the rest of her morning, only taking time to ensure Gail's alarm was set for half past six. An hour was enough time for the detective to get ready for work, and Holly gently kissed her girlfriend's cheek before heading in to the lab. Let her have the next 90 minutes to sleep and rest, she'd need it.

The lab was the opposite of her peaceful home. The techs were in an uproar, having rushed as many samples as possible, by bumping the Klingon knives to the front of the queue. They'd done a wonderful job in triage, sorting the knives with no blood traces from the ones with any trace, but the number was daunting.

As Gail would say, stupid Klingons.
"Who's got my murder weapon?" Holly started from there, pulling her lab coat on and tying her hair back.

One of the techs held up the bag. "It's not even sharp," he announced with disdain.

Holly took the bag and blinked. "So you have the report?"

"In your inbox ten minutes ago, Dr. Stewart. So far none of the samples have come up positive to his blood type."

Eying the mountain of knives, Holly made a decision that Rodney should have. "Put that on hold."

The lab looked at her like she was a goddess. "We have the murder weapon, there's no point in looking for more. I need someone to run the tox on Mr. Mitchell, and trace on his clothes. Did they bring in samples of Klingon clothes?"

One of the techs nodded, "Yes, they all used the same kind of fibers. Looks like most of the local Klingons use the same costumers and fabric. I guess it's a consistency thing."

"Check for makeup transfer. And adhesive. Those ridges have to stick on somehow. Oh and wigs."

She frowned and studied the output. "I need one person to compare metals. Just sort out what knives have the same source batch in case they need to find the makers."

The techs, much relieved, split up and started their new orders with much more excitement. They'd been processing blood on knives for a day and had to be bushed. Holly retreated to her office to read what had been processed so far, and to study the knife. It didn't make much sense to kill someone with a knife less sharp than a kitchen knife, but maybe it was just the weapon on hand. The Klingon Opera had a performance at the con and Holly had been sad to miss it, but that would have been asking a lot for Gail to suffer through.

By a quarter to eight, she was caught up and had the preliminary results of the tox screen, as well as most trace processed (or in some some stage thereof), and Gail and John showed up with fresh coffee. While there was a twinkle in her eyes, Gail greeted Holly as 'Dr. Stewart.' John rolled his eyes but repeated the greeting similarly.

"Tell me you have something juicy," Gail pleaded, holding a coffee out for Holly, in her favorite ceramic travel mug.

One sip and Holly grinned. They'd even stopped at her favorite coffee shop. "Your murder weapon isn't very sharp. Literally."

Both detectives blinked, eyebrows lifting in similar expressions of disbelief. "He was stabbed in the gut," John pointed out. "You've got to push hard for that."

"If you go through the abdominal muscles, yes," agreed Holly. She held over the sketch she'd made earlier. "And with a core as tough as Mr. Mitchell, it's a reasonable assumption to make. Either your killer knew what they were doing or they were insanely lucky. If they nailed the kidney, that'd take him out pretty fast."

Gail mimed stabbing a couple times and frowned, "Isn't it easier to get the kidneys from behind?"

"Shorter distance," Holly nodded. "The back muscles are stronger and thicker though, so that would be a lot harder. This was actually more effective."

"Slow death?"
"We're about to find out." Holly finished half the coffee and handed it back to Gail to suit up and start the autopsy. Many detectives had started to come watch the entire autopsy, citing it helped them better understand the scene of the crime. Gail had always watched them, respectfully. She'd always been more respectful of the dead, insisting on calling them humans.

As Holly cracked the chest, Gail flipped through the preliminary trace report. "I can't believe he didn't fight back," she mused. "No defensive wounds at all."

John grunted a reply. "Given everything else, it's out of character. He must have known the killer and not expected it."

They'd clearly done some more legwork since Holly had seen Gail last, or talked to about the case. "There are no hesitation marks," Holly pointed out.

"Cheerful," drawled Gail. "One shot and dead."

"Huh," muttered Holly, surprised.

"Huh what?" That was John and Gail hushed him.

Ignoring them both, Holly checked her theory and nodded. "Transacted the abdominal aorta," she said firmly. "Killer came up from below and hit him perfectly."

Now Gail asked a question. "Did it take a lot of strength?"

"Yes," Holly replied slowly. "Mind, I think I could do it, if I was three inches shorter."

"That's oddly specific." Looking over the body, Holly saw Gail's smirk and returned a smile she knew made Gail happy; she called it that 'Stewart Side Smile.' Incorrigible flirt.

John seemed to agree, "Really? Over a dead body?"

"Just because you can't get a second date even with a dead body," replied Gail, but she did give Holly an apologetic smile. "Why three inches, Doc?"

Holly held her hand out at an angle. "The knife is seven inches long, so to get through the aorta and up into the kidney it takes a specific angle. This was an underarm stab, up and to the victim's right."

She continued to describe the exact angle and method of stabbing, and Gail simply took notes.

"How tall?" John sounded tired.

"5'4" to 5'6" depending on shoes," replied Gail. Holly looked up just in time to see Gail and John smirking and glaring at each other. How very weird. "Gut wounds take forever to die, and he didn't move around a lot, Doc."

That was a bold statement. "Generally true. But with a kidney wound, it's seconds rather than minutes. What's your evidence that he didn't thrash?"

Holding up her iPad, Gail showed a photo of the crime scene. "Pretty clear he died where he fell. No drag marks, no thrashing. Just a guy in a gross jumpsuit and a puddle of blood." Well done, smiled Holly. Badass Detective Gail Peck was always a charmer.

Leaving John to follow up on the evidence, Gail went down and to grab a uniform for backup. Butler had commented on it before, that he found it odd they always split the load like that and separated, but since it was still working he'd let it go. It suited Gail fine, since she liked John well
enough but they often worked at different speeds.

That was also part of why she had a handy short list with Oliver. The only one free was one of her friends, which always made things equal parts interesting and complicated. "Chloe, grab your gear, I need backup."

Rarely was Chloe her first choice, but she'd realized that the woman had a knack for undercover and had been encouraging it lately. It was most likely the next to leave the beat cop nest would be Chloe over to Blackstone and Callaghan's arena. Gail had been putting in a good word for her as much as possible.

"Where are we going?" Chloe had on long sleeves and her body armor, but no jacket. Sometimes Gail felt a little naked without it every day.

"Therapy." Gail gestured for Chloe to get in the passenger seat of Gail's car. "Dr. Joyce Klein." She handed the iPad with her notes over to Chloe, the page with the information on Joyce loaded first. Unlike Dov or Nick, Chloe could be trusted not to snoop on Gail's iPad.

Chloe read carefully and frowned as Gail drove to the offices. "If I'm just backup, why are you letting me read this about her?"

Smiling, Gail slowed at a stop sign, "People ignore the uniforms when you flash a detective badge at them. That's what Butler used me for when I was new to the unit, so I like to haul you guys around. Keep your eyes open, tell me what you think about this stuff."

A very thoughtful Chloe nodded and accepted that. They pulled up outside the building and headed inside. It was a matter of moments to get to see Dr. Klein, who was expecting them.

"Detective Peck, thank you for calling first. So few police have been so considerate."

Frankly, Gail had just wanted to be sure the woman would be there. Hands were shaken, and Chloe drifted to the back of the room by the door, out of sight and mind to the doctor. "This shouldn't take long, Dr. Klein. You were treating Todd Mitchell?"

The doctor held up her hands, "You know I can't tell you confidential information about a patient. Not even for court mandated therapy."

Gail held up her iPad, showing a photo of the deceased Todd Mitchell. "Mr. Mitchell was murdered late Saturday night. We're following up on some leads, and I was hoping you could tell me about the acting troupe you connected him with."

Sitting down, Joyce Klein looked stunned. "Todd's dead?"

"I'm afraid so." And Gail waited.

After a moment, the doctor exhaled, shakily. "What was he doing?"

"Portraying Khan at ToSCon. He was murdered after his dress rehearsal."

Joyce lowered her eyes for a moment. "Of course. He was with Kirk?" When she looked up, Gail nodded, letting the doctor feed on the silence. "He and Kirk met at Todd's second group," she said slowly. "The first group was where he found Star Trek. I found it through Allison Roan, and she was so nice to Todd, getting him involved. When he told me he wanted to start Cosplaying as Khan, and changed his name, it was a turning point to his whole life. He suddenly had an outlet for the self he never felt comfortable with."
Frowning, Gail felt sympathy with Todd in that moment. She'd never felt comfortable with herself, and envied Chloe for her own ability to just be who she was. Gail only became at ease with herself as a person when she'd met Holly and changed the entire direction of her life. "Allison Roan?" The name was familiar.

"She's an actor and prop maker. She usually goes to these things, the cons, with Todd. Was she not there?"

Gail arched an eyebrow. "No, his wife Becky was there."

"Oh it's not like that!" Dr. Klein waved a hand and then wrote down some information on a piece of paper. "Allison and Todd are just friends, like Kirk. She plays Marla McGivers."

"Who?"

From behind, Chloe spoke, "Khan's wife."

Of course she knew that. Gail tapped on her iPad for a moment and found Allison Roan listed as a merchant. She had not attended the show. Gail high-lit the name and made a note to look into her after this. "Dr. Klein, why did you encourage him to portray Khan?"

"I thought that channelling his anger into a character with fervent passion would help him control his urges," she sighed. "It seemed to work. He turned into a vegetarian, he married, had children… I thought it was all behind him."

"Weren't you afraid that playing a killer would inspire him to become one?"

The doctor looked away. "It was a remote possibility."

Too bad he was the victim, not the killer.

Chapter End Notes

The doctor was originally written to be a multi-arc serial killer, too! She's not. Sorry. She's still weird and creepy and pretty much not a great doctor.
The Enemy Within

Chapter Notes

It's still Monday. It's a very long day. Since I was asked why I hate naming characters, it's because that means I can't reuse a name later, or an archetype, without wondering why. Also it means I have to describe them more, explain how they look and move and act, and that can be complicated. Also I worry about the Mary Sue effect when I do it. John is only original because I can't spell Callaghan reliably, and none of the other detectives we've met on the show fit the niche I wanted for this. The converse to that means when I do name someone, they're likely to be important to the story somehow, as a killer or a red herring. I'll never tell.

Monday was the last day of the con and Holly knew Gail was going to be in a rush. That was why she was not surprised that Gail sent Chloe to her lab instead of coming by herself. "We have a courier," joked Holly, holding the report up for Chloe.

"That's what I said, but Gail said this would be faster. Why can't you just email it?"

"Hard to email a knife." She held up the evidence bag and Chloe looked impressed.

Taking the bag, Chloe turned it in her hand. "That doesn't match anything in the series, that's a movie knife." Holly laughed and Chloe looked offended, "You knew that, didn't you?"

Holly nodded, "I did. Everyone's figured that out." She rubbed her own shoulder and wondered what the chance was to get a massage from Gail. Assuming she even got to see Gail again today. "Sadly that knife doesn't match samples from any of the vendors. Or the Klingons. And the style's wrong."

"How's that?" Chloe peeked at the report, and Holly didn't stop her.

"Well the form doesn't match most of them. Here..." Holly pulled another of the knives out from the box to be returned. "Look at the left blade. The angle's all wrong."

Chloe huh'd softly. "A one off, handmade, knife?"

"I'd imagine so. It's a pretty big mistake to make, though, and it's a newer blade, or at least one that wasn't used ever. You can tell by the seams from the casting, how they're still burred. Whomever made it didn't bother to clean it up and fine tune it, just cast and sold. So they're either really lazy, or it was some early craft work that never sold before. I can't see why anyone would try to sell less than their best, but then again, I'm not really into the whole cosplay thing. I'd rather be outside, as much as I love a con..."

She noticed, at this point, that Chloe was looking at her with wide eyes. That was why Holly had trouble keeping many friends. "That is so cute," bubbled Chloe, absolutely delighted.

"Thank you?"

"You're so into your work, it's got to be why Gail's just got a fire under her to be this totally bad ass detective. And," continued Chloe, picking up the evidence and report and placing it on top of the
evidence box of knives. "And you're pretty. I mean, super sexy, great skin, and you're so fit. You have this hot librarian thing, like Lynda Carter, going on. Which isn't my thing, but I can totally see it."

Holly covered her mouth and hide a smile. Did Chloe know that Holly knew she was bi? This had the potential to be awkward. "Thank you, Chloe."

"And you're nice," added Chloe. "Gail's still bitchy, but she's a nicer bitchy." She picked up the box and smiled. "Next year, you and I are totally going to the con." And Chloe swept out of the room.

Shaking her head, Holly went back to her computer to work on her report and the formality aspects of it. She knew Gail would be fine with the bare bones report and be able to make enough of a decision and get warrants when needed. It was much the same with Traci and Steve and even Swarek. Callaghan, on the other hand, wanted things to be precise and complete, and was a bit of an ass when he didn't get things fast enough.

Her phone rang, shattering her fantastic description of the wound to the kidney, and Holly groaned. "Hi, Dad."

"Your mother wants me to get on a plane," he complained.

This was going to be one of those conversations. "Dad, you already agreed to do the lecture."

"We have enough time to drive."

"If you leave today, sure." She took her glasses off and pressed the bridge of her nose. "Gail's starting to think you don't want to meet her, Dad." This was a lie. Gail had such a broken concept of family that the idea of family actually wanting to meet her was entirely foreign.

Her father groaned. "Please don't tell me you're siding with your mother."

"I always side with Mom, you know that," she grinned. "Please, Daddy?"

"Oh, don't do that," he pleaded.

"Daaaddyyyy."

"I hate when you do that." He didn't, and she knew it. "I want to see you here next winter. We need to go hiking. Gail hikes right?"

"No, she's not really into sports, Dad."

"Thank god for that," he muttered. Holly's father had never really been into sports either, and tolerated Lily and Holly's passion. "Hiking isn't sport. Pack her boots for her."

"She doesn't own winter hiking boots, Dad." Aghast, her father demanded to know how Gail patrolled in winter. "In a car. She made detective last year, though. Now she sends minions into the snow."

"I like that. That's clever." He sighed, "Fine. I'll come. But I want that that tomato soup you make." Holly's lengthy pause seemed to surprise her father. "You forgot how to make it?"

"Gail's allergic to tomatoes."

"So? You can eat it!"
"I'm kind of fond of kissing her, Dad," she pointed out and her father laughed. "How about I let her make this amazing baked mac and cheese dish?" Now her father paused. He was a sucker for a good mac and cheese.

"Now I'm interested. Alright, sweetie. Go back to work cutting up dead things and saving Toronto. I love you."

"Love you too, Dad."

Hanging up, she rubbed her face and texted her mother to note that Dad was having second thoughts about flying, and she'd tried. Sometimes parents were such a trial and needed such looking after. But she'd rather have parents like hers, who wanted to be involved and wanted to talk to her, than ones like Gail's, who wanted to be involved for their own reasons.

There was no time to waste. Monday was still crowded at the convention, even though it wasn't a holiday, and most of the vendors were still there making the last of their sales. Sunday, they'd made sure to check out when each vendor who sold weapons (prop or otherwise) were leaving, and prioritized the ones who left Sunday night first. Blissfully, Allison Roan was of the lot to leave last, as she lived in Mississauga, which meant she was going to be available to meet with.

"What time is she leaving?" John pulled his coat on as he got out of his car.

"After closing at six, so we have three hours minimum."

The day had sped by and Gail wished she had a TARDIS to go back and interview more people. Holly would probably lecture her about crossing her own time stream, though, and Gail kept the thoughts to herself.

"We should give the Klingons their knives back," muttered John, as a horde (army?) stormed past them in a rush.

"Once we close the case." Gail stifled a yawn. The commissioner had called her an hour before, letting her know exactly how important it was to have someone in custody today. At that point, Gail expected Butler to yank the case from them, but he'd just promised them anything they needed.

Right now, Gail needed an IV of espresso.

John shared the yawn, looking just as tired. "Maybe you can use your magic silent treatment and break 'em down."

They found Allison Roan's stall right away and Gail stared at the weapons on display. "Wow," she muttered, and leaned to pick up a round circle with Greekish engraving.

"Hey, can't you read?" The brunette with a surprisingly poofy hairstyle snapped, angry. "Sign says no touching without staff."

Gail held up her badge, "Allison Roan?" She introduced herself and John. "We'd like to talk to you about Todd Mitchell."

Her face paled slightly and she nodded. "Joey?" Her assistant nodded, squeezing her arm, and Gail and John led her away to a quiet room to talk. John had wanted to take her back to the station, but Gail pointed out that most of their suspects (if they were still in town) would be here.

The hotel had readily given them a small conference room to use for just this sort of thing, and they
waved for Allison to sit down. "Todd," she sighed, taking the bottle of water John held out.

"I'm sorry," Gail said, not feeling the words but knowing she had to say it. "I know you were friends."

Allison startled, "Yes. I introduced him to Star Trek."

"You're a life long Trekkie?" Gail was leading the interview for now, simply because she knew more of the dork lingo.

And Allison nodded. "My Dad got me hooked."

This one wasn't going to be a crier, or a drama queen, so Gail led her on. "The weapons I saw were pretty cool. Did your dad teach you that?"

"He did. We used to make costumes together." At the 'used to' comment, Gail arched her eyebrow. "He died two years ago, cancer." Murmuring another sorry, Gail asked if Allison did cosplay as well. "Oh yes, when we do a bigger group, I play Marla, Khan's wife."

Flicking her eyes at John, Gail let him take the next question. "Bigger group?"

"Normally we do the whole Botany Bay crew, but this time Todd and Kirk wanted to do something special, and they thought it would dilute too much if we were all there."

Gail nodded and pulled out a photo of the murder weapon. "I know it's a rough time, and you were close, but we need some help. You're a weapons maker, maybe you can identify this?" She put the photo down and slid it forward.

The startled expression was quickly masked, but Gail knew both she and John caught it. So did Allison who looked at them, chagrined. "It's mine. One of mine." She touched the side blade, the one Holly insisted was wrong. "I screwed that up about eight years ago."

That was not an admission Gail had seen coming. John leaned forward, equally surprised, "Do you still sell it?"

"Not that particular blade, no. I don't even have the mould anymore, I shredded it for filler in a padded costumes. I stopped five years ago, when I started selling at cons. I only do replicas from the original series and the reboot movie now."


Gail rolled her eyes. "Don't mind him. He was calling him Cummerbund yesterday."

"I've heard that before," smiled Allison, warily.

Shooting Gail an annoyed look, John asked "Do you have records of the older sales?"

After a short pause, Allison shook her head. "No, I was cash only then. I'm sorry."

They thanked her for that and let her go back to her booth, but lingered. "She's hiding something," muttered John.

"Ya think?" Gail put her head on the table, resting on cheek on the cool material, and closed her eyes. "She's short enough, too."

John sounded surprised, "She's your height!"
"She was in heels boots with chunky heels." Gail opened one eye. "Becky Mitchell's still around, right?"

After tapping on his phone, John nodded. "Yep. I had her and Kirk pegged as a romance gone wrong, y'know."

Gail snorted and closed her eyes again. "No, she was in love with Todd." Letting her mind wander back to Becky, Gail frowned. "Allison plays Todd's wife."

"Jealousy?"

"Holly wasn't exactly keen on you being my work husband," admitted Gail. Especially not when she'd seen the recent photo. John was pretty, in a severe sort of way. Very intense. Even when she'd been dating men, he wasn't her type. She'd preferred Boy Scouts. Though it was hard to look at men and remember why she'd ever found them attractive at all. They no longer did anything for her. Neither did most women, with the exception of sexy librarians and Anna Silk.

There was silence from her partner, so Gail opened her eyes again to see him confused and embarrassed. "Gail, I like you, but … You're not my type."

Smiling, Gail rested her hands under her chin. "Too much fleece? Too many backpacks?"

He laughed, having heard that story from Holly. "I was thinking the bitchy blonde spitfire. I like my ladies curvy and sweet." But there was a strange way to his words that Gail probably wouldn't have even noticed if it wasn't for some of Holly's friends.

The last thing Gail enjoyed doing was sharing her personal life, however this felt like the right moment. Steve had nagged her that she needed to bond with someone, especially if she was going to spend hours and weeks and years working in close quarters. "John, you know Nick, right?"

"Soldier Boy Collins? Sure."

"We were engaged once." John's eyes widened in thinly veiled amusement. "We actually went to Vegas to get married, and he left me at the alter."

"Please don't tell me your parents were there." She nodded and he winced. "Wow. I'm amazed he's still alive," he laughed.

She smiled and sat up straight, stretching her back. "Between me and my mother, yeah, it's pretty impressive." Her lower back popped and Gail sighed. "Course I hooked up with him again when he joined Fifteen, a monumentally dumb ass decision."

"Sex was probably good," mused John. "I mean, he looks fit."

"Wasn't bad." Gail smirked. "Problem is now they all get compared to Holly, and I gotta tell you, there is no comparison." While John laughed and nodded his understanding, he didn't come clean to what he was holding back. Well. There was time. Gail slapped the table. "Okay, let's go find Becky."

The busy work of the lab was sometimes incredibly stressful. Having handed off everything to the police, including her collection of Klingon knives, Holly ended up putting in scut work time to help try and catch up from their frantic change of plans. There were other murders around, after all. She left work at four, arguably early though she'd been at work since six, and planned to finish up reports from home, but desperately wanted a run in to calm herself down.
Most of her problem right now was that she thought the conclusions on the murder weapon were wrong. The initial thought was, based on the style, it was a scrap knife. But the more Holly thought about the quality of the metal and the handle, the more she started to think that maybe the knife was brand new. That would explain much about its look, like the unfinished parts, though none about why someone would let poor quality like that out into the world.

Those thoughts meant that her run hadn't really helped, and she was home, and grumpy, at five when her phone rang again. "Hey, sweetheart," smiled Holly, feeling her blood pressure lower just by knowing Gail was on the line.

"Hi," came the familiar, crabby, voice of an overworked Gail Peck. "Lab said you already left."

"I've been there since six, Gail." Holly knew she sounded snippy, but Gail's mood fed hers.

"Oh! That wasn't a complaint, sorry. I'm still at the stupid con."

Somehow it wasn't fair that Gail, who didn't even want to be there, was stuck. "I'm sorry. Any luck on the case?"

"That's why I'm calling, actually, Dr. Stewart."

Holly grinned and walked upstairs to the office. "Do I need my laptop?"

"Only if that steel trap of yours can't remember anything about the knife"

"I've been calling it the dichotomy knife," admitted Holly, pulling up the file anyway. It was still fresh in her mind, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Gail was silent for a moment. "The whole of the sum is divided into two parts?" How she loved that woman's mind.

"Okay, I think our initial conclusion was premature."

"Huh," replied Gail. There was no judgement in her tone, just acceptance of science and how theories changed. "What's the new one?"

Full on science nerd kicked in. "There's no metal fatigue, which means it's new. But the mould used has to be old because the edges aren't as sharp. The constant casting and use wore them down. I think it looks better from an aesthetic perspective, but it's strange when you consider it's a poorly designed blade in the first place." She stopped rambling and sighed, "This is normally the part where you tell me I needed to stop talking."

"The knife's new? The report said unused."

Holly cringed, "I thought it was unused, but the more I looked at the photos, the more I thought it was weird. It was definitely a rush job, though. There were flakes of metal all in his gut."

"Hang on!" Gail was excited and sounding far more chipper. "John, it's new." In the background, Holly heard a started John ask how new. "I don't think she can tell that."

"I'm not a miracle worker," joked Holly, and Gail snorted. She knew the old Trek pretty well.

"The mould's about eight years old."

Now Holly was surprised. "How'd you figure that?"
"We found the maker. She said the knife was from a batch she made five years ago, and she never used that mould anymore."

"If you had the mould—"

"Destroyed, of course."

Of course, Holly sighed. "Well. It's just not probable, unless all the metal in all her knives uses a new blend. Hang on, which vendor?"

"Allison Roan, Heartblade Weaponry."

Holly skimmed through the database and pulled up the specifications on the knife metal sample, side by side with the murder weapon. "It's the same metal batch, and that would hold up in court."

"Damn it! Why didn't we check that before?"

That sounded like it was shouted at John and not her, but Holly still had an answer. "We were looking for blood and individual weapons. I put a stop to that before you came in for the autopsy."

She scratched the back of her neck. "And they all used the same few vendors. Maybe they got a group rate or something."

"You're a genius, I love you."

Never once in their dating life had Gail ever said that while working and Holly felt her face heat up. "Go arrest someone, Gail."

Her girlfriend agreed to do so and hung up. Holly spun her chair around, smiling. It was nice to date someone who got her humor, admired her work, and still loved her when she got obsessive over things. They didn't share everything in common. Actually they had very little in common outside of work. But that gave them so much more to talk about and share with each other.

She stopped the chair and looked at the wall. Her college and medical degrees were framed next to Gail's from college and the academy. In the corner, Gail's gun locker stood next to the bookcase filled with Holly's medical journals. The other bookcase had all sorts of books, non-fiction of course, but everything from history and costuming to music and geography. Holly had no idea which books were hers anymore.

They were integrated.

It was pretty nice.
The prospect of making an arrest had Gail wide awake. It was also the prospect of being done with a very long day and getting to go home and sleep and relax. She was due a day off, hopefully before Holly's parents showed up, but really she was too busy to seriously concern herself with that.

Interviewing Becky about Allison had proven surprisingly enlightening. To put it simply, Becky hated Allison. They'd been friends up until Becky and Todd met at a Halloween party, dressed as Classic Trek Klingons, and Todd asked her out. She always felt Allison had wanted to be with Todd, but when she asked, to make sure she didn't break the friend code, Allison had said it was fine.

When the dating became serious, Becky found herself the recipient of petty sniping and was ostracized from two of their groups. Since that also impacted Todd's life, he switched to a new acting troupe, which as where he met Kirk.

"Why didn't you mention her before, when we asked if someone wanted to hurt Todd?" John was a little flabbergasted.

"She'd never hurt Todd. Me, maybe, but she's not even here." When neither detective said anything, Becky paled. "She's here? She's not supposed to ... She's not playing Marla is she? Todd stopped that after our second child."

Gail took a moment to miss having her radio, where it would be so much faster to get someone to guard Becky, but she'd have to make do. "Mrs. Mitchell, she's had ample opportunity to get to you all weekend." Frankly Gail didn't understand why Becky was still there, but to each their own. "However you should stay in your room until we call you."

Nodding, Becky accepted this and Gail called Oliver to get a protection detail, for peace of mind. They made Becky promise to check the badges, and gave her the names of the officers to expect. You could never be too sure.

"You think Allison's going to try to kill her?" John stabbed the button for the elevator.

"I think Allison was never okay with Todd dating Becky, but murder..." Gail shook her head. "Ever done anything weird on impulse, John?"

They stepped into the elevator and John looked thoughtful, "Dropped out of college and joined the academy. That's about it."

Gail nodded, "You thought about it for a long time, right? About how to do it, how to break it to people, how it was going to change your life forever. And then that one day, you just snapped and did it. And it was kinda insane, you felt like you were crazy reckless, even though you'd thought about it for days."

"Yeah," breathed John, seemingly startled at the explanation.

Not saying anything else, Gail waited for the elevator to stop. "Think it's enough to bring her in?"

"Invite." John pushed his short hair back and up, smoothing it out. He tilted his head and Gail nodded, gesturing for him to go first.

They quickly found their way back to Allison's booth, where she was starting to box up. "Detectives,
"is everything okay?" She looked stressed, though Gail could come up with a hundred reasons why.

"Actually, we'd like you to come with us, back to the station. Answer a few more questions," said John, his voice pitched to a casual tone, as if this was perfectly normal.

Normal people, innocent people, tended to spook when you asked them that. It was human nature, the fear of unknown and simple cop fear. There was a big difference between that tension and the one they saw in Allison. People told her you couldn't see guilt in a person, and Gail just felt they didn't see enough guilty people.

Allison looked between them and frowned, mental walls going up immediately. In her head, Gail could hear Holly making a joke about shields being at full strength. "I'm busy. Can this wait?"

Deferring the conversation was a common tactic.

"We can talk about it here, if you'd like," John offered, making it seem like no big thing. While Gail had a weird knack for interrogation (anything was easier than Perik), John had that calm vibe that put a person at ease. Clearly if they wanted to talk in public, it couldn't be that bad.

"Oh." Allison looked at Gail again and then nodded. "I guess that's alright."

John smiled. "We just wanted to check something. You said you played Khan's wife?"

"Marla McGivers," nodded Allison. "It's something argued in canon. The original script for *Star Trek II* references her as Khan's 'beloved' wife, but the life was cut from the final version. Most of her characterization is drawn from the book *To Reign in Hell*, which has its own issues, of course, but what doesn't."

Her partner gave her a look and Gail nodded. "We were told that your, ah, Botany Bay crew had disbanded," Gail explained, slowly.

Allison stiffened. "Who told you that?"

"Becky Mitchell."

The look on Allison's face was pure anger. "She's just jealous that the best she can do is play a trill. She can't even do the classic Trek with those cow legs."

This was Gail's turf now, the indignant anger. John had put Allison in a place where she would want to talk, and Gail had the knack to make her talk. "You don't get along," she said, not asked, and tilted her head.

"Becky? Perfect princess Becky?" Allison scoffed and folded her arms. "It was the knife, wasn't it?"

Gail nodded. "Damn it, I should have lied." Allison's eyes went wide, "It wasn't... I didn't mean to... Can I change my mind?"

Taking out her cuffs, Gail took hold of Allison's upper arm. "Allison Roan, you're under arrest for the murder of Todd Mitchell, do you understand?" When Allison muttered her understanding, she continued through the charter.

"Tell Kirk I'm sorry," she whispered as the loaded her into the car.

That was unexpected, and Gail frowned. "Kirk?"

"That's what she said." As the uniforms drove her to the station, John shook his head. "Think you can break her for the whole story?"
Gail snorted, "Please." She looked after the car, "Come on, let's let her sit and go tell Becky."

Upstairs in the hotel room, Kirk was sitting with Becky, holding her hand. Unable to tell if there was something going on, Gail let John take the lead again. "We thought you should know, we have a tentative confession from Allison Roan."

Both Trekkies exhaled, looking pained.

"She wanted to tell you she was sorry, Kirk."

And the man didn't look surprised, he just nodded sadly. "I should have known," muttered Kirk. "It's the curse."

"Curse?" Gail blinked a few times.

"Allison used to play Lois Lane in stage productions of Superman." He shook his head. "We never should have kept her in the group," said Kirk. "She used to do a great Lois Lane, and everyone knows they're all crazy!"

The party was loud and drinks were paid for by the mayor, which was weird and hilarious. Once Gail called her to tell her about the arrest and confession, Holly had been impressed that it ended that fast. But Gail assured her, most criminals weren't hardened killers with a stonewall defense, but regular people making terrible decisions. An hour later, Chris showed up in Gail's car to drive Holly to a surprise party at the Penny, explaining that there was no way Gail or John were leaving any time soon, and he was their chauffeur.

As soon as Holly walked in, Traci grabbed her and hauled her to the bar, where Gail and John were holding an embarrassed court, John standing by the bar while Gail was perched on it. Gail's look of perpetual disdain and annoyance faded as she spotted Holly. Hopping off the bar, they managed to get in a quick hug and brief kiss before another drink was pressed into Gail's hand.

"They're trying to kill me," complained Gail, handing the Jack and Coke to Holly.

"How drunk are you?"

Defensively, Gail replied, "I ate a burger."

It was John who leaned in to provide a drink count, "She's on number five. She really holds her lick... Her booze. I, however, am on three or floor." He was definitely drunk already.

"Lightweight." Gail wrapped an arm around Holly, keeping her close by. "Don't worry, Snowflake'll drive him home tonight."

"And Chris is our ride... How does that work if he has your car?"

"Dov has his car." Gail shrugged and Holly just sipped the drink. It was surprisingly strong. "So how was your day?" There was a nearly British level of absurdity in the statement and Holly nearly snorted her drink out of her nose.

Laughing, Gail guided Holly to a table. "I'd like a burger," Holly declared. "And I want to hear what the motive was."

John made the order before joining them. "Boring. Jealousy," he announced, sitting across from Gail and Holly. "She wanted Kirk to leave Becky."
That was mundane, and Holly felt disappointed until the name kicked in. "Kirk? Not Todd?"

"Yep, she was in love with Kirk, had been for years," sighed Gail, accepting another drink and the appetizers. "Numb-nut didn't even realize Kirk loves Becky like a sister. Who ordered potato skins?"

"I like them," grumbled John, taking one.

"You're so gross. I told you to order the fries."

"They're coming!"

Holly smiled at the bantering. "So she killed Khan to get to Kirk?"

"She was trying to make it look like the Klingons did it," Gail explained, an arm winding around Holly's waist. "So… the plan was to hurt Todd and Becky. The Klingons would clearly be an attack on Kirk, because Kirk and Klingons. And Becky would be so upset, she wouldn't want to see Kirk anymore, so Allison would have a free path to, ah, comfort him."

The fries finally made an appearance, and Gail grinned, grabbing one to eat right away. "See? I didn't forget you." John slid the vinegar over for Gail. "Does that make any sense, Dr. Stewart? Framing Klingons?"

"John, you can call me Holly."

But he looked at Gail. "Technically it's not work," he said slowly.

"Technically," agreed Gail, putting fries on her plate and doctoring them with vinegar.

Clearly Holly was going to have to ask about that later. "It makes sense," she told John, taking some non-vinegar coated fries. "The third movie, after Khan, is about the Klingons. They kill Kirk's son."

John snapped his fingers, "Oh! Right! That's what he said, the killed his son and then they took his Khan!"

"Seriously?"

Gail nodded, "He had a whole rant." Taking a breath, Gail was just about to recite it when Holly leaned in to kiss her. No. She didn't need to hear that. Someone hooted and Gail growled as she leaned away. "Shut up!"

Mouthing a thank-you to Holly, John cleared his throat. "So the Klingon thing makes sense. We're going to need to find a Trekkie in the Crown's office."

"Won't be hard," Gail said thoughtfully. "Getting a jury to understand it is the hard part. So glad I'm just a cop."

After dinner and more drinks, Chris drove a very tipsy Holly and totally drunk Gail home. It was the first time in about a year that Holly had seen Gail that drunk and she wasn't surprised when the blonde dozed off halfway home.

"Thanks for the ride, Chris," smiled Holly, easing Gail's head onto her shoulder.

"No problem. Just make Gail delete the photo about the Kingons." Holly bit back a smirk and nodded. Gail might delete the photo but Holly wasn't going to. Besides which, Gail thought it would make a good Christmas card for the division, and had already sent it to Oliver. "Should I park in the garage?"
"Please, just go around the back."

Chris eased Gail's car into the empty spot. "Need help getting her in?"

"Maybe." She gently nudged Gail, "Hey, honey, wake up. We're home." Unbuckling herself and Gail, Holly scooted to push Gail into sitting on her own.

With a complaining groan, Gail opened her eyes. "Why am I in the back?" She rubbed her face sleepily. "Oh. Hi, Chrisikins," she sighed, and reached for the door.

"I think we're good, Chris. Thanks again." Holly accepted a hug from the tall, teddy bear, officer while Gail muttered something that might have been a thank you, but more likely was a suggestion to get out of her house. Holly made sure Chris safely got into the car driven by Dov before closing the garage and following Gail.

As tired as Gail was, she had already locked away her gun and badge before starting the shower. Some things were just engrained in her brain, Holly had come to learn, and putting everything away and getting clean before bed was one of them. Plugging in her phone was not and Holly made sure to turn off both their alarms before docking them to charge.

Gail went to sleep right away, though Holly stayed up to read a little and wind down. She couldn't say it was nice that Gail still needed to sleep with some light on, but she did enjoy being able to read in bed without bothering her girlfriend. It didn't take long for Holly to feel her eyelids droop and she turned off her light, making sure the nightlight was still working, and curled up next to Gail to sleep.

For the second morning in a row, she woke up first and smiled at the (blurry) sleeping detective in her bed. Gail's face was scrunched up in concentration, sleeping hard, and Holly reached over to caress her cheek. The face relaxed and Gail stirred. "Go back to sleep," she muttered to Holly, not opening her eyes.

"There's a beautiful woman in my bed," whispered Holly, leaning forward to kiss Gail's cheek.

The blonde grumbled and rolled over, scooting back to take the little spoon spot. "I have a hangover, Holly," she complained.

"Poor baby." Holly propped herself up on one elbow and gently stroked Gail's hair. She'd told Gail to drink more water, but given how tired she was beforehand, it wasn't going to matter much.

The grumpy face faded a little as Holly kept running her fingers through Gail's hair. "The sun's up?" Gail's eyes were still tightly closed.

"Yes." Holly brushed her fingers across Gail's shoulder and arm. "You don't have to be at work till noon." Gail muttered an 'ah' sound and managed to smile and look annoyed. "What's that about?" Grinning, Holly put her chin on Gail's shoulder, her hand roaming a little.

There was a pause before the reply. "You're awake and frisky," yawned Gail, clearly not fully up yet, but not moving away. Grumbling, Gail stretched her arms out in front of herself, "Why did I move in with a morning person?"

With a smile, Holly pressed her lips to Gail's shoulder. "Because morning sex is fun?"

"Sex with you in general is fun," allowed Gail, catching hold of Holly's roaming hand. "But I really have a hangover, Holly."

"Sex is great for headaches," Holly suggested, moving to nuzzle the back of Gail's neck.
Grumpy Gail was winning, however. "Really?" She nudged Holly away from her neck, "Not helping."

Thwarted. Holly sighed and settled for just cuddling, and felt Gail relax quickly. "How hungover?"

Gail groaned and pulled her pillow into her face. "No sex, and believe me this is the only time in the history of the universe I'm ever going to say that, Holly."

With a laugh, Holly reached up to push the pillow away. "No sex right now, fine. But I want sex before my parents get here." There was a soft 'oh' from Gail and she scooted to roll over and actually look at Holly. She repeated the question, "How hungover?"

"Uh, headache, cotton mouth, nauseated." A pause. "Tired." The symptom rundown was concise. "You're going to make me get up, aren't you?"

"No," promised Holly, kissing Gail's forehead. "I'm going to get you water, painkillers, and a banana. Stay." Holly also decided to get her coconut water, on the chance Gail was willing to drink the stuff.

Gail sighed, "You're the coolest chick ever, Holly."

"I know," smirked Holly, and went to fetch supplies for a hangover cure. The only hangover cure. Science.

After her first case, Gail had gotten so snippy with people interrupting her while she wrote her reports, someone had made her a sign: Don't Poke The Bear. Most of the time she kept it in her drawer, but as she worked on writing up the stupid Khan case, she put it on the desk and put on her headphones to concentrate. The headphones also let her ignore the sound of the shoes in her head.

It wasn't anyone's fault. It was just one of those days where one of the lawyers came by, in his wingtip shoes, and they echoed on the tile in the lobby. Gail just happened to be downstairs getting a donut when he walked by. There was a sound, like nails on a chalkboard to her soul. And this was not the day, the place, or the time for dealing with crap like that.

They were expecting Holly's parents on Thursday, which meant Gail needed to be done with everything by then, and there was a lot to record. The only person who survived bothering her was John, who sometimes asked for clarification on terms, or spelling. Neither was done when Butler came over with the news.

"Plea bargain."

Gail read his lips and tugged her earbuds out. "Already?" It astounded her that a plea bargain was even an option in a murder case, but she wasn't a lawyer.

Nodding, Butler took the free chair near their desks. "She could hardly have plead innocent after confessing to you two," he smiled.

Angry, John slapped his laptop closed. "She's insane."

"That's probably the point," Gail mused, leaning back.

Butler nodded, "The lawyers started to argue it wasn't murder, since she didn't plan on killing him."

Both Gail and John expressed their disbelief at that claim. "Intimidation," snapped Gail, having
memorized the nature of murder years ago. "And she came with a goddamn knife!"

Raising his voice a little, Butler continued. "Which is why the Crown's office is leaning to a plea. Cop to murder, take life with parole in 30-plus, keep her crazy ass off the street and away from … what did you call them?"

"Cosplayers," sighed Gail.


As Butler started to get up, Gail cleared her throat. "Sir, can I ask a quick favor?"

That was rare, she knew. She tried like hell not to ask for favors, and certainly not for special treatment. Butler raised his eyebrows and looked over at John, who quickly opened his laptop again and started typing studiously. Still, Butler offered, "My office?"

He didn't have an office, but when people needed a private word, they always went to one of the smaller rooms. "No, I just may need some time off. My… Holly's parents are coming in town on Thursday." Gail wasn't quite sure what to call them. Were you supposed to call them your girlfriend's parents?

"Oh! If you finish that report, you can have the rest of the week, Peck." Butler smirked. "First time meeting them?"

She shook her head. "I've met her mother. I guess her father doesn't like to travel, or something."

"Sounds like fun," laughed Butler, leaving them be.

Gail put her earbuds back in and went back to her report, until she became aware of her partner's eyes, watching her. "What?" she sighed, not taking the earbuds out.

Shaking his head, John replied. "Nothing."

"Men," muttered Gail and she went back to work. She knew he had something to say about himself, but he could take his time and it didn't really bother Gail all that much. It wasn't as if she was the most welcoming person in the world.

Near noon, John waved a hand at her, mouthing 'lunch?' Gail nodded and saved her progress. She was getting to a better point in the report. They were much longer than when she'd been a uniform and far more intricate. The worst part was as you went over things and felt stupid for not seeing the clues before hand. She did include photos, however, for Butler's amusement, like the one of Chris and the Klingon women.

"I need meat," John groaned as they went to the elevator.

"TMI." Gail checked her phone and smiled at a text from Holly telling her that Gerald had been dumpster diving, complete with a photo of Gerald in the dumpster with an amused Chloe watching.

They picked a Moroccan restaurant near the division, each ordering a large dish. "So listen," John said, looking nervous. "I want to tell you something and it's probably going to piss you off."

Gail shrugged, "I've probably heard it before." She was too bitchy, too cold, too cynical.

"I like you as a partner."
That wasn't expected. "Sorry, what?"

John smirked, "You. I think you're a cool partner. You're smart, you say what you think, you don't say what you don't mean, and you give me shit. I like you."

"Oh." Gail tore off a hunk of bread and dipped it in the bean paste.

"See? That's what I mean." Pouring them both some mint tea, John explained. "You don't just say crap like you like me too or whatever because I said it. You actually process it."

Gail shook her head, "You are very strange, John Simmons."

He shrugged. "I get that a lot."

"So… that's it? You wanted to eat lunch so you could tell me you like me?" There was more, she knew it, but she didn't feel like treating him like a suspect. Just ask, that's what Holly told her. If you have a question, you can just ask people.

And now John looked nervous. "What do you know about Missing Persons?"

Gail sipped the tea, which was amazingly good and sweet and she was going to have to have it again. "It's the second shittiest department, on the soul sucking scale of people interaction. Right behind kids... That shit would eat you alive."

"Well that makes it easier," muttered John. "I went into Missing Persons because my fiancé vanished. We got engaged and four days later … Gone."

"Okay, that is officially worse than being dumped at the altar in front of your family," Gail informed him. "Did you find her?"

"No." He took some bread. "Last year they declared her legally dead. I'd already given up, though." John looked at Gail, apologetic, "That's such a fucking downer. Tragic guy, lost his fiancé to a mystery. And everyone always tries to tell me it sucks and they're sorry for me and baby me."

Smirking, Gail gestured at him. "I am not the shoulder to cry on."

"And I don't want one," he confirmed. The appetizers came and they both chowed down. "Thank god you're not what I expected," admitted John, watching Gail put an entire Briouat in her mouth at once.

Gail swallowed. "Because I'm a woman?"

But her partner shook his head. "Because you're a Peck. I've met your mother."

"Who hasn't?" snorted Gail. The back of her brain told her that this was where she was supposed to tell him something about herself. "I don't do this well, John, this people thing," she finally said.

"That's okay," he replied. "You have this weird ability to make people confess. I can cover the people crap if you do that." They clinked their tea cups and Gail felt a growing level of comfort with John. This would work.
She felt panic. It had been a long time since Holly had seen both her parents and even longer since she'd introduced a girlfriend to them. In fact, Holly was pretty sure that her parents hadn't met a girlfriend since they'd moved to Vancouver while Holly was in medical school. Things had been tense enough when just her mom met Gail.

The Doctors Stewart, as Gail had taken to calling them, were due to land in less than 24 hours, and Holly rushed home to give the house a good scrub from top to bottom. When she pulled into the garage, she knew something was wrong.

First of all, the garage was organized again. Everything was where Holly wanted it, where she'd put labels for it, cleaned off, and put away. The camping gear was hanging off the pegs and the movable clothes rack with all the winter hiking clothes was tucked to the side where it was no longer at risk of being hit by a car. Speaking of cars, Gail's was cleaned and looked like it had been detailed.

While Gail wasn't a slob, she wasn't fond of cleaning. In order to not face the wrath of Holly, Gail's simple tactic was to clean as she did things. If they watched a movie, Gail cleaned up the living room right after. If she cooked dinner, she cleaned while things were at a hands off stage, and loaded the dishwasher. If she did laundry, by gum, that laundry was folded and away. The bathroom? She cleaned it before she showered.

So to walk in the house and see Gail in the process of mopping was enough to make Holly wonder if she'd fallen into a time warp or an alternate universe. When you added in the heavenly smell of meat and fruit, Holly was agog at the Susie Homemaker world.

"Shoes!"

Holly froze. "What?" She looked at Gail, who was pointing at her. No, Gail was pointing at her feet. Shoes! Holly stepped out of her shoes and, in her socked feet, went to the stairs. "What's happening?"

"It's called cleaning, nerd." Gail took her mop back over to where Holly had been and she re-mopped the path from garage to stairs.

"Yes, but why are you cleaning?"

Leaning on the mop, Gail eyed Holly. "Because your parents are coming tomorrow and you're about to have a full blown nerd panic attack? There's also dinner in the oven."

Holly exhaled, "Oh my god, Gail, I love you."

"I know, I'm awesome," grinned the blonde, her smile broad and toothy. "Go take a shower. I'll be done down here in a minute." She waved Holly up the stairs and went back to mopping the hallway.

This was not the time to argue her luck, and Holly did as ordered, only finding one thing odd. She took the time to wash her hair, and was not surprised to hear a knock at the door. "Come in."

"Hey," announced Gail. "Leave the water on, I'll hop right in." There was, as one might have predicted, a quick kiss shared as they swapped places and Gail yelped under the water. It was always too cold for her tastes and Gail swore as she cranked the temperature.

Reluctant to get in her pajamas just yet, Holly wound her hair into a monument and watched Gail
through the gap in the curtain. "Can I ask a question, honey?"

"Only if you hand me a washcloth."

Holly pulled her robe on and handed a cloth to Gail, getting another kiss in the process. Much better. "How come you call other people nicknames but not me?"

There was a moment of silence. "Nerd? Lunchbox? Baby? Those aren't nicknames?"

"I meant… You called Chris 'Chrisikins' the other night."

Gail stuck her head out of the shower. "You want me to call you Hollikins? That sounds stupid…"

"Some people call me Holl, or Holls." Including her parents.

"I like calling you Holly," Gail replied, confused. "You call me Gail all the time." Holly grimaced, the conversation not going where she thought it was. "You can't really make Gail shorter. Unless you make it Gay, which is redundant." Pleased with herself, Gail pulled her head back into the shower.

"Do you ever call Chris 'Christopher' though?"

There was a lengthy silence and Gail turned off the water. "Rarely," she replied. "Towel please?"

Holly handed over a towel. "Other people you've dated get … Longer names when you're annoyed. And I call you honey, and sweetheart, and … You just call me Holly. Which I like but …"

Rough drying her hair, Gail stepped out of the tub. "I like your name, Holly. It suits you and it makes me smile." She let the towel hang around her neck, otherwise bare ass naked. "Holly," she whispered, softly, and leaned in to kiss her.

Okay. Maybe there was a point. Hearing Gail whisper (or moan) her name was a crazy turn on. And while she never heard Gail use an endearment in bed, maybe that wasn't a bad thing. "Oh, my sweet, sweet, Gail," sighed Holly, gripping both ends of the towel and pulling Gail closer.

They kept kissing, reminding Holly of the time in the shower where they felt like they had all the time in the world and yet they had to touch each other. This time they were both nearly naked, and Gail's hands eased inside the robe.

Abruptly a beeping started and Holly jerked her head back. "What was that?"

"Dinner," sighed Gail, somewhat breathless. She exhaled softly and kissed Holly's nose. "Food. Come on, I know you didn't eat." Gail brought the towel back up to her hair and gave it another go at for drying, before heading to the bedroom.

As much as she'd rather be kissing more, Holly's stomach growled loudly. "I hate you," she shouted after Gail, following to get some clothes on. She got another, brief, kiss as they passed by, Gail already in sweats and t-shirt.

"You don't have to eat the lamb tagine," noted Gail, heading back down the stairs.

Holly's mouth watered and she picked up a tank top. Her hand paused at her sleep shorts and she stared at the bed. Of all the things Gail had done, which even included vacuuming the upstairs, where her parents were unlikely to go, she had not changed the sheets. There was an implication that Holly decided she liked. She left her sleepwear on the bed. Dinner. Relaxing. Then maybe…
Leaving her robe on, Holly tied it and put on nothing else. Not even panties. "How early did you get off work?"

When she got downstairs, Gail was at the laundry machine, folding the last of the latest load. "That was fast," Gail remarked, quickly finishing the change of loads, but not taking the clean ones upstairs. "I got home at four. Butler said as long as I have my report in by Friday, he doesn't care."

That was nice. "I keep getting more and more work," complained Holly, joining her to serve up couscous in the bowls on the counter. She didn't mind, except for the uptick of being on call at night. "I'm sure my caseload will pick up, now that I'm the golden child." Gail brought the lamb over and ladled it in.

"You are amazing." The smell was amazing and Holly sighed. "This is seriously fancy for a weeknight, baby."

Gail shook her head. "The hardest part is waiting an hour and a half for the stuff to cook. Everything else is pretty fast."

For some reason, even Holly harbored the thought that Gail didn't cook. She did, at least as often as Holly did, and she was actually good at experimenting and making new things. Gail liked weird foods and weird combinations, and once told Holly that she loved her simply because Holly would eat the experiments too.

"Patience isn't one of your virtues," teased Holly, and she took a bite. "Apricots?"

"Good, isn't it?" Gail grinned.

They ate on the couch, watching a reality show about mining for gold, and Holly finally felt like she could dare to relax a little. She was fed, her house was clean, and she had a totally awesome girlfriend. Gail even took the plates away and brought back tea. When she sat back down, Holly leaned into her. "Hey."

"Hey," replied Gail, amused.

Holly turned to look at Gail better, "Hey."

"You said that before." Grinning, Gail brushed her lips on Holly's forehead.

"It sounded familiar." She leaned more into Gail, and the blonde almost absently adjusted, slinging an arm around Holly's shoulders and pulling her in. It was comfortable and soft to nestle against Gail on the couch.

Eventually the tea mugs were left on the coffee table and Gail wound both arms around Holly's waist, holding her close. "Feeling calmer?" Gail's cheek rested against Holly's head.

Being settled between Gail's legs like that was rarely calming, but in that moment, with the soft warmth of the detective against her back, it really was relaxing. "Getting there," admitted Holly.

"Good." Gail's form relaxed behind her, and Holly took one hand in her own, gently stroking the back of Gail's hand.

Gail's free hand ended up on Holly's thigh, her thumb absently rubbing back and forth on top of the robe. After another segment of the show, Holly spoke up, "You didn't change the sheets."
The thumb paused. "I didn't. Yet." Gail moved her hand to the edge of the robe, fingertips easing under.

"Yet," repeated Holly, and she bent her knee up, letting the robe slide off her leg and giving Gail's roaming hand access to her skin.

There was a soft intake of breath as Gail realized Holly wasn't wearing anything under the robe. "You know, I did promise to make up for my hangover." Her breath was warm and inviting against Holly's ear.

"You did," agreed Holly, and she tilted her head to give Gail more access to her neck. Soft kisses led down to the collar of the robe, and Gail freed her hands to untie and ease it down Holly's shoulder. "I think we should go upstairs," she huffed, her skin warming.

Upstairs, Gail more than made up for spurning Holly's advances two nights (mornings) before. Lying in the bed afterwards, smiling, Holly swore she could feel the earth slowly rotating. Gail lay alongside her, caressing her face and arm. "You look relaxed now," she said, smugly.

Holly closed her eyes and smiled. "I think you're a liar."

"Oh?"

"I'm not possibly the first woman you ever slept with."

Gail laughed and kissed Holly's shoulder. "First and only," she confirmed. "You've ruined me for anyone else." A soft, roaming, hand drifted across Holly's abdomen. "Definitely ruined me for men, never ever going there again."

Turning her head, Holly frowned but did not open her eyes. "Better not. I know where to hide your body, Peck."

There was soft laughter from Gail, and she moved closer to Holly, kissing her neck and collar bone. The kissing started to drift south and Holly sucked in her breath, but then Gail continued across until she came up and found Holly's lips. That was good in a different way and Holly groaned slightly as Gail's weight settled on her. "Never," Gail promised, and started to move down Holly's body again.

After that, Holly's brain was empty. Gail had completely wiped her mind of thought and was drawing the sheet up to cover them. The comfortable and familiar weight and warmth of Gail pressed against her side, the darkness and quiet of the room soothing Holly into absolute relaxation.

She came alert rather abruptly, hours later in the darkness of early morning, in an empty bed with her t-shirt on. That wasn't too terribly odd and Holly had sleep-dressed herself many times before, but she frowned. Gail hadn't had a nightmare that took her out of bed in months. Getting out of bed, Holly found her robe and tugged it on, calling out "Gail?"

There wasn't a reply and Holly poked her head out of the bedroom. The light from the office was barely visible from the closed door. That was somewhat better than the nights Gail played mindless video games to get her mind off things. Holly paused at the door and gently rapped it, "Gail, please confirm existence."

The door opened and Gail looked surprised. "Hey, sorry I didn't mean to wake you." Her hair was damp, the blonde strands standing up like a porcupine. It must have been a hell of a dream for Gail to shower when she woke up. And Holly must have been insanely wiped to have slept through that.

Holly wrapped her arms around Gail and squeezed her. "You okay?"
With a sigh, Gail returned the hug. "There was a … sound. Something outside." She pressed her face into Holly's shoulder. "It was nothing but then I was awake so...

The sentence didn't make a lot of sense, but Holly generally got the story of Gail's abduction in dribs and drabs. The one time she'd gotten a large chunk of it had been a rather horrible evening. "Sit down?"

The office had gone through multiple rearrangements until they'd sorted out the best way to fit two desks and a couch and a gun safe in the room, along with all the science books. But it worked now and Gail enjoyed reading on the couch while Holly worked.

Looking at the couch, Gail shook her head. "No." She took one of Holly's hands and started for the door, flicking off the light on the way.

There were night lights in the office, and the hallway. Holly had installed them when she and Gail were just friends. Sometimes, like tonight, she felt a pang of guilt for having ripped them out when they broke up. These lights were new, low energy, and the first things Holly had bought after the disastrous visa debacle. She squeezed Gail's hand and followed her back to the bedroom, curling back up in bed.

"Skipping the pajama bottoms?" Gail sounded tired, but amused.

"Figured it's a better chance of keeping you in bed," smiled Holly, and she watched Gail slide under the covers in just a t-shirt as well.

Gail kissed her forehead, "You never chase me out of bed."

They settled into their usual positions, Gail on her stomach, hugging a pillow, while Holly was curled on her side. "Shitty night for it," decided Holly and Gail snorted a laugh.

They both knew that Gail didn't have to talk about it. And Holly would never push. But Gail had once said the trick to a fast confession, or any sort of connection with a suspect or victim, was to lower the bar. So Holly simply tried to do that, to make it easier for Gail.

"If I tell you why, then you won't sleep either," Gail pointed out.

Reaching over, Holly ran her fingers through Gail's hair. She knew it was soothing to her girlfriend and more than once had taken an over-tired and cranky Gail right into sleep. She didn't say anything and didn't really have to, as Gail's eyes slowly drifted closed. It was still hard to tell when Gail was asleep and when she wasn't, unless she was flat out exhausted, but Holly would settle for calm and composed.

Eventually her arm felt too heavy to move, and it stopped of it's own volition. And Holly fell asleep.

Thursday morning came sooner than Gail wanted. Of course it would have to be a night where she wouldn't get half the sleep she wanted when she'd already planned to be a little short on sleep. At least Holly had gotten rest, though, and woke up chipper and, as normal for many mornings, frisky. Which was probably the best reason as to why Gail looked as tired as she felt.

"Man, your eyes are all slitty," remarked John, meeting her at the elevator with coffee.

Grouchy, Gail growled, "Is one of those mine?"

A cup was handed over quickly. "Aren't your in-laws due today?" When Gail nodded, he muttered,
"You picked a hell of a day to stop smoking crack."

Gail arched an eyebrow. "That's from a movie."

One of John's odder traits was his movie knowledge. "Airplane, you'd like it." They stepped onto the elevator. "Holly keep you up all night?"

And Gail glared. "Shut up."

"Technically we aren't at work."

"Technically it's illegal to taze you."

"My my, we are grumpy."

She flipped him off. "Thank you for the coffee, asshole."

"Welcome, hoser," he replied, cheerfully, and they went to their desks to catch up on paperwork. Butler had assigned them some more, small, cases. Mostly follow up and backup work to other detectives. That suited Gail fine, since if every case had to be as fast as the Khan one, she'd be more of a mess than normal.

After a morning following up on leads, Gail tackled her reports. The last of her paperwork was filed when the phone rang. "Peck," she answered without looking at the display.

"Help!" Holly sounded stressed, nearly frantic. "I'm stuck."

"Oookay. Do you need a crowbar?" Across the table, John snorted.

"My parents! They're landing at the airport in an hour and I'm elbow deep in a-"

"Ah, Holly, is this a request to pick your parents up from the airport?" It was adorable when Holly panicked, but Gail didn't really think now was a good time to let her ramble. "I can get them."

Holly exhaled, "Thank you, I hate throwing you at them but Dad would just pitch a fit about a taxi."

That sounded like a story. "Not a problem. Go run the gut or whatever you're up to. I'll get them to the hotel and play driver." With a rushed goodbye, Holly hung up and Gail glanced across the desks at her partner. "I'm done anyway."

"Lucky you. Where did you learn to type that fast?"

Gail shook her head, "Where do you think? Call me if you need me, but-"

"But don't need you, yeah I know." John smiled and stretched his arms up and over his head. "Good luck meeting the in-laws."

Everyone kept telling her that, and Gail couldn't understand why. She'd already met Holly's mother and, after that first horrible joke, they'd gotten along fine. Meeting her father couldn't be half as bad; Gail was a lot more comfortable with herself, her sexuality, and her relationship with Holly, so it would be easier. Right?

She made it to the airport with time to spare and found good parking without having to consider the ethical implications of using her badge. She could have easily used it to skip the TSA line, but chose to wait by baggage claim and read from her iPad until the Vancouver flight started filing in.
It was easy to spot Dr. Lily Stewart, PhD. She looked a lot like Holly, with the dusky Spanish skin and hair. The height came from Dr. Brian Stewart, also PhD. He looked annoyed and frustrated with the entire day, as if travel had been invented to piss him off. Gail had a feeling she'd like him right away. She shoved her iPad into her shoulder bag and walked over to meet them.

"Hey, Drs. Stewarts," she greeted.

Lily, as expected, hugged her. "Gail! I love the hair. Is that your natural color?"

The last time they'd seen each other, Gail's hair was some variation of growing-out blonde. "Afraid so. It's nice to see you again."

Smiling happily, Lily held Gail at arms length to look her over. "You look good." Behind her, her husband coughed. "Oh, stop it, Brian." Lily let go of Gail to tug the man closer. "Brian, this is Gail Peck, Holly's girlfriend. Gail, this is my husband, Brian."

Extending a hand, Gail put her best smile on. "Nice to meet you, sir."

"Sir," he repeated. "She's polite. I like her."

Gail wondered a little just how many of Holly's girlfriends they'd met, but did not ask. "Did you check bags? Holly didn't say."

"She didn't, eh?" Lily shook her head. "I thought she was coming, actually...

"She's mid autopsy."

Brian sighed loudly, "Of course. We did check luggage."

It didn't take long to collect the luggage and get everyone loaded in the car. Brian sat in back, sulking about everything, and Lily cheerfully took the passenger seat. As they drove to the hotel, Lily explained that Brian would be giving a lecture at University of Toronto. When Gail mentioned she'd graduated from there, Brian sat up and asked what she studied. That gave them enough conversation to take them to the hotel.

At Lily's request, Gail stuck around, making sure to text Holly that everyone was safe and sound, and went with them to the rather nice hotel room by the university. "We're eating out tonight, I gather," Brian said loudly, falling into the easy chair.

Taking the desk chair, Gail nodded. "Italian. It's a tiny little place, but they have a good fresh tomato soup."

Brian narrowed his eyes. "My progeny informed me you were allergic."

"To tomatoes? Uh, yeah. Yes. But she said the soup was good." Gail shrugged.

"She said she didn't eat it anymore."

He was rather pushy and Gail frowned, thinking about that. Holly hadn't ordered anything with fresh tomatoes ever since she accidentally ate one and kissed Gail, giving her a rash in some rather annoying places. "True, but we were friends before we dated."

If pressed, Gail would admit wasn't so sure about that. There had always been some sexual tension between them. From the moment Holly sassed her back at the crime scene, she knew she was going to like the strange nerd. All that silly kiss in the coat room had done was make Gail wake up to the
fact that gender didn't matter all that much.

Brian studied her face. "So a cop."

"Detective," Lily said from the bathroom. "Holly said you might not be able to spend much time with us, that you had a case?"

"I did. We closed it this morning." Gail paused, "Sorry, that probably doesn't make sense to you. We solved it Monday, got a good confession and finished the paperwork today. Now it's all lawyers."

"You sure you got the right person?" Brian looked suspicious.

Awesome. Holly's dad wasn't a fan of cops. Or he was just poking the bear to see what kind of woman his daughter was dating. But again, Lily stepped in. "Brian. Stop." He held up his hands, defeated quickly. "What about your parents?"

Oh good. "My parents?"

"Will we get to meet them? Holly said they had important jobs."

"No," sighed Gail. "I'm sorry, I told Holly she could tell you but... My parents and I aren't on speaking terms right now."

Both Brian and Lily looked surprised. "Because of Holly?" Brian's face was set in stone.

Shaking her head, Gail explained it as simply as she could. "My mother used to be Staff Superintendent, and she used her job to push me around. When I applied for the detective slot, she decided I should be in a different department. Short version, she messed with my application. I found out and, ah, reported her to internal affairs."

Every time she'd talked about it, it sounded horribly cold and unfeeling. Even Steve, who had grown up in the same house, said it was harsh. Gail realized she didn't know how her father felt about the whole thing, and had only seen him in passing when her mother left the last IA meeting.

"She sounds like a piece of work," Brian announced. Gail studied his dour expression and grinned, toothily, at the man. In a heartbeat, he returned the smile. "I like her, Lily, she's spunky. Bet she keeps Holls on her toes."

Lily sighed, "Spunky. He thinks that's a compliment." But she too was smiling, fondly, at her husband.

"Could be worse," smiled Gail, feeling as comfortable with Holly's parents as she had, initially, with Holly. Less weird tension of course, since she was dating their daughter.

Brian snorted, "Since we have her alone... Holly said you met at a crime scene."

Uh oh. "That's true," confirmed Gail. "I thought she was crashing the scene." And Gail told her version of 'How Gail met Holly' and won smiles from the parents. This might work.
The first serious girlfriend Holly had introduced to her parents had, unceremoniously, broke up with her six days later for a job in Vancouver, then Montréal, and after that Holly lost track. She had a vague memory of her moving to New York. Her parents had been comforting at the break up, Lily being a shoulder to cry on. When the second girlfriend announced she was in love with someone else, it had also been shortly after meeting the parents. The last girlfriend her parents met actually realized she was straight when she met Holly's parents, dumping her on the way home.

So from then on, Holly stopped introducing her parents to her girlfriends. She called her parents and would talk about them, but rarely would they meet. It wasn't like Holly had a lot of serious girlfriends anyway. After the straight girl broke her heart, she entered residency and her parents moved to Vancouver for a teaching job. It had been a lot of casual dating, falling for unavailable girls, and then Gail Peck, ice queen extraordinaire.

Having Gail meet her mother, after they moved in together, was daunting. With that in mind, it was just a casual meet and the embarrassing baby questions aside (and damn it, the joke about dildos was funny), Gail had gotten along with Lily and nothing bad had happened. Her mother had been suspicious, since there had been a break up before, she said it was clear Gail was entirely besotted with Holly.

But Lily adored just about everyone on the planet. She was friendly, she hugged people, she could tell when people didn't want to hug, and she was nice. Gail remarked that Lily was the non-annoying version of Chloe. Someone who was actually nice and funny. Lily was also involved in Holly's life, wanting to be sure she was cared for and loved.

And then there was Brian Stewart. Her father was the epitome of a grumpy old man professor. He'd not really liked anyone Holly had dated, saying none of them were good enough for his little girl. He'd liked the boys she'd brought home in high school less, and was initially the more encouraging of her parents when she'd come out. That had been funny, in retrospect. Her mother walked in on her with her hand up another girl's shirt, making out like the messy teens they were, and immediately closed the door. Her father reopened it a moment later and just asked if they were dating. When Holly nodded, he repeated the rules about no closed doors, left it open and went back downstairs.

Her daddy loved her to pieces and was protective and liberal, grumpy and sweet, hostile and huggable. The more she thought about it, the more she found her favorite traits of her father in Gail. Her mother had found that amusing and fitting, since Holly was so much like her (Lily loved to tell the story about how she'd sworn off dating when Brian showed up at her conservatory to look into plants to use for making paper, called her a nerd, and then asked her out).

Meeting everyone at the restaurant (having stopped for a shower and clean clothes), Holly's fear was that she would find Gail sitting there with a forced smile, her parents dead silent. Or worse, Gail abandoned her parents and hid somewhere.

She found them all laughing over some story involving Duncan, which Holly only figured out because Gail said, "Damn it, Gerald!" as a punch line and her father nearly laughed his drink out his nose. "Hey, Holly," grinned Gail, looking up at her. "We're on appetizers. Your dad's got the bruschetta."
Holly blinked and saw her spot, between Gail and her mother, had a glass of sparkling wine and some garlic bread. "Prosecco?" Gail nodded and sipped her own. She ceded first greeting to the parents, as Lily was already on her feet.

"You have a hickey," muttered her mother as they hugged hello.

Blushing, Holly tugged her shirt up more. "Nice to see you too, Mom."

Her father didn't get up and Holly gave him a quick, awkward, hug before sitting down and getting a soft kiss hello from Gail. "It's all good," Gail said softly. "Brian was telling me about how you got kicked off the baseball team."

"Seriously, Dad?!" Holly grimaced and picked up her drink. "The whole idea of making me wear a cup was ridiculous."

"You could have been the first Mo'Ne Davis," complained Lily. "She had the most amazing curve ball."

"And I would have thrown out my elbow by fifteen and gone into medicine anyways, Mom."

Grinning way too much, Gail took a piece of bread, "You're still mad I scored the winning runs at the one game you made me play."

Brian nodded, "Of course she is. She'll be mad about that for years, Gail, you watch."

"I appreciate the warning."

The quartet bantered like they'd known each other for decades. Gail's dark humor was appreciated by both Holly's parents, which seemed to surprise Gail and she blushed at one point. It took a while for Gail to accept a compliment and longer to ensure she didn't think they were being sarcastic. Years of self esteem damage from the Pecks still left their mark and Gail never expected to be admired or appreciated for what she was. The bluster of being awesome aside, having Holly's parents be impressed that Gail was already a detective who solved a big case clearly confused her.

After dinner, Holly took her parents to the hotel, insisting Gail get some rest. That led to her mother teasing her about keeping Gail up all night before.

"We're consenting adults, Mom," laughed Holly, buckling in.

"And they don't even need to keep the door open." Her father took the passenger spot, "By the way. Should you actually make it over for Christmas, you can keep the bedroom door locked."

Holly snorted, "We're getting a hotel, Dad." Though that reminded her to bring the topic up with Gail soon. The week had flown by.

Her mother made a disapproving noise in the back seat. "I told you you'd like her, Brian."

Glancing at her father, Holly held back a smile. "Do you, Daddy?"

"Oh don't start that again," he groaned. "One 'daddy' out of you and I'm on a plane. I hate planes."

She caught her mother's eye in the rear view mirror and grinned. "My one regret about moving back to Vancouver," lamented her mother. "He won't fly and you're so busy with work. I'm glad you didn't move to San Francisco."

Holly winced. "It was a great offer," she pointed out. "Assistant chief medical examiner."
"You'll get there," her father said, patting her leg. "Remember when I almost took that position in Australia when you were seven?"

"I remember crying when you didn't get it," laughed Holly. She'd been so excited about moving.

"It was for the best."

"Brian," muttered her mother. "Holly, dear, did you ever find out why your Visa was rejected?"

She hesitated. "Yes," Holly replied softly. "It's fine now." An amusing apology from the consulate had come in the mail, where the Department of Homeland Security in the states simply told her she was permitted to travel to and work in the United States.

Both her parents were quiet for a moment, picking up in her unease. "You can tell us anything," her mother pointed out.

"I know, Mom. It's complicated." She exhaled slowly. "We're not going to see Gail's parents."

Her father nodded, "So Gail said. Her mother sounds like quite the bully."

"But it explains the little wall she has," pointed out her mother.

"Oh yes, very much," agreed her father. "Self esteem issues, no doubt. You're very lucky she didn't have issues with her sexuality too, Holls."

It was strange to think that talking about sexuality was safer then trying to explain the drama that was the Peck family. "No, that wasn't an issue."

"Did that bother her family-"

"Brian!" Her mother actually leaned forward to slap his arm and Holly burst out laughing at her parents. "Honestly, you have no filter sometimes."

Holly smiled. "I'm glad you like her."

"She's prickly, but I don't think I'm qualified to judge anyone for that," sighed her father. In the back, her mother muttered how true that was. "She really likes you, Holls."

"I really like her too, Dad."

Pulling up at the hotel, Holly got out to hug her parents. Her father took the moment to tell her she had a hickey, and Holly grimaced.

While she could have taken Friday off, Holly's parents insisted that they had plans all day and night, but wanted to come over for dinner Saturday. Having a normal day and a quiet night was going to be far more restorative that a day off. Gail had learned she didn't like days off. Not going to work, doing her job, made her feel incomplete. Neither her boss nor her partner (nor her girlfriend) found that odd, thankfully. If she could actually sleep through the night while they were in town, that would be perfect.

"Hey, do you rent a place?" John asked the question out of nowhere.

"Own, why? Need a new place?"

John turned his laptop around and showed a report. "We have a couple very angry landlords."
Squinting, Gail skimmed the report. "People fake subleasing apartments?"

"Luxury ones. I'll send you the links." As he typed, John explained, "So these people put in ads online, like Craigslist, and say they have a fancy apartment they own, but need to sublease because they're moving to the states, or whatever. So they'll give you a great deal, just fill in a form. Boom, you're approved, they show the place and you sign the lease."

Gail blinked, "Same day?" She'd never actually rented her own place, though in the gap between when she tried to adopt Sophie and when Holly's move was turfed, she had started looking into her own apartment. The credit check was a pain in the ass, since it was going to be her first place on her own, but she knew no one gave you the lease without the check.

"Pretty much," he nodded.

"Jesus, what happens when the real owners find out?"

"They complain to the cops. We've got four big shots now, bitching loudly." John looked very interested. "Ever searched for people who don't exist?"

The files showed up on her laptop and Gail opened one. "They vanish, huh. Fake names and burner phones. Did Butler give this to you because you're Mr. Missing Person?"

John looked sheepish, "I was going to ask, actually. It's sitting in the queue."

"Cherry picker," she joked. "Sounds interesting. Oh, will we get to fake being a couple trying to rent an apartment in a rush?"

"See now you're just giving me an idea!" But John was ecstatic and hyped up, which was new for him (or new for him with Gail) and she waved him on to talk to the Inspector.

From the outside, the case looked simple. Find the scammers, make sure they matched the descriptions from the losers who fell for it, arrest them. Boom. Simple. Gail pulled up Craigslist, and the three other sites John had listed, and started hunting for similarities. By the end of the day, she had a headache and a growing list of possible scams.

Gail slapped her laptop closed, "Is anyone on Craigslist not a liar? Free dirt, pick it up. Free wood, take my fence down. It's a damn loser convention."

"Glad you're interested too, Peck," grinned John and Gail flipped him off. "Take the weekend off, we can start Monday."

"Don't have to tell me twice," Gail groaned and stretched. When her partner showed no signs of stopping work, Gail frowned. "John, what are you doing tomorrow night?" The question felt impulsive and weird.

He looked up, surprised. "Nothing. Why?"

Wondering if Holly would be mad, Gail cleared her throat. "Holly's parents are having dinner at our place. My brother and his girlfriend will be there..." She trailed off.

"So don't call?"

"God. You're an idiot, do you want to come?" When John startled, she added, brusquely, "You just look like you're going to spend your weekend working like a total loser nerd, and I should let you see how the other half lives."
John smirked, "I don't want your pity, Peck. Who's cooking?"

"Me."

"Oh hell no, you just want to poison me!"

Gail snorted and put her laptop in her bag. "Fine, but if you change your mind about the best mac and cheese known to man, you come by."

John grinned. "Nice try, Peck. I'd rather eat sewage."

"Bite me, asshole."

"Temping, but your girlfriend knows what to do with bodies." John stretched his arms up over his head. "Thanks for the offer, but I'll pass. Maybe next time?"

She paused with her bag on her shoulder. "I haven't seen you interested in a case, John." Gail hoped he understood her meaning.

The man nodded. "Maybe it's your fault. You get so driven to solve things, it's rubbing off."

"Better be the only thing," she smirked, and headed home.

"Are you sure it's edible?"

"You can go the hell home, brother."

The Peck siblings were arguing in the kitchen, much to the amusement of everyone else. Traci and Steve had come over early to 'help' since they knew Gail was cooking, but Gail had quickly volunteered her brother that he was her sous chef and left Traci to enjoy the rest of an evening without Leo. The only thing Holly had really worried about was desert. Gail's ability to make deserts was rather limited compared to Holly, who saw it just as another science experiment.

When Holly went to pick up her parents, she made Traci promise to keep the duo out of trouble. Her parents walked in on Gail holding her brother in a headlock and they promptly found the sibling bantering hilarious. Holly's indignant expression only fueled her parents laughter.

"Traci," sighed Holly. "You were supposed to keep them out of trouble."

Traci just smiled. "Given the alternatives they can get up to, I think this is the least trouble possible. Hi, Dr. and Dr. Stewart. I'm Traci Nash."

"Lily, please." And Holly's mother swept Traci into a hug. "It's nice to meet you. This is Brian, he's grumpy. You can ignore him." Her father rolled his eyes and held out his hand for Traci.

The kitchen argument had stopped at some point and Steve walked in with two glasses of wine. "Steve, Gail's brother and captain of the universe."

"I like him," announced Brian, taking the wine and shaking Steve's hand.

"Traci picked the wine," Gail shouted from the kitchen.

"Then I like her more," Brian shouted back.

Holly sighed and tried to remember why she thought that inviting Steve over was a good idea. Half
the time, the siblings engaged in a battle that had clearly begun at birth. "Sometimes I wish you had a brother or sister, Holls," her mother announced, after taking her wine from Steve.

"Having seen them at their worst, I'm glad you didn't."

"You wouldn't have been so lonely growing up." Lily squeezed Holly's arm.

This caught Traci's attention. "Holly was lonely?"

"She was always nose in books," lamented Lily. "But tell me about you, Traci! How did you meet Steve?"

When Traci looked nervous, Gail called over, "At our initiation, Traci. He totally had a crush on you." The blonder Peck came over with a glass of wine for Holly and kissed her cheek. "We're all cops, Lily. Traci and I were in the same rookie class."

Steve made a sign for 'thank you' at Gail. "Traci made detective first," he noted, and got a glare from Gail.

"Oh, all three of you are detectives?" Holly's father looked impressed. "Is it a family business for you too, Traci?"

"No, I'm the first."

Steve looped an arm around her waist, "And probably only. Leo wants to be a hockey star."

"He also wanted to be a race car driver," laughed Traci. "Leo's my son." She pulled out her phone to show photos, including some of Gail horsing around with the boy.

"Shit," muttered Holly. "Here it comes."

Lily fawned over the photos and asked, "Are you and Steve planning on having any?"

Both Steve and Traci looked like deer in headlights. Gail covered her mouth to avoid laughing, but the snort leaked out. "Lily, they just moved in together a few months ago," explained Gail. Steve signed something fast and Gail looked surprised.

Brian frowned, "What's all that with the hands?"

"Sign language," sighed Traci. "The Captain and Champion of the universe like to do that to speak privately. So annoying." She cleared her throat. "We haven't talked about children. Yet. Maybe..."

"More than time enough. You're not almost forty, after all," smiled Lily in the way in a way a parent could. "Holly's been clear about not wanting children forever... Unless...?"

Ugh, why did she have to do that. "Steve is. Almost 40," pointed out Gail, ruthlessly defending Holly the only way she could.

"Thanks, Garbage Pail."

"Shut up, Ginger."

And Brian laughed. "It's like watching you and your sister, Lil. Gail, why Garbage Pail?"

Steve seemed happy to steer the conversation away from children. "She'll eat anything. Why you let her cook, I'll never know, Holly."
"She's good. She made lamb tagine the other day." Holly beamed at Gail, who shrugged awkwardly. Compliments still made her look suspicious and Holly kissed her to reinforce the remark.

Besides the sibling bantering, dinner went off without a hitch. Gail's mac and cheese was perfect, Brian calling it gourmet until Steve told him it was made with cheese puffs. Then it was genius. Her parents both wanted to know how Gail came up with the shallot and broccoli side dish and Gail admitted it was from a recipe she found online. That led to a discussion that you could use cheese puffs in place of breadcrumbs for almost anything.

Which led to the amusing desert of cheese puff flavored rice crispy treats, dipped in chocolate. It was a recipe even Gail couldn't screw up, thanks to it's simplicity. Traci laid claim to some for Leo.

The evening ended with Gail and Lily tidying up, and Steve offering to drive the Stewarts home. Gail said her goodbye politely, while Holly squeezed her parents in tight hugs and promised to see them again before they left.

"That was okay, right?" Gail loaded up the dishwasher. "I'm no expert with the parents... Actually yours are the only ones I've met."

Holly smiled, "They like you, honey."

"I mean the dinner."

"They liked that too." As Gail walked back around the kitchen island, Holly caught her hand. "Hey."

"Hey." Gail leaned in and kissed her. "I like them. They're nice. Weird like you."

With a little laugh, Holly pulled Gail in and intruded in her personal space. "That's a compliment, I suppose. Thanks for deflect the age and baby stuff."

Another kiss, "Welcome. It was fun to see Steve squirm." Gail's arms draped over Holly's shoulders, her fingers lacing to make a little loop, holding Holly in place before her. And she just smiled, looking at Holly.

"What?"

"I love you."

Three words. Simple words. Small, one syllable ones. Comforting ones. Holly grinned and put her hands on Gail's waist. "I love you, too, honey." They kissed gently, not hurried at all, just a regular kiss for people who were there for each other every day. "Why was Traci spooked?"

"About what?" Gail let go and stretched, walking into the living room and checking for anything left out.

"When Mom asked how they met?"

Gail paused and sighed. "Traci remembers meeting him at Jerry's funeral, and then at the case where I had to go interview Perik." She said the words softly, faster than normal, with a push to just get them out.

And Holly wondered if tonight would be a repeat of Thursday, when Gail struggled for sanity and normalcy after a night of little to no sleep. "Sorry," she sighed. She wanted to sweep Gail into a comforting, safe, hug, but Gail was moving around restlessly.
Holly's therapist had said Gail's tendency to just push the issue away and ignore it wasn't the best, long term, solution. When Holly mentioned it, Gail said she knew that, and it was the whole reason she kept going to therapy. You don't magically get over things, just because someone loves you. You don't magically get used to people being nice to you, loving you, after years of never being the one.

Part of Holly wished she could go back in time and be there for Gail when it all happened. That she could have been a friend to give Gail a safe place to talk to about things, and not the stupid avoidance 'help' from her parents. Making her go to a therapist far from home so people didn't see and know meant that Gail felt she couldn't talk to people, which led to not talking to people.

That said, Gail had said it was fine if Holly wanted to talk to her own parents about it. In fact, she thought it would be a good thing. For all her faults, Gail was self-aware enough to recognize that while the Pecks were useless, most people did have a support structure of family and friends. So Holly tried to encourage Gail to use her own friends. They were too close, was Gail's excuse, but slowly she'd started to bring it up with Traci and sometimes her brother. And Oliver, recently. They had a weird bond that had always been friendship and was now something a little more. Something a little tighter and sadder.

It still scared Holly. While as a detective, Gail was far safer than she had been as a patrol cop, there were still days where Gail got in to tussles. She went undercover, she got crazy Russians to aim shotguns at her, she was still a cop and still at risk. When Gail went out with her partner, Holly worried they'd be hurt.

Monday afternoon, Holly picked up her mother for lunch while her father spent his day with 'boring intellectuals.' The last time she'd seen just her mother in person, they'd talked about Gail, and the fact that Holly was, in essence, living with a girl who had been straight up till then, and was she sure she knew what she was doing.

"Mom, can I tell you something without you getting judgmental?"

Lily looked surprised. "Honey, when have I ever judged you?"

"And not tell Daddy?"

With a frown, Lily nodded, "Alright, honey. I promise not to judge you or tell your father."

Sighing, Holly poked at the napkin on the table. "I've been seeing a therapist for a while."

And that did entirely surprise her mother. "Did something happen at work? Are you okay?"

Bless her mother for that, Holly smiled a little. "Yes and no." Holly fiddled with the napkin more. "Gail has a really dangerous job, she gets hurt a lot. Used to be a lot more, when she was a patrol cop. And I freaked out about it." She glanced at her mother, who studied her face with a frown. "Because... Gail's got PTSD and I really worry about her being hurt again."

Her mother's eyebrows lifted to her hairline. "I see why you don't want your father to know," she muttered. "From being a police officer?" Holly nodded. "And she still does the job? Every day? I'm not sure if I'm impressed with her bravery or she's crazy."

"A little of both, Mom," admitted Holly, shredding the napkin.

And her mother reached over to take Holly's hands, stilling them. "Are you okay? It's not easy to live with." Nodding, Holly squeezed her mother's hands. "You really love her."

"I do, I really do."
"Do you want to tell me what scares you, honey?"

Holly nodded quietly, and found voice to talk to her mother about it. And it helped.

Chapter End Notes

Google 'Saveur broccoli with Cheetos' and it's a real thing and it's amazing. So is mac and cheese with Cheetos. Nick's an idiot for not trying it.

Part of dealing with PTSD is having a support structure. This is especially important for living with someone who has PTSD. You can't take care of them alone, and you don't have to. It's a hard thing to step into and come to someone who's already in that kind of pain, far harder than already loving someone who becomes hurt.
Seventeen dead end phone calls by Tuesday morning. Gail rubbed her face and looked at number eighteen on the list. "Any luck, Simmons?"

"I got bupkis," he replied. Not that every dead end was a non-scammer, but they weren't always their scammers. Those were passed on to other team members to follow up on, and Gail and John kept looking for their high end morons.

It didn't help that the stupid branch on the window had kicked up Gail's nightmares. She hadn't slept through the night for a week, and since that had come on the heels of their other case, it was hard to muster the passion needed for this one. At least John was driven, and she eased into the supportive partner role, trying to give her brain enough time as it needed to cycle back out.

Having Holly's parents around also meant their normal routine, things that might ease her back out of the patterns, break the loop. Taking a break from work, Gail went out to the smoking patio, totally unused in these health freak days, and called her therapist's office, setting up an appointment for that afternoon. Then was the harder call.

"Hey, beautiful," greeted Holly.

Always just hearing Holly's voice was calming. "Hey, I wanted to tell you I'll be home late."

"Get a new case?"

"No. Well. Yes, John grabbed a con artist case. But we're only at the set up part right now. Research."

"Sounds fun, all Leverage of you," Holly teased. "That's a tv show-"

"I know that one," smiled Gail. "Dov watched it and said I was like Parker with a gun."

There was a pause and Holly laughed. "I can see that. You're both antisocial masterminds who love kids."

Gail smirked. "Was that a compliment?"

"If you'd like," sassed Holly. "When will you be home, or don't you know?"

"Just about an hour later. I'm going to see my shrink." Silence. "Do you ... Um. Do you want to come?" The two therapists talked, shared information regularly even. Hell, Holly's was someone Gail's therapist had recommended and worked with before for spouses of military and policemen. And ever since Gail told Holly she saw a therapist, the offer had been there.

"No," said Holly after a while. "Not today. And I'm going to tell Mom and Dad we're busy. Mom wanted to come over and watch the game."

Gail felt incredibly guilty. "Crap. I forgot..." She had no idea what the game was but the Stewart women loved their sports.

"No, no," rushed Holly. "This is more important, honey. You need a routine." That was very true, and Gail agreed. "Good. Go save the city, okay? I'll see you at home. I love you."

"Love you too, Holly," promised Gail, and she hung up.
Gail sat on a bench and stayed outside a while longer outside, in the sunshine, soaking up the rays. She looked at her phone and thought about what she'd told Holly over the weekend. Initially, Gail had suggested they both tell Lisa and Rachel, but Holly balked. Neither of them would understand. And it wasn't fair to put it on someone like Traci or Andy, who both shared some of Gail's pain, all the time.

What Gail needed was a better support structure, and she knew it. She'd tried to imagine talking to Nick or Dov, the two people she knew best who might be able to handle it. But they'd both feel guilty. She could talk to Oliver, but he needed her more than she needed him right now. Which left Holly, her therapist, and probably Steve.

That was something to talk to the therapist about, she decided, and turned her mind towards the case. Maybe there was a pattern in what buildings were being hit. How were the con men getting access to the building in the first place? If the building were inherently insecure that would be one thing, and a rather ugly thing to boot. How would she get in? The obvious way was to fake tie her shoe and wait for someone to come by and unlock the door and go in. Or press buttons until someone let her in. That required a lot of time. It would be easier to find places that had passable security, doors that could be easily bumped, and use them.

The patio door opened, and John walked up, his soft soled shoes scuffling the floor. Gail already knew him by his step, but a question popped into her head. "Is it a floor or a ceiling," she asked him.

"Floor? Surface? Good question." He leaned against the railing near her. "Do you know how to pick locks?" His question meshed with her earlier thoughts.

"Yeah, but I'd probably try bumper keys first," she replied. "Slightly less conspicuous, not that hard to figure out based on lock models."

John looked interested. "I didn't think about that."

Smiling, Gail teased, "You've been off the street too long, Simmons."

"B&Es are boring." He leaned forward, looking down. "You okay, Peck?" Gail exhaled and looked at the sky. That was such a loaded question. "Look, I know it's not my business, but you look beat, like you're not sleeping. And it's not the good not sleeping. Things okay at home?"

She looked at her partner. "Holly and I are fine, John. It's not that." No doubt he knew about Perik on paper, it wasn't a secret she could keep cops from knowing about. But every cop had some trauma they carried around.

Nodding, John let it go and they talked more about the case, starting to formulate a plan. They went over the buildings that had been hit, looking for things in common. Gail looked at the building security from a physical angle, while John studied up on employee relations. To each their own, after all.

After work, and after an hour talking to her therapist about how the combination of a stressful case, plus parents, plus a sound trigger, had put her in a bad cycle, Gail went home feeling a little better. Not that Gail didn't already know all that, but having validation and confirmation helped sometimes. They talked about Holly, how things were going, and how Holly had talked to her parents, or at least her mother, about Gail's PTSD.

When Gail got home, Holly was getting her running shoes on. "Give me a minute to change, I'll come with you." While Holly was surprised, she waited, and they went for a normal run around the park by the house. The best thing about running with Holly was they didn't talk. They had the same
playlist, synced it up, and ran five miles.

At home, Gail took the first shower while Holly called in an order of Chinese food. After showers and food, they curled up on the couch, Gail in Holly's arms, and watched something Gail really didn't pay attention to. She closed her eyes, leaning against Holly, and just enjoyed being in a safe place.

"You okay, honey?" asked Holly softly, toying with Gail's hair.

"I'm alright," she replied. "I think I'll sleep okay."

Holly made a soft noise and stroked Gail's hair, smoothing it down. "Did you ask her about sleeping pills?"

That had been Holly's tentative suggestion once before. Gail's issue was that when she had a nightmare while on sleeping pills, they were more horrible and led to vocal freak outs. That said, most of right now wasn't a nightmare issue, but a too tense to sleep one.

"I did. And the antidepressants." Gail rested a hand on Holly's knee. "She has a ... There's a gentle sleep aid she wants me to try, if I can't sleep tonight, prazosin. Said it would lower my blood pressure."

The hand on her head kept caressing. "How do you feel about the antidepressants?"

"Not thrilled," admitted Gail. "I don't feel depressed. I don't feel sad... But that's that other problem," she sighed. The disconnected problem. It was often hard for her to tell if it was just her innate ability to not connect with people, or her PTSD cropping up. What she felt right now was anger at herself, for not being able to be in charge of her own brain.

Holly kissed her head. "I don't think you need them right now, but keep an open mind, honey."

"That's what the doc said," noted Gail, trying to keep her frustrations in check. She wasn't mad at Holly, after all. "She wants me to try the EMDR thing again, try to talk about it without freaking out."

She could feel Holly's body tense a little. "That sounds scary," she decided. It did, agreed Gail. But perhaps not a horrible thing. "If you do that, I'll come to your session."

Gail exhaled at the offer and opened her eyes, turning to look up at Holly's face. "Thank you." She wasn't entirely sure how she felt about Holly's slow transition to doing everything she could to help her. Sometimes it felt like Holly just wanted to fix things, or was frustrated with the fact that Gail's head just wasn't magically better after years had passed. But Gail's therapist told her not to project her fears onto Holly, and allow herself to trust.

When they finally went to bed, Gail slept most of the night, waking up to only a full bladder, but still not being able to fall fully back asleep after. Small victories.

By Friday, Holly was relieved to see her parents go home. Her mother had not told anyone about the conversation, as promised, but she did pull Gail into a tight hug, until the blonde objected that it was not how she communicated. Thankfully, Gail and Brian just shook hands, and Holly watched her father push for a promise to come visit in December.

Friday night was quiet, no going out, nothing fancy, just a relaxing night at home and Gail was sound asleep on the couch before Holly had sorted out dinner. She was tempted to let Gail just sleep
through the night there, given how grumbly and tense she'd been the last two nights, but there was a benefit and purpose to a routine, and Holly gently shook Gail's shoulder. "Honey, the bedroom's upstairs."

Gail cranked one eye open and stifled a yawn. "Food?"

It was hard not to smile. "Food," she confirmed. Holly watched Gail stretch and look up at the ceiling.

"I slept last night, right?"

"You did." Holly nearly sat down with her, but forced herself back to the kitchen and got dinner sorted out. Sleepily, Gail followed, sitting at the island and stifling another yawn. "Did the jogging help?"

Gail shrugged, "Maybe? It's not that nice straightforward science you love, Holly."

It wasn't and Holly did hate that, but she kissed Gail's cheek. "We don't have to go see my parents for Christmas, you know."

"Don't be silly, Holly. They want to see you. Us." Gail got a weird, shy smile on her face. "I'd kind of like to see what a non passive-aggressive Christmas was like."

Last Christmas they'd both worked, except for during the snowstorm, and Gail wasn't one to celebrate holidays much anyway. "You'll probably end up meeting my cousins," warned Holly. Rubbing her face to wake up, Gail asked, "Why are you making excuses? Do you not want to go?"

Holly shook her head. "No, I do. Just … if you don't think, I mean. If you don't want to."

"I like your parents," Gail pointed out, frowning. "Are you… Do you not want me to go?"

"No!" Holly held her hands up. "I want to go with you."

Clearly awake, Gail demanded, "Then what the hell? Because either you want to go, with me, or you don't? Or … you don't want your parents to have to deal with me?" Holly chewed her lip, thinking about her answer and Gail grumbled, "You think I'm going to freak out."

Holly wanted to shake her head, insist it wasn't the case, but she only managed to say, "I didn't say that, honey."

"No, you don't have to. Why… Ugh, Holly, why can't you just say you're worried I'll freak or whatever when we're at your parents and spook them?"

"Because! I'm not worried for them. I'm worried for you, Gail. I don't want to put you in a— a situation where you— we invite an…" She wasn't sure of the word and stopped.

Gail's face was set firmly. "Episode. That's not how it works, Holly. And I don't want you doing that."

"What? You don't want me to worry about you?" Holly laughed, mirthlessly. "I'm going to worry, I love you, and I hate this, I hate you being all—"

"All angry at shit I'm not in control of? Mad that my head just does things? Jesus… You can't fix this, Holly," Gail snapped. "Okay? You can't magically put in a formula or whatever and go 'aha! that's why!' because it doesn't work like that!"
Holly bit back the apology on her lips. It was the second hardest part about being with Gail, knowing that there were problems that you just couldn't do anything about. They'd fought a couple times about Holly's incessant need to fix things, and Gail's (surprisingly) practical viewpoint that what was wrong with her wasn't fixable, but it was manageable. It sometimes was a lot to deal with, and it would be easier not to have to, but it would be harder to not have Gail in her life.

"I know," Holly finally said quietly.

"I'm not mad at you," Gail pointed out, still sounding frustrated and angry. She hadn't been that self-aware when they started dating, prone to tree metaphors and cutting and running. She knew what was wrong, but had no idea of why, or how to move on. But by the time they'd gotten back together, Gail seemed to have forced herself to a place where she could, objectively, see what was going on in her head.

"I know." And she did. Holly really did know that the anger wasn't related to her. And she knew the frustration wasn't about her.

Gail pushed her hands through her hair, "Can we not do this right now, Holly? Because … I'm tired, and I'm cranky, and I'm pissed off that this has to even be a thing. I know I'm lashing at you, and it's not fair. And I want…" She trailed off, losing the thread of her rant. With a loud exhale, Gail put both hands on her hips and stared at her feet. What Holly wanted was to hug Gail, but she held off, wrapping her arms around herself and waiting. Finally Gail spoke. "I'm trying, Holly," she said quietly. "I want to not be like this."

For the third time, Holly repeated. "I know, honey." She sat down on the stool by the kitchen island. "I'm not going anywhere." Nodding, Gail kept her eyes on her feet, stepping a little closer to Holly, putting her hands on the kitchen island.

"Shoes." Gail's hands were clenching and unclenching. "Wingtip shoes. They have this … this echo? They clack. It's not like penny loafers or saddle shoes, they've got this hard sole, this leather and wood sound, with nails, and they have this way they just … they echo? On cement." First one hand tightened into a ball, then released, and then the other did. Gail's eyes were locked on her hands now. "He had them, wingtips. Couldn't see him, but I heard them."

Gail's hands were shaking and Holly reached over, hesitantly offering her own. The first time she'd seen Gail have a flashback, it was just a nightmare. The second time was after Oliver's kidnapping. In the time since then, she'd seen countless moments where something, a sound or a sight, would cause Gail to tense and get snarkier, meaner, than normal. But the times Gail's hands trembled, the times her body shook, were rare.

In the beginning, Gail had begged Holly not to touch her. To let go. And Holly remembered that first time, when she'd held Gail and let her cry, not asking a thing. She had no idea what was wrong, the depth of this. Being this deep, this involved, with someone who was hurt so much was scary. It was worse than worrying about Gail being shot at. Slowly, Gail moved her hand until her fingers were holding Holly's. "The sound got in my head last week," she whispered.

Holly gently drew Gail's hand towards her, urging her to come closer. After a moment, Gail stepped in and put her head on Holly's shoulder. They stayed like that for a while, Holly not holding Gail but just keeping their hands together and pressing her cheek to Gail's head. More than anything, Holly wanted to be able to fix things, to make Gail feel better. All she could do was be there and be a safe space.

While Gail wasn't shaking, she was just tense and clearly still angry. "I'm hungry and I want to sleep," she muttered into Holly's shoulder.
Smiling, Holly asked, "Can you fit a shower in there too?"

"Oh. Fine," sighed Gail. "Because you asked nicely."

"One day you will tell me what's in that blonde head, Peck," John informed her.

"Donuts and coffee," Gail replied, picking up the items in question. "Sugar and caffeine."

"Head, not stomach." But he picked up a donut as well.

Gail ignored the jibe and sipped her coffee. "Did you think up a cover?"

Nodding, John explained, "My lease is up and my new apartment felt through, I need a new place in a rush."

Which was pretty much the story every single victim told. "You should have a backup sob story." She bit into the donut and sighed happily. Oh yes, that was perfect. The chocolate fueled her brain better than protein, no matter what Holly said.

"A sob story?" John frowned and nibbled his donut, turning to the elevator.

"Yeah, like how your new place was infested with bedbugs, or the owner sold the building, or ... Something juicy but real." John muttered 'juicy but real' to himself as they walked into their office.

One of the things that had thrown Gail off, being a detective, was the idea of not having to go to parade anymore. Sometimes they went, but most of the time there was no need and they just got to work and started working. There was also more flexibility with when they got to work at all. Inspector Butler was pretty lax, as all that went. As long as she did her job well, she was allowed to come in when she wanted.

On her desk was, weirdly, a box of donuts and a card. "Secret admirer?" John peered over her shoulder.

"Not so secret," muttered Gail, recognizing Holly's handwriting and wondering who she tricked into the delivery. Probably Traci. She opened the card and smiled. Three words, all small. 'I love you.' Tucking the card away, Gail popped the box and took her favorite donut (and John's) before sliding it to the edge of her desk for the others to attack.

Hovering over the food, one of the other detectives asked, "The doc?"

Gail nodded and the donuts were gone in seconds. As she texted Holly a thank you, Gail felt John eyeing her. "What? I saved you the old fashioned chocolate." She pushed the donut towards his desk.

Taking the donut, John asked, "Everything okay at home?" He kept asking that. Gail wondered if he was looking for the signs he'd missed in his fiancé, a warning that one of the pair was running.

They'd already done that.

Oh. Gail nodded. "Fine." It was true.

"You still look like sleeping has been optional." His voice was quiet and did not carry past their desks.

"Insomnia," sighed Gail. Pretty much every cop on the planet had a touch of it, and Gail knew it wouldn't be questioned. It was also technically true.
And John just nodded, flipping his laptop open. "If you nap in the break room, I won't tell."

"No thanks," drawled Gail. "You drool in there." She knew that John sometimes spent the night, usually on a weekend, at work. It wasn't something she liked to know, since it meant he didn't want to be home alone. But Gail knew why he had issues, and if it was work and not drinking or drugs, that was somewhat better, she supposed.

That was the aspect of being a partner with someone that she disliked. The status of John's mental health was something she had to care about. Understanding people like that, caring about anyone besides Holly, wasn't something Gail much cared for. She wasn't good at it, and John and she got along well enough (she felt) that the idea of pushing him felt wrong.

Gail watched him study his laptop for a while and then asked, "Do you play softball, John?"

"Play or play well?"

With a snort, Gail forwarded him an email from Oliver. "Fifteen's got a team and they drafted me, god knows why. I hate sports."

John looked up at her, "And I look like a sporty guy?"

"You should come," she told him, pulling up her list of potentials and opening up a burner email app. God bless gmail, but they wanted to track it so she had to use an account set up by IT. "It's practically beer league."

"Maybe," muttered John, and he started calling a number.

Half listening to him, she sent out a couple sample emails. Blah blah interested. Blah blah two bedrooms. She considered the various places and, when she got decent replies, had IT check them against known realtors. So far, she was finding a ton of legit renters looking for subleases.

Wondering if John was having better luck, she looked up at him and was surprised to see an excited expression. "Really? To couples? Oh, but... Well we're just dating. Is that okay?" He waved at Gail and scribbled on a piece of paper the name of the apartment. "Oh no, we are very serious. We've been together for, uh, honey how long?"

"A year and a half," replied Gail, giving the timeframe of her relationship with Holly, seeing as it was the only date she could reliably remember besides their birthdays. She also pulled up the apartment information. No one was renting officially and a sub-lease didn't seem to be permitted, but she'd call in an inquiry after. Jesus, did they even try?

John repeated the date into the phone. "I'm useless with dates," he laughed. "We are serious. Yes... Oh yes, we'd both sign the lease. Of course. No question. ... Yes, thank you, I'll email it back right away! Yes, the email." He recited the address, a simple one, and grinned, shooting a thumbs up.

Once he hung up, Gail smirked. "I'm your girlfriend?" She started filing in the trivial background form for them.

"Think you can play straight for a day?"

"Straight enough for you," she drawled. "This form is stupid. They don't even ask for socials!"

John kicked his chair around to look. "Three legit ones I found did that as a sort of captcha. Make sure you're a human. Of course, the jury's still out on you." Shooting John a disgruntled scowl, Gail let him proof the form. "Nice names. Abigail?"
"For when you inevitably call me Gail," she pointed out. Her name wasn't actually short for anything. Gail had been Uncle Al's wife's full name and it was hers as well. "You have the second most common first name." She stretched her arms up.

"Seriously? John?"

"James is first, for male Christians." She caught John staring at her, "Dov was on this trivia kick when I lived with him. Don't judge me," she snapped.

But John smirked. "Totally judging."

The email chimed, saving him from rude comments. "Your application had been approved." They both read the email, which said to bring his girlfriend, and asked if they could meet today 'after work' to sign the papers.

"Want to try for lunch?" John pulled himself back over to his desk and picked up the phone.

"Better I pretend to be in love with you before we eat," agreed Gail. "I don't want to vomit the awesome lunch you're going to buy me."
A Private Little War

Spending a beautiful, if chilly, spring day on the baseball diamond was a wonderful thing for Holly. It was far less for Gail, who grumbled about getting out of bed before noon on a Saturday when she didn't have to work. Gail's current case was a string of apartment rental scams, which was turning out to be more complex than expected and that annoyed the cop to no end.

Still, they were both up and dressed and at the field on time, with their own equipment, and stretching. "I just don't see why we can't play in the afternoon when it's warmer and socially acceptable to drink beer," complained Gail, mirroring Holly's various stretches.

"I don't plan these things," Holly smiled.

Gail frowned and, as Holly started to walk by her, caught her arm and pulled her close. "I demand compensation, Stewart," she growled.

That could be arranged, decided Holly, and she kissed Gail gently. "Okay, you pick lunch."

"Dessert," suggested Gail, her hands settling on Holly's waist, and Holly giggled. "Hamburgers, though. Definitely this is a hamburger thing."

Letting her arms wind around Gail's neck, Holly pointed out the obvious, "You're supposed to have hot dogs and Cracker Jacks with baseball."

"Pretty sure this is softball." There was another soft kiss. "Hamburgers and beer."

They were interrupted by Oliver, wearing the same pale blue shirt as Gail. "Peck! Stop fraternizing with the enemy!"

And Gail groaned, letting her head fall to Holly's shoulder. "Damn it, Oliver, why is she on the other team?"

Holly whispered, "Oh don't worry, I'm on your team, Peck." But she kissed Gail's temple and nudged her towards the Fifteen Division team. "I didn't pick the sides, honey."

Pouting, Gail picked up her mitt. "I hate this. You're making me play sports and I can't sit with my girlfriend." Petulant Peck indeed.

"And I get the cutest cheerleader," added Holly, pointing to Sophie who was sitting on her team's side.

Gail threw her hands up and stomped off with Oliver. The teams were basically Fifteen, its cops and detectives, versus the big building's staff and anyone adjacent, which was why Holly played for them today. Eventually she'd have to figure out how to get on Gail's team, just to play with her. That set her brain moving in a different way and Holly knew she was flushed when she joined Frank at the dugout.

"All done flirting with the right fielder?" Frank looked amused.

"She's so cute," grinned Holly. "How's the third baseman?"

"Noelle is mad that Sophie wants to cheer me on and not her." The dynamics of that were likely more annoying than their own and Holly grinned.
Her team was filled with mostly people she knew by name but not very well. That barely bothered Holly, who simply liked the idea of getting outside and running around for a couple hours. She watched the people from Fifteen warm up on the field, Swarek taking the spot as pitcher.

Slow pitch softball wasn't as fun as real baseball, but Holly wasn't going to knock it. She'd run Gail through the rules a couple times, but had to agree with Oliver that right field was the position of least destruction. For herself, Holly was batting first and playing second, her favorite positions.

Watching Swarek warm up, she got the feeling that he was going to be a nasty pitcher, with some hard inside pitches. You couldn't throw a real cutter underarm, but the angle of few of his throws sure looked like he was trying. Hell, he was almost cheating and throwing a submarine pitch. Or was that ... A knuckleball?

Frank stepped up beside her. "Don't crowd the plate," he advised, already in his shin guards.

"Yeah?" Holly sighed and pulled her helmet on as the umpire, a fireman, called for the game to start. At least it wasn't fast-pitch softball, where the whipping windmill might make an inside pitch actually dangerous. "Hey, Chris," she smiled at the catcher.

"Hey, Dr. Stewart- Holly." Chris blushed and pulled his mask down, squatting behind the plate.

As expected, the first few pitches were brushbacks, two balls and one strike. The strike was questionable at that, but Holly just took measure of the umpire's calls, and nodded. Alright then, the next should be that knuckler. She could tell by the way Chris tensed behind her that it had to be a knuckleball. Catchers hated them and Chris was insanely transparent. Gail said it was one of his better qualities.

The ball came sailing in and didn't rotate the way it should have. In a split second, not even a second, she knew that Swarek had screwed up the pitch. Holly's eyes went wide and she pivoted on one foot, swinging hard. The bat connected with a solid ting, lining it to left, and Holly ran making a double easily.

That was the best hit of the night. While her team did manage to advance her to third, Holly only scored because Chris dropped the legit knuckleball that struck out the first base guy (Cromwell?). The dropped third strike rule ended with Holly safe and Cromwell on first, and a one run game.

Four innings later, it was still one run. Holly, back up at bat to start the fifth inning, took a couple sample swings. Her second at bat, Swarek had been vicious, savagely attacking the inside corners as best one could with a lob. Holly dropped a perfect checked swing (in lieu of a bunt, which was illegal in slow pitch) down third base and advanced the runner, nearly getting safely on first to boot, but Andy (playing third) managed to throw to Nick at first in time.

She was not surprised to have a repeat of the pitches. This time, though, they were a little higher and inside. The first was a ball, so close it sent Holly stepping back. It wasn't like it could actually hurt her, but she'd grown up playing baseball and habits died hard. The fourth pitch was in the sweet spot and Holly swung hard. The ball felt wrong and she cursed inwardly, seeing it head right at Swarek's feet.

He bobbled it, letting her make it safe to first, but that was probably why, when Swarek was up at bat and they did an infield shift, he ran the way he did. Holly was the only person to touch the ball fairly in every at bat. When Swarek pulled the ball down the first baseline, they'd nearly botched it. The first base idiot jumped, making right field scoop, and Holly made it to first before the pitcher. She had her back to the base-path, stupidly, caught the ball and turned to tag Swarek.
Technically she did. At least she hoped she did. She was confused when she heard someone shout and then found herself looking up at a blurry Gail, very angry, being held back by Nick and John. Shouting. She was calling Swarek some fairly impressive names. And Holly was holding the ball tightly in her mitt. That was good.

"Hey, hey, there she is," said a very soothing voice. Holly blinked and squinted up at the face on the other side. Oliver. "Hi, know who you are?"

Oh. She’d been knocked out? How embarrassing. "Holly Stewart. Where are my glasses?" Oliver held them out and Holly eased them on, not sitting up yet. She told Oliver the date and the name of their insane mayor, while watching Gail rage.

Gail was livid. "I swear to god, Sam, I will make you watch me fry your liver!"

"Gail, she's awake," John said firmly. "Come on, she's okay."

Spitting an epitaph at John, Gail stopped throwing herself in Swarek's direction, kneeling by Holly instead. "I quit, Oliver."

"I'll take over," sighed John. "Let me know if you need anything, okay?"

"Hi," smiled Holly, reached up towards her girlfriend. "Be nice to John."

"Hey." Gail looked mad and worried, which was not an attractive mix Holly realized. She took Holly's right hand in both of hers. "How..."

Clearly Gail was at a loss what to say, so Holly asked, "Is he out?"

Everyone except Gail found that funny. "God, you're an idiot," snarled Gail. "Give Oliver the ball, will you?"

The man eased the glove off Holly's hand and she reached to touch the back of her head. Her arm hurt worse than her head, which didn't hurt much at all. Actually she felt like she'd been hit by a train. Swarek must have run right into her. "How long was I out?"

"Seconds," assured Oliver. "But you lie still, okay?" Holly gave him a thumbs up and squeezed Gail's hand.

One of the umpires came over with a first aid kit and ran Holly through a concussion checklist. Declaring her fine, they helped Holly to her feet, much to the applause of everyone in the stands. John acted as a shoulder, Gail carrying ice packs, and while they stayed the rest of the game, Gail threatened Sam's life multiple times if he so much as looked at her.

By the time they got home, Holly just wanted a hot shower and a nap. "Gail, I'm fine." Now was not the time to explain she'd taken harder hits playing soccer.

"He could have seriously hurt you!"

Holly sighed, "He didn't, honey. See? I'm fine." She held her arms out, turning around. "My head is fine, I'm just sore."

But her girlfriend was still fuming. "I want to hit him," Gail snapped. "I want to kick him so hard, the idea of popping out McSwareks makes him cry. His great grandchildren will be limping."

Holly covered her mouth. It was adorable, if anatomically incorrect (Andy would be popping out the
McSwareks). Now was not the time to be precise about those things. "Andy would never forgive you, Gail."

"I don't care!" Gail paused. "Is this how you feel when I come home banged up?"

"Not generally murderous," mused Holly. "Scared."

And Gail stopped. She did the thing where she just … stopped whatever she was feeling or doing and shut down. Which was not healthy. "I'm freaking out a little," she noted.

That was when it made sense to Holly. She understood the feelings. This wasn't the anger that popped up, unexpectedly, in arguments with Gail. This wasn't Gail's PTSD rearing its ugly head. This was just a girlfriend being upset the woman she loved was hurt."Honey, this is normal."

Making a disgusted sound, Gail wrapped her arms around Holly and held her close. "You sure?" Gail's face was pressed into Holly's shoulder and she still sounded angry, though it was much less than before.

What must the world be like when you couldn't tell if your anger was your own or just made up in your head? Holly squeezed Gail close, ignoring the aches from her collision. "I'm sure," she said firmly. "If it was you, I'd want to vivisect him."

Gail exhaled a long, low breath. "Okay." Nodding, Gail stepped back to cup Holly's face in her hands. "Okay," she repeated and kissed Holly gently. "You're okay. I'm okay. Sam's an asshole who hates losing."

Smiling softly, Holly leaned in for another kiss. "I totally owned his ass, too," she noted. She'd hit in all three at-bats and still tagged him out. If they didn't give her MVP on Monday, she'd be pissed.

"Yes," agreed Gail, relaxing into the kisses the way she tended to, the walls floating away so there was just the two of them. "You are an awesome little butch thing," she muttered against Holly's lips. "Go take a shower, will you? I'm going to order something for dinner."

"Wow, I take a hit from Swarek and you won't even cook," teased Holly.

Now Gail smiled, "Tell me what you want?"

Holly kissed Gail's nose. "I was promised hamburgers. And beer."

Laughing, Gail agreed and let Holly upstairs, on her own. It hurt more than she wanted Gail to know and Holly grimaced as she got her clothes off. She was bruised where Sam hit her, though her head was fine. By the time she got downstairs, clean and feeling a hell of a lot better, Gail had the grill going with burgers, onions, mushrooms and bacon.

Silently watching Gail cook, it wasn't until the taste hit her tongue that Holly realized Gail hadn't put breadcrumbs in the burgers, she'd put in cheese puffs. And it was good.

Four arrests down and they'd only scratched the surface of the scammers. It was a semi organized scam, and the more people they caught, the closer they got to really understanding what was going on. John had managed to turn the last couple into CIs at least, which made it a little easier, but the whole concept was plain weird.

"So they all work for some guys they don't even know," she explained to Holly over dinner. "Once a month they get a call, telling them the buildings and the apartments. They run the rest of the scam
and give the guy a third of the take in a blind drop."

Holly screwed up her face. "What happens if they don't?"

"The usual. Broken bones. Death threats." She shrugged and took a last bite of her chicken. "Damn this is good."

Smiling, Holly sipped her wine, "I thought you'd like it. It sounded like your thing."

"Food is generally my thing," admitted Gail, smirking. "It's stupid, though. The scam, not the chicken."

Holly peered at Gail's plate and remarked dryly, "Seeing as you ate the whole chicken, I guessed as much." Before Gail could sass back at her, she asked, "Why is it stupid? They get, what, first and last month's rent, plus security? So for those apartments, that's five-grand minimum? $3333.33 and on per scam at the bottom."

For a moment, Gail just grinned. Holly had done the math in her head that fast. It was cool. "That means you have to do at least two of these a month, Holly. Four, if you consider it's three people per scam in the end, plus whatever loser you bribed in the first place to get into the building."

"Wouldn't the … mystery guy be doing that?"

"You'd think, right? He just tells them the building, provides the cell phones, basic info."

Holly snorted, "Well shit, he's cleaning up."

"No kidding. Small range of available buildings at that price too. It would be easier to do a building like my old apartment."

"There was a surprising lack of security there," noted Holly.

"I think we were the security." Gail eyed Holly's plate, "You going to eat that?"

Rolling her eyes, Holly brandished her fork. "Stay away from my lamb. It's still not super stupid, though."

Next time, Gail would have to try that particular dish. "It's a lot of hustle for less money than I make a month, is all. I'd start with charging a processing fee for their background check. Get a real one from a real company, change the headers, email it. Maybe use PayPal."

Holly shook her head, "You'd get shut down for fraud."

"Not if I did it right. Tell a bunch of them they were approved at the first level, and your manager was checking. Then if you reject, send 'em half back. You'd get a lot more bang without leaving the house."

Squinting, Holly finished her own dinner. "How much time do you spend thinking about how to be efficiently lazy?" Gail decided not to answer and finished her glass of wine instead. "Thought so."

But Holly looked amused. "So what's next?"

"John and I are going to do some stings, maybe borrow Chloe again. She's really good at it, which is weird…" How someone that comfortable with being herself could be someone else so effectively weirded Gail out, but also impressed her.

The look on Holly face shifted into one of discomfort. "You're going undercover?"
"With John," she pointed out. "We're playing a couple." Gail rolled her eyes at the idea. "Some places only rent to couples. We actually got turned down for one because we weren't married."

And still Holly looked uncomfortable. She muttered an oh and pushed the sauce on her plate around. "I don't like when you're undercover."

Reaching across the table, Gail touched Holly's hand. "It's not dangerous, Holly. It's not people with guns, or killers, or anything. It's just losers trying to rip people off. And I'll be with John the whole time."

"You really want to try and tell me your job isn't dangerous?" But Holly turned her hand so their fingers tangled up.

Gail sighed, "Only if you want me to lie, Holly. But… I don't know what to do about this."

The hand in hers squeezed hard, almost to the point of actual pain. "Nothing, it's just… I don't like it. It makes me worry about you, and I'm probably always going to worry about it. You'll be careful, right?"

"Always. I'll try not to get any more broken, promise."

"Hey!" Holly's voice snapped like a whip, surprising Gail considerably. "You are not broken," she said fiercely. "God, I hate that more than anything, Gail." Her voice was angry, actually angry. "I really, really, hate your family when you say that, because…" And there she stopped.

But Gail knew what she was thinking. Because you didn't get here, to a place where a thirty-year-old didn't have the right coping mechanisms for life, without having a shit-tastic setup as a child. And that was entirely true. "It's not your fault, Holly," Gail pointed out.

Bitterly, Holly retorted, "That doesn't mean I have to be okay with it." She sighed, "You are not broken, Gail Peck. And … I will tell you that every day if I have to."

Unbidden, a smile crossed Gail's face. "Every day? For how long?"

"As long as it takes."

Gail leaned on the table, resting her chin in her palm, and looked thoughtfully at Holly. She still really had no idea what 'normal' was supposed to be with people. Being with Holly was easy, though. It felt like what everyone always talked about love to be like, that you found someone who accepted you, warts and bumps and all, didn't try to make you into anyone perfect, and worried about you. No one wanted to protect you, in Gail's life. At best, the only time anyone did was with Perik the time she interrogated him. And that… well that was an epic failure on so many levels. But at the same time, it set her free to be able to consider something for herself.

Holly chewed her lip a little, "Why are you just looking at me?"

"You're pretty awesome, Holly," smiled Gail. "I think I'm better when we're an us." There was an embarrassed blush growing across Holly's face and Gail added, "I like me because of you. Thank you."

"That's … a lot of pressure," Holly muttered.

"Good thing you're amazing, huh?" Gail considered leaning across the table, but the waiter came by to take the plates and offer coffee and desert. "Yes, we will have desert," decided Gail.
That night, Gail probably would have slept through the whole night had Holly's phone not gone off at nearly four. "Stewart," yawned Holly, coming alert faster than Gail ever could.

For some reason Holly had a magical power, the ability to just wake up and be awake. And worse? She could go back to sleep without a problem, provided she didn't really engage her nerd brain, or it was before five AM. Five was a special hour, at which point Holly simply would get up and start her morning. It was one of the only things Gail actually despised about her girlfriend.

"Okay," muttered Holly. "How much will you use up to run it again? Oh." She groaned. "Yeah, I see the problem. Okay. Give me a second." Gail opened one eye to see Holly pressing her phone to her forehead. "Okay. I have an idea." And she launched into a technical description of something Gail might have been able to follow along with at a decent hour.

Instead, she pulled her pillow over her head and tried to claim at least another hour of sleep. The conversation got quieter, and Holly whispered an apology, but didn't leave the bed. That was encouraging, and Gail wasn't too surprised when Holly's phone made a soft click on the nightstand, and an arm oozed around her waist.

"Rodney needs a new babysitter," she informed Holly, grumpily.

"He's getting one. We hired a new guy for night emergencies." Holly pulled the pillow off her head and snuggled up against Gail's back.

"Good." Gail's fingers found Holly's and squeezed them, settling them between her breasts. The comforting warmth of Holly, her breath against the back of Gail's neck, was soothing. Dimly, Gail remembered how much she hated it when any of her boyfriends had tried to snuggle with her. Of course, that was more due to awkward boners.

But like everything else, things were just easier with Holly.
This Side of Paradise

Really Holly was starting to believe two things. First, Gail's job conspired to teach Holly all about eavesdropping. Second, Gail's friends wanted her to overhear things. Like Nick and Andy, arguing about something... Holly would have ignored until Andy mentioned she thought the entire idea was romantic, and Nick replied that it wasn't if Gail did it. If it was about Gail, she was going to listen in.

"Gail's not romantic," insisted Nick. "She's an heart breaker."

"Nick, that's not fair." That was Andy, annoyed. "You saw her with Holly when we went camping. She was downright cuddly."

"Yeah that was … pod Peck. That's not Gail."

Holly felt herself growing actually angry as she listened, but she couldn't take a step around the doorframe. Hearing Nick talk about Gail like that upset her, and yet she wanted to know more.

"You're just saying that because you two were terrible together," insisted Andy.

"That's what I mean. I knew, I always knew, she was going to break my heart." Nick was bitter.

"Does that make you feel better?" Andy sounded exasperated. There was a reply Holly didn't hear clearly. "Well then you're an ass. I'll stay, you go." Footsteps retreated and Holly quickly sat at her workbench. "Don't even try," announced Andy. "I know you heard that."

"Only the part where Nick complained Gail wasn't romantic."

Andy rolled her eyes. "God, he got kind of dumped, and he's being a total prick. He's got a sad puppy dog thing."

In a way, Holly felt bad. "Was she really different with him?"

"They never connected like you two," shrugged Andy. "She was a lot closer with Chris, but he has some commitment issues. I think he loved her. Anyway!" And she held up a cooler. "Wanna rehydrate a foot? Gail said you'd find it fun."

Holly blinked. "A foot." She eyed the cooler. "Fresh?"

"I'm not the doctor."

They smirked and Holly waved Andy in, pulling on gloves. "She is cuddly, you know."

Andy put the cooler on the table and smiled. "Especially when drunk. I think Nick's just jaded after the ... Um."

Once Gail had tried to explain the convenience of Nick to Holly. She hadn't liked it but Holly had to admit there was logic to it all. "Perik. It makes sense." Andy winced a little. "She never talked to him, did she?"

"About that? Hell, you're the only one she does, I think." Andy looked weirdly guilty and watched Holly work without saying anything more about it.

Over the year and change they'd been together, Gail had given Holly the brunt of the Perik drama, but every once in a while something new came out. Like who, exactly, Jerry was, and why she didn't
like shoes that made a lot of noise on tiles. Those were things that came out in inches, dribs and drabs, and yet still Holly was the only person who really got to hear that much of the story.

With a sigh, Holly pulled her mask on and opened the cooler. "Wow, okay that is fresh... Are you sure it's not supposed to be at a hospital?"

"Like a foot transplant?" Andy had her phone out. "You can do that?"

"You can reattach them, if the tissue is still viable." Holly checked the foot in the cooler and frowned. "This might be."

Andy was already calling the detective on the case, asking for hospital information. In the end, the foot was not a part of any known surgery. It was also not something Holly could readily use to identify anyone, but she did send the DNA sample to the system. At best, she was able to tell Andy the foot was removed by a chainsaw, which they both found interesting.

From there, Holly went into a meeting with her boss about the new night shift supervisor (finally freeing Holly from that particular on-call hell), and asking her how serious she was about staying in Toronto. Holly tried not to take offense at the way he questioned her. The Chief of Forensic Pathology was a nice man, a great scientist and a good director. To Holly, the order was the most important of things when you considered the work that they did.

But in asserting that she had every intent to spend the rest of her life in Toronto, her boss asked the obvious question about how serious things were with Gail. Not that anyone cared that Holly was gay, but being tied to someone who was ensconced in the city went a long way to any credibility or eligibility to whatever she was being secretly interviewed for.

Yes, Holly knew she was being considered for a promotion. She knew people were being shuffled around into new roles. Of course, the Medical Director, who was equally ranked with the Deputy Chief, didn't like her very much. The whole San Francisco thing rankled with many people, though not the lab techs. If Holly had to pick a job to be nudged into, she'd take head of the biology lab or a lateral move to the Forensic Anthropologist... Which would require some more school. Unlikely. But it would get her out from the Medical Director's auspice and that was a good thing.

Home first, Holly tidied up made a light dinner. She knew Gail was working some mean hours, making multiple arrests of people low on the totem pole. "Please tell me dinner has substance and isn't salad," groaned Gail as she dragged herself in. Boots were abandoned by the door and Gail stomped up the stairs to lock her gun away,

Holly pulled the fresh salmon out of the fridge and quickly turned on a burner. It was going to be a nice, light, salad, but Gail got cranky without enough protein. She burned a lot of calories even riding a desk as much as a detective did, due mostly to an insanely high metabolism. No wonder her brother caused her a garbage pail. Gail just ate a lot.

When Gail came back down, dinner was nearly done. "I see we snuck in a shower," grinned Holly.

"We also need a haircut," groused Gail, wearing a pair of yoga pants and one of Holly's sports shirts. The Toronto FC shirt was loose on Gail, but looked adorable.

Glancing over, Holly realized Gail's hair was touching on mullet territory. "You want me to trim it again?" While Holly was no professional stylist, Gail often put off haircuts as long as possible and ended up needing a quick fix before some meeting or event. The hair was back to Gail's natural color, too, having grown out incredibly fast from her undercover op at the university.
Gail got out a bottle of Pinot Noir and Beaujolais, holding them up thoughtfully. "No, I have an salon trip on Saturday. Preference?"

"The pixie cut," Holly replied cheekily. When Gail shot her an annoyed look, she added, "The Beaujolais please. Are you going to dye it again?"

"Nah," Gail yawned, putting the Pinot back on the rack. "Maybe in the fall." She opened the bottle and held it up. "You're a bad influence on me, Stewart. I actually know why red wine is good for me."

Smiling, Holly plated the salmon. "It doesn't actually lower your blood pressure," she pointed out. That was, currently, one of their goals. Not that Gail had *high* blood pressure, she was astoundingly healthy for someone with as horrible eating and sleeping habits as she had, but the current theory was she might sleep more consistently if she would keep her BP low.

"Neither does you wearing boob shirts." Gail gestured at Holly's partly unbuttoned blouse.

"I believe we determined that was the good way to help you relax." She teasingly leant forward as she put the plates on the table. Glancing at Gail, Holly saw her girlfriend already a little flushed and smiled.

Gail sighed and sat down. "I did not know I was a boob person until you."

"You also didn't know you were into sexy librarians." Smiling, Holly sipped her wine. "I knew I liked cute blondes with attitude and uniforms, at least."

Her girlfriend rolled her eyes. "And unavailable. Don't forget that." She took a bite of the salmon and sighed, looking rhapsodic. "This is good. But you forgot the cheese puffs."

Later, in bed, Holly was reminded that while she was very much a morning person, Gail was a night owl. She came back from her shower to find Gail in just the shirt, looking under the pillows for her sleep shorts. The shirt had ridden up, bunched at her hips, and Holly lingered in the doorway, watching the blonde toss the pillows all aside.

"The shorts were dirty," Holly finally spoke up, knowing she had a silly smile on her face.

Gail glanced over and sighed. "Well crap." She fell backwards onto the bed and into the nest of pillows. "I'm sleeping in this, Holly."

There was nothing wrong with that plan, and Holly hung her robe up. She glanced at the mirror and saw Gail watching her with a fond expression. "Admiring the sexy librarian?"

"Sexy scientist," corrected Gail and she raised herself up on her elbows. "What happens now?"

Holly picked up her lotion and frowned. "What do you mean?" She had no idea where Gail was going with the question.

"I mean, we're in love, right? We live together, we're sharing a mortgage on the house now. We have awesome jobs and are on our way up... What happens now?"

More than once, they had shared the opinion that their lives were not the fairy tales. Holly's career hadn't quite recovered, and they hadn't dealt at all with the fallout from Gail's mother. God knew what was up with her father. Not to mention Holly's parents starting to nudge them about children and Holly finding herself considering it.
She sat on the bed next to Gail and started to rub the lotion into her arms. "Well. I think we start with the easy stuff. You solve this case, we go see my parents for Christmas, maybe I get promoted. We just ... We just keep moving on. Like normal people."

Gail made a disgruntled noise and took the lotion, squirting some on to Holly's back and gently massaging it in. "I don't really do normal, Holly."

"I had noticed that." Holly closed her eyes as Gail's fingers easily drew the tension out of her neck and shoulders. It felt wonderful. "Okay, so future. I want to be the Chief Forensic Pathologist."

"You'd be a good one," mused Gail. "Would you still get to do autopsies?"

"Not as many." Holly hissed as Gail found a particular knot in her lower back. "Which may not be a bad thing, crap I'm getting old." With a laugh, Gail kissed her shoulder. "Okay, give, what about you?" Reaching back, Holly got more lotion for her legs and feet.

Sprawling to the side, Gail looked up at Holly, her eyes lingering over Holly's bare skin. "Promise not to laugh?" When Holly did, Gail sighed. "Detective Inspector. I'd kind of like Butler's job."

That would be interesting. "Cool," Holly decided. "Gail Peck and her minions. A whole department of people terrorizing the rest of the force." Gail poked her ribs and Holly giggled, stretching out beside her girlfriend.

"You said you weren't going to laugh."

Holly smiled and ran the backs of her fingers across Gail's face. "I laughed because you tickled me, you dweeb."

"Dweeb?"

"Neo zoom maxi dweeb."

Gail smirked. "Now you're just making things up." But as Holly's fingers toyed with the collar of the shirt, she grinned. Discussions of a future could wait a little longer.

The answer to the question 'how many hours can you sit in a car without killing someone' was not one Gail ever wanted to answer. After four hours, staking out the drop point with John, she only knew that she had not yet reached homicidal levels with him. Which was good. When she'd done stakeouts with Dov, she'd wanted him dead after two minutes. Of course, she also lived with him and didn't have Holly, who had a remarkable impact on her mood.

"Jesus, Chloe, stop bouncing," she grumbled.

They'd spent almost a month getting Chloe and Nick in as a scammer pair. After arresting four of the real scammers, they realized the catch would be the man running the business. So Chloe and Nick became a couple who worked a similar scam on low end buildings. Then Gail and John put the pressure on the real scammers, arresting and scaring off more.

With a dearth of minions, they made Nick and Chloe look like attractive newbies. But the layers of layers of scams was wearing them down. Finally they had the in they needed. Chloe had been approached by a building guard, which explained how they'd known which buildings to hit. The guard gave her a card, which connected her to a burner phone that asked her to meet at the park.

Gail wanted to arrest the man at that meet, but John insisted they wait for a money exchange. She
hated waiting, but had to admit the case would be more solid with the money. And that took them to today. Chloe was making the first drop of the money, wearing a camera which Gail was monitoring on her iPad.

"She's fine," John noted, glancing at the iPad propped up on the center console.

Gail sipped her water. "It's making me nauseous."

"You pregnant, partner?"

"Only if Holly's been lying about that being her tongue," Gail replied, dryly.

There was a long pause and John grimaced. "You're right, I need to start dating again." He sighed and picked up his camera. "How's Nick?"

Gail touched her mic. "Nick, eyes on the Princess?"

"Yep. She's at the drop point. I don't see our guy."

Neither did Gail and it was bothering her. "If he sends another lackey, John ..."

"I will let you hit him with the car." He raised the camera to his face.

That was alright. Gail looked at Chloe's camera and blinked. "Hey. There he is. Alone, damnit." She tapped the mic. "Nick. Make sure he can't see you. Chloe, we've got you. Just be yourself."

There was no worry about that, though. Chloe was a freaking natural at this sort of thing. When Gail floated the idea to Luke, he'd been interested enough to put Chloe on his list of potential people for the next op. That was all Gail could do for it, and she wished Chloe the best, even if it meant she'd have to deal with a grumpy Dov for months.

The skinny, scruffy, guy with a puffy jacket walked up to Chloe, and Gail turned the sound on.

"So. You did okay," he said, his voice reedy.

Chloe sounded serious and bored. "Money makes people stupider." She pulled a book out of her bag and held it up.

"They think it solves everything," he smiled. "No problems?"

"Nah," Chloe drawled. "Dumped the phones like you said. I got everything you asked for."

Taking the book, the man flipped through it and nodded. "Good. Good. You got socials and birthdays. Voided checks... Nice work." All the data was faked.

"Come on fishy fishy," muttered John, taking the photos at long range.

"He's not a fish, John." Gail smirked. But she agreed. If he could give the money to Chloe, they'd have him.

The man nodded in the video. "So."

"So," replied Chloe, sounding rather like Gail at her most bored.

"What's the deal with the pretty boy?"
"What about him?"

"How come a hot girl like you is the brains? He looks like a soldier."

Chloe did something and the camera jiggled. Probably a hair toss. "He was a mental defective before the war," she sighed. "But he's pretty and looks good in a suit. Nice smile."

The man laughed and Gail covered her mouth. This was not planned. "Why do you stick around with him?"

"He served with my brother."

John exhaled. "Nice recovery. She's good." Gail nodded, smiling.

"Nick, get in position," ordered Gail and tried to ignore how good it felt to push him around.

The man in the poofy jacket nodded. "So. The cash."

Nodding, Chloe pulled an envelope out of her pocket, holding it close. "Do you have another gig?"

"For you, hot stuff? You bet." He held up his own envelope. "Four more. If you can flip these in a month, I've got a steady gig for you."

They exchanged the envelopes and John snapped the photos. Bingo. "Do it, Chloe. Nick, go now."

"That sounds great," beamed Chloe, putting the envelope in her bag and pulling out her cuffs. "But you're under arrest."

"What the..." He stepped back and right into Nick.

"Toronto police," grumbled Nick, clearly less pleased at the story about him being a mental defective. The former soldier grasped the man by the arms.

No one expected the skinny loser to shed the coat and run across the park. He had an escape route planned. Nick swore and took off after the guy. A moment later, John was out of the car, sprinting after him and Gail sighed. Men.

"Chloe, you okay? Still got the goods?" Gail turned on the car and put it into gear. Let's see...

"Yep! Where do you want me?"

"Go after Nick, keep his ass in sight," sighed Gail and she headed towards the jogging path, pulling the car around on the hill and setting it in neutral. She pulled the parking brake and waited.

Chance, as Brian Stewart mentioned once, favored the prepared mind. She watched the video feed from Chloe's camera and, as soon as she saw the trail, released the parking brake. "Chloe, shout at him, will you?"

She did.

The idiot turned to look.

There was a satisfying thud as he ran full speed into the side of the unmarked car, knocking himself silly.

Gail smiled and pushed the parking brake on again, taking her time as Nick and John caught up with
their runner. "Honestly," she remarked to her partner. "You always do things the long way."

Hours later, they headed for celebratory beers at the Penny, and Chloe was telling everyone about the way Gail cut off the runner, like she knew exactly where he was going. Even Dov was impressed. At the Penny, Holly was already sitting with a round waiting for them, and her friend Rachel, who was highly amused as the story of the arrest got another go around.

"I have to say, Gail, you don't look like a badass."

"You've never seen her take down a meth head," Nick pointed out. "With a chair."

Chloe giggled, "Or stare down a Russian human trafficker with a shotgun."

"Or drive," muttered Dov.

Wishing they'd shut up and not spook Holly, Gail shrugged. "She's a damn good cop," John remarked, holding his beer up. "Of course, I thought we agreed you only use the car if he had a partner."

It was Holly, leaning over, who answered. "Potato, tomato. Right?"

Gail grinned and kissed her girlfriend. "Right."

"Still?" That was Rachel, who sounded annoyed. "It's been over a year. You'd think they'd stop being that cute."

"They've always been like this? Crap, I was promised a Peck, not a teddy bear," joked John.

"I will taze you in your nutsack, Simmons," growled Gail, not at all serious. That made John remark he felt a little better. Holly frowned slightly and jerked her chin at Rachel. "Oh, right. John, Rachel. Rachel, John. He's my partner, which means he has to put up with my abuse. She went to school with Holly and held her hair back when she puked."

John rolled his eyes. "Still putting the ass in classy." However he extended a hand to Rachel, "Nice to meet you." There was an awkward pause and Gail stood up, "Next round is on me. Come on, Holly."

By the time they got back with drinks, Rachel had moved into Gail's seat and was talking to John. By the time the night was over, Gail was reasonably sure phone numbers had been exchanged. She'd pester John later or let Holly work girl magic on Rachel. Either way, it was an improvement on two people lamenting about not getting out there.

"You realize that if this goes poorly, parties are going to be awkward for years," sighed Holly, looping an arm through Gail's as they walked to the car. "Not everyone can work with their ex-fiancé and ex-boyfriend without life becoming a battle zone."

Gail shrugged. "John's not an asshole. Rachel wants to save kids. I think the worst case scenario ends with they being friends. Besides, it's not like I think it'll be something as awesome as you and me, Lunchbox. You're one of a kind."

Her arm was tugged as Holly stopped by their car and Gail turned, confused. She saw the smile on Holly's face, that crooked, amused, wry smile. Gail tilted her head, expectantly and was not surprised when Holly held out her free hand. It was the most natural thing in the world to step into those arms and let Holly hold her. "You know you're ... Sui generis." She leaned in and kissed Gail.
Taking a good hold of Holly's collar, Gail tugged her closer. "Are you nerding at me?"

"You think it's sexy," Gail really couldn't argue that, so she leaned back into her car, Holly tipping into her. They fit together effortlessly and Gail stopped kissing to marvel at that for a moment. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," smiled Gail, cupping Holly's face with one hand. "Absolutely nothing."

Holly wrinkled her nose, "Sometimes you are very odd, Gail." She shook her head and let go of Gail, reaching into her pocket and jingling the keys. "Home?"

Nodding, Gail stayed leaning against the car, watching Holly walk around. The fear she'd had the nights before, worrying about what happened next, seemed silly. Next was similar to now. As long as it was with Holly, it was going to be just fine and she could face any hurdle.

"Yeah," grinned Gail. "Home."

Home with Holly. Because that was her answer. With Holly.
Chapter Notes

Part Six: Demons

The brunt of this arc is about Perik. I just want to put that out there. The subplot bounces between cute love, tough choices, and growing up. Also while Gail and Holly will be talking about the idea of kids, there won't be any that they adopt in this arc. Yes, I know I asked you guys what you thought, but this was written and done before that.

There is 'bad' French in this chapter. It will not be translated, as most is self-evident in context, but the French is intended to be very odd and grammatically incorrect for anyone who knows real French.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Holly secretly enjoyed getting to come to 15 when Gail was busy. It was nice to see the people she know being experts without having to concentrate on her own work the entire time. At the end of the day, however, most of the people she knew well had drifted off to their lives and families or, more likely, the Black Penny, to distract themselves from the drama of their day.

It made the station, at eight PM, rather charming, Holly thought. Quiet, and generally calm on a week night with no sporting events, Holly could enjoy looking for things familiar and comforting, like the pictures of Leo that Traci stuck on her desk, or the way someone would decorate a desk for an upcoming birthday. She paused by a desk with a mug that said "Gerald" and laughed. It was two years and he was still Gerald.

"Dr. Stewart!" The man with two names was excited to see her and came over right away. "What brings you here this late?"

"Picking up Gail. She's still upstairs mired under paperwork, though."

Duncan nodded and grinned, "I'd offer you some of our coffee, but it's pretty crappy. My rookie made it."

For a moment, Holly felt like having a heart attack. Someone gave Gerald a rookie? Dear god. "Your rookie? How's that going?"

And to her surprise, Duncan grimaced. "If I was that bad, I owe Peck and McNally dinner. Noelle was her TO, though."

Thank god. The idea of Duncan being a TO was horrifying. "Well you did nearly get Andy fired…" she trailed off at the look of actual pain on Duncan's face. "Just work on making it better, huh?"

He nodded. "Jones means well, but she's really exuberant. I mean like crazy overboard. Sgt. Shaw said she reminds him of Epstein when he was new." Duncan dropped into a seat. "She… you know, she's driving me nuts."

Holly looked around, "Where is she?"
"She's with a witness."

"Alone?"

"Kid had to pee," he shrugged. "I can't take a girl to the bathroom!"

That was true. But then the words sunk in. "Girl? This late?"

"We found her at a murder scene. Detective Callaghan said since she wasn't related to the case we should get social services here." When he didn't explain further, Holly coughed. "Oh, we're waiting on them. They're backed up after some detective found a Russian baby thief." His eyes twinkled and he looked upstairs.

Oh so *that* was why Gail was running that late. "Always causing problems," smiled Holly.

Duncan looked at his watch, "Jones should be back by now, though." He frowned. "Could … would you mind checking the bathroom? I mean I can but it's weird and creepy."

"Sure," agreed Holly and she let Duncan lead her to the bathroom. Which was empty.

"Shit," he groaned. "I'm gonna kill her." Thanking her, Duncan rushed off to try and find his rookie and witness.

Holly half smiled, and texted Gail to say that Gerald had lost his rookie in the station. Her phone buzzed right away with a reply that Gail was nearly done and would be right down. That meant up to half an hour and Holly wandered towards the break room. As she passed by an interrogation room, memory kicked her and she grinned at the thought of the last few years.

The door was open and Holly glanced in, wondering if they ever redecorated, and blinked to see a child sitting at the table with a grumpy police officer talking to her. No… yelling. "Duncan!" she shouted and turned to look for the man.

Duncan flipped his shit and hauled the rookie and the child out of the room. With the kid seated in his desk chair, hot cocoa in hand, Duncan read his rookie the riot act. No one paid attention to Holly who quietly sat down next to the girl. "Sorry," she said quietly, trying to think of what Gail might do in this moment.

The girl gave her a dry look and muttered something in French that wasn't French. Holly blinked. "Ontario," complained the girl, curling her legs up in the chair for protection.

Okay. Not local. Holly checked her phone considering calling Gail, but instead asked "How stupid was that officer?" The girl blinked and flashed a smirk. "Yeah, her partner was a pain in the butt when he was a rookie."

"Êtes-vous police?"

"Me? No, I'm a doctor." Holly smiled. "I'm dating a detective." She never knew how to broach the topic of homosexuality with children and decided to leave it like that for now. "The guy, Duncan? We call him Gerald when he's being stupid."

"Pourquoi?"

"When he was new, one of the officers just started calling him that and the name stuck."

The girl giggled, the first really childish moment Holly had seen. "Elle is a païen."
Holly frowned, "I don't know what païen means..." And she didn't know why the girl switched to some English words in the middle. That didn't make any sense.

In a weird accent, the girl said, "Stupid. She is not smart."

"She's new. She'll learn." Holly smiled, "I'm Holly."

"Je m'appelle Alexiane. Vous êtes nice."

The broken English/French conversation continued quietly until Holly heard the rookie, loudly, complain about the 'stranger' sitting with their witness. Alexiane pulled her legs closer, clearly not happy about this threat to their small world. No, she was actually scared.

"Hey, Duncan," murmured Holly, with a head shake.

"Jones, get off it. That's Dr. Stewart." He grabbed Jones' arm as the rookie made a step towards Holly and the room felt impossibly tense. Other officers were now taking notice of the scene which only made Alexiane shut down more.

Thank god for Gail. "Jones? You touch one hair or fiber on Dr. Stewart and I will lock you up myself," growled the detective as she walked in, messenger bag dangling off one shoulder. "Does anyone want to tell me why you're scaring the hell out of a kid?"

Jones and Duncan started to explain, their voices overlapping, and Gail frowned at them both. She moved her hands, slowly, and signed at Holly, asking if she was okay.

She's scared, Holly signed back. Shouting.

Alexiane's soft question startled her, "Que vous doing?"

"Sign language," Holly explained sheepishly. She glanced at Gail who nodded once. "The detective's going to shout at them, not you."

Eyes widening, Alexiane nodded and leaned a little towards Holly as if for protection.

"Enough!" Gail's voice was firm and strident. "Gerald, you write this up and you do it now. Jones, unless you want to spend the night in lock up, you sit down and shut up. Over there." Gail looked across the room, "Salvador, keep her out of trouble. Everyone else, get the hell back to work."

The girl blinked and looked amazed at Gail, as if the world was magically fixed by her force. Holly felt that way a lot, but as a small hand reached for hers, she met it and found herself transfixed by the hold Alexiane had on her. "Sorry, she's loud," whispered Holly.

"She's incroyable!" replied Alexiane.

Making sure everyone did what she'd ordered, Gail walked over and squatted in front of Alexiane. "Hi. Are you okay?"

The little eyes widened again and Alexiane looked from Gail to Holly. She nodded, "Oui."

Gail arched an eyebrow and replied in French, "Je suis désolé j'ai crié. Je m'appelle Detective Peck, mais vous pouvez m'appeler Gail." Unlike Holly's stumbling attempts at French, Gail spoke it fluidly if formally.

At first, Alexiane didn't reply. Only when Holly squeezed her hand did she repeat her name to Gail. Very slowly, Gail talked to her about what had just happened and how the officer was in a lot of
trouble for not being polite to her. They were only mean to criminals, after all. In that magical way Gail had with kids, she quickly got Alexiane to talk with her about what she'd seen.

Partway through the conversation, Gail frowned and asked if she was from New Brunswick. That burst the dam, and Alexiane rattled on in a weird French and English mix about how no one here spoke properly and that was why she'd been lost in the first place. Her parents came here for a trip but her mother had been sick, and went to buy medicine from a man in an alley. After taking her medicine, her mother fell asleep and didn't wake up. Her father disappeared when he said he went to find a doctor, and the manager scared her, so she'd run off.

Holly's heart pounded. There had been a woman brought in the night before, dead of an overdose. Found in a cheap motel. Rodney had worked the case, currently being the night manager. She unconsciously gripped Alexiane's hand tighter. Not seeming to notice, Gail gently asked if Alexiane had photos or a phone.

"Non."

Of course not. She didn't have other family in town either. Gail sighed and glanced at the hand in Holly's, before saying she was going to call and see if they could find a place for the girl to stay while they looked for her father. Sit closer to her, signed Gail to Holly, pulling her phone out and calling, of all people, Nick.

She did move closer to the girl, who sighed, finally relaxing a little. "Ma mère is morte," she whispered. Holly couldn't answer and just squeezed the little hand again. Alexiane sniffled and turned her face so it was pressed into Holly's shoulder, hiding from the world.

This was a little girl who needed a hug, and Holly let go of the hand to put an arm around her. In a moment, the child was in her lap crying. No one stopped them or said a word, save for Gerald who handed over a box of tissues. His presence caused Alexiane to stiffen, and Holly frowned. "He won't hurt you, honey," she told the child in her arms.

"I know," whispered Alexiane, in her first English only sentence.

When Gail came back, she took in the situation and sat in Alexiane's empty chair. "How good is your English?"

"Alright," she replied, the thick accent making the word sound off.

"I can't find anyone who speaks Acadian French, let alone Chiac," explained Gail.

"You?"

Gail laughed softly, "Barely. And I'm not allowed to bring you home."

The girl turned to Holly for a moment and then looked at Gail again. "La pretty médecin ne peut parler Chiac?"

"She barely speaks French," teased Gail and won a smile from Alexiane. "I found a couple, husband and wife, who have space and know some French."

When Alexiane stiffened, Holly felt it and frowned, "Gail, I don't think…" She chewed her lip and Gail looked surprised. "No men," she mouthed at her girlfriend.

"Oh. Okay, I can do that. No problem."
Gail stepped away again, and made more phone calls. Hiding her face again, Alexiane whispered, "Why can you not? I can speak English."

"There's a law about fostering," explained Holly. "My— we'd have to pass a test to be allowed to, and have room." Accepting that, Alexiane closed her eyes and nodded. "Don't worry, Gail's awesome. She'll find you a safe place." And Holly proceeded to tell the story about how Gail found Sophie and, when she wasn't able to adopt her, found her a home with loving parents. Sophie had just turned ten and announced her intention to be a professional soccer player. Of course, last month it had been a doctor, and before that a fireman. Gail had been aghast at that one.

The story calmed Alexiane down and Holly was surprised to realize she was holding a sound asleep child in her lap. "She's out?" Gail was quiet as she sat down again.

"How do they do that?"

"Beats me," shrugged Gail. "So. Alexiane Tourangeau. You didn't work the case yesterday, did you?" When Holly shook her head, Gail looked relieved. "I pulled the hotel information, but the … well he wasn't the husband but he has a record." Gail's eyes drifted to the girl, "Domestic abuse. I suppose I can be grateful there's no assault charges."

Holly frowned, "I don't think this is a good topic for little ears."

"She knows her mother's dead, Holly, I don't think there's a way to make that better." Gail pushed her hair out of her face. "I got a hold of Anne, Sophie's social worker, and she's got a girl only place for the night. Maybe a week, but after that I'm going to have to find some family for her or another solution."

"You?"

"Oh like hell I'm letting this case out of my hands. Gerald already fu- muffed it up. I'm going to roast Jones so hard, her children will be sunburnt."

That made Holly feel somewhat better. She knew Gail tried not to work cases with children since it had a tendency to eat at her heart, but at the same time this situation didn't feel like one they should just leave to the system. "Thank you," she sighed at Gail and reached a hand over.

Gail smiled, tiredly, and squeezed Holly's hand back. "Gotta say, I didn't expect to see this." She let her eyes drift over the girl in Holly's lap.

"Neither did I," confessed Holly. "I'm not sure how… She was scared. When they started shouting, she got more scared and did that thing you used to do all the time." When Gail arched an eyebrow, Holly explained. "The shell, where you shut down?" Holly chewed her lip a little.

"Oh that." Gail sighed and shook her head, "Poor kid."

They both waited another hour for Anne to show up. Waking up Alexiane, Holly felt heartbroken at the last hug she got before the girl went off and found herself promising to come visit as soon as she could.

Gail drove them home, quiet the whole way. She seemed to just know that Holly had a lot of processing going on. How did looking at one kid make her feel that differently about everything? Was this like it had been for Gail seeing Sophie that first time? That sudden feeling that you should make a difference in something besides yourself and your cases?

Holly looked at her hands and said nothing for the ride home. They got home and out of the car
before Holly found her words. "I don't want her to be with strangers."

Gail tilted her head and understood. "Technically you and I are strangers to her."

"She trusted me." Holly felt her body shake and couldn't pinpoint why, but Gail's arms were around her, folding her into a hug. And the shaking hit hard. She grabbed Gail's shirt and pressed her face into the blonde's shoulder, suddenly sobbing. Why did that little girl have to be alone? Why did she have to be scared? What had people done to her to make her fear shouting?

Saying nothing, Gail gently steered Holly to the couch and stroked her back. The tears kept coming as Holly thought about the system and the life the girl would have, if there were no family members. Maybe she could go home, but why? Was there anything for her anywhere?

Eventually she stopped crying, but felt insanely spent and just held on to Gail. "You saw that coming," she whispered into Gail's shirt.

"Yeah," sighed Gail. "I keep telling you not to hang out at the station."

It did make Holly wonder how many times Gail had to walk away from people in her life. "Does it always hurt like that?"

Gail's hand stilled. "When Andy and I were rookies, like being babysat all the time and Oliver worried that we were allowed carry guns newbies, we got a woman to a shelter, away from her husband who hit the shit out of her. He called her cell and she not only answered, she told him where she was." Gail's cheek pressed against Holly's head. "It's easier, when they're stupid, when you look at it and realize you can't promise them things will be better if they won't try themselves."

Sniffling, Holly noted, "That doesn't make me feel any better."

"That's my point, Holly. It never hurts less. Once the door is open to let in the hurt, it's always going to suck and hurt. Especially with kids."

"I hate people."

"Me too," sighed Gail.

No matter how many times Gail told her that Alexiane would be taken back to New Brunswick, Holly had been adamant that they actually get certified for possible fostering. Finding three people to serve as references was the second easiest part, the fastest was when Gail called Anne and asked if they still had her information. One update later, with a lovely apology from Uncle Al, and the wheels were greased.

But as Gail predicted, a relative was found for the little Chiac girl before all that was done. Holly was torn up, and Oliver reminded Gail multiple times not to say 'I told you so.' But Gail had predicted, a while back, that Holly would have a case that hit her like Sophie hit Gail.

They let them say goodbye at the airport, where Alexiane's aunt came to pick her up. The aunt was clearly good people, as she had been sufficiently horrified to hear the story of her sister's death and the no-good boyfriend's vanishing act. She'd hated him for years, and Alexiane clung to her. A good sign.

After hugs for Holly and Gail, the girl took her aunt's hand and explained how the nice couple had made sure she was alright. Gail expected to never hear from the girl again, but one night, two months after Alexiane was safe with her aunt, came a letter from the girl. It was, naturally, in Chiac, so Gail
had to translate it for Holly (wracking her brain for the inane colloquialisms those weirdos out east liked to use), and it made everything worse.

In was a far lesser version of the drama Gail had struggled through with Sophie, but it was enough to make Holly miserable for days. Gail made sure not to say 'I told you so' or ever insinuate it had been worse for her with Sophie, even though she was certain it had been. She did get to see Sophie still, after all.

Of course, like Gail, Holly took the situation with a little more fervor than perhaps was normal. She started talking to Anne, the social worker, about what being a foster parent really involved. She even took Nick out to lunch to hear what he'd hated about it, and bullied him into introducing her to his foster mother. Gail let this happen, not because she wasn't interested, but because she knew better than to get in Holly's way. Her girlfriend was in research mode.

They'd talked about moving a few months prior, to a place with a bigger yard and an actual guest room. The moment Gail floated the idea, Holly rushed into research mode and demanded to know every detail about the houses, the areas, what she liked, what Gail liked… It was absolutely draining for Gail to watch. But she'd learned not to get between Holly and research, even if it meant suffering at 4AM when your girlfriend was reading on her iPad about something new. At least Gail could sleep with the lights on.

Once Holly calmed down and had her information, she presented the idea and plan to Gail. They could easily become potential foster parents in their current house, so if there was another little girl (or boy, but Gail was pretty sure it'd be a girl) who needed a family for a night or a week or whatever, they could help.

Gail pointed out the practical aspects that would be a problem. Their house had one spare room, which limited what they could do. But. They could do this and Gail was all in for it, even if it sucked up free time for months. They took the classes, they talked to psych, mostly because of their jobs, and they easily passed background checks. They found themselves in a strange niche where they were available to be fosters, should the need arise. Privately Gail hoped it didn't. She still wanted kids and was rather happy realizing Holly didn't not want them, but she wanted to possibly plan that out, not have it thrown upon them.

Speaking of throwing things, Holly tossed a new curveball at dinner. "Pregnancy."

Gail froze, her fork halfway to her mouth, "Unless this is some immaculate shit, I hope we're talking hypothetical."

"Actually Mary was the immaculate conception, the whole free from sin birth so she could carry the son of God. Of course, dogmatically that wasn't set until 1854, by Pope Pius IX. Now, Jesus was the virgin birth, which is completely different. Didn't you go to a Catholic school?"

"And spent half my time in detention for ditching religious services." Gail put the fork back down, however, her bite uneaten.

Looking serious, Holly went on. "It would be medically complicated for either of us."

Good lord, this was that conversation. "Because I get shot at and you're around formaldehyde all day? Holly, why are we talking about this?" There was a big difference between the possibility of being available to foster kids and the possibility of having their own, natural children. Even with fostering, there wasn't a permanence to it in most cases. Gail had a working theory that it was that permanence aspect of kids that spooked her girlfriend, but had yet to ask for details. Doing that tended to bring out some of Holly's cut-and-run habits, so Gail knew she had to ease into the topic.
"Because … I want to think about options and that's one too."

"I don't think it'd be smart for me to be pregnant," Gail pointed out. "Do you want to have a baby? Cause this is really out of right field." Holly made a face and Gail grinned, "I know it's left field."

Holly opened her mouth and Gail's phone rang. They both knew the ring tone was Gail's boss. "Go on, it's not like it's an answer today, honey."

Bewildered, Gail picked the call up, "Sir?" She tried not to let the relief leak through her voice. This was not a conversation she'd prepped for, and it was seriously weirding her out.

"How wrapped up are those B&Es?" There was no preamble, Butler just asked and sounded like he was in a mood.

"Pretty much baked, sir."

"Good, tomorrow I need you to pick up some robberies at hotels. Jewelry out of the safe stuff."

Gail sighed, "On it." But Butler had already hung up. "Ass," she muttered. Even if he was her boss, hanging up like that was a dick move.

"Anything fun?"

"Robbery, nothing for you. It can wait till tomorrow but sounds like a couple theft overs at a hotel."

Holly nodded. "Okay." She got up and walked around the table, sitting in Gail's lap abruptly. "I'm thinking things out loud."

Nodding slowly, Gail carefully wound her arms around Holly. "Okay. I'm not judging, I'm just very confused."

And Holly laughed. "Sorry, I got used to you just knowing what I've been thinking about." She kissed Gail softly. "I got offered a promotion."

Gail blinked a few times. "You got promoted? To…"

"Offered. Assistant… kind of. It's kind of the job I would have had in San Francisco. Medical Director, which would make me report directly to the Chief."

"I think this is better," Gail pointed out, dryly. "San Francisco is gloomy." When Holly smiled she added, "I'm totally bragging to everyone that you're a bad ass now, just so you know." They kissed again, more warmly and seriously.

"I wanted to make it by forty," admitted Holly, sounding embarrassed. "But now I'm wondering if I do this, and you being all super detective, is just … excluding other things in life. I don't know, maybe it's my biological clock," she sighed and rested her head against Gail's, slouching into her arms.

Rubbing Holly's back, Gail sighed too. So Holly didn't want children now, she was just trying to figure out the whole family, career, life balance. That made a lot of sense. At Gail's age, her mother had Steve already. At Holly's, both Pecks were ambulatory and had vocabulary. Time was out of joint. "We can talk about it, Holly. Just warn a girl, okay?" Holly nodded. "Okay. So tell me everything about this job that you're totally taking and we're bragging about, because my girlfriend is totally the assistant chief medical examiner of the damned city of Toronto."
"Medical Director…"

"Potato, tomato, Holly."

Chapter End Notes

Holly really has changed over the time she's been with Gail, understanding more about herself. There's still more to come. When I posted that poll to ask what you thought about Gail and Holly with kids it was, in part, because I was looking at all the growth I'd given Holly and found myself at a crossroads. I knew where I wanted to go, I wondered if I'd lose all my readers if I did it. That still worries me, if I'm being honest. I look at chapter 68 and on and I think that I'll catch some grief.

I've been building up to things since the early teens chapters with a purpose and a direction. Some of your votes may have changed since Oct '14, especially since that was over 20 chapters and three months ago and you've seen how the ladies have grown up. The point of this chapter remains the same; Gail and Holly are talking about possibilities and eventualities and doubts and fears and that moment where you wonder if you forgot to do something.

They will come to a decision about the whole baby thing and I hope it makes sense to you when they get there.
Listening to her drunk parents singing "Auld Lang Syne" was not the highlight of the trip.

The original plan, getting out before the holidays and enjoying October and Thanksgiving Day in Vancouver, was turfed when Gail caught a big case. Instead of going alone, Holly changed the tickets to Christmas and went over Gail's head, asking Inspector Butler to let them have a nice vacation.

The case, Gail admitted, surprised her. She'd been working on nothing but robberies for so long, having a real, honest to goodness, mystery was wonderful. They teamed up with Traci on a triple homicide, which turned into a cult killing, which turned into over a month of work with Gail barely sleeping and working all hours of the clock.

Between the three of them, the case was solved but Gail was not happy about it. "Cults are disgusting," she growled, hair still wet, wearing the sloppiest sweats she owned (too large ones Holly's father sent from UBC).

"Coercing people to die is pretty vile." Holly brought over a mug of whiskey tea for her girlfriend. "Did you find out why?"

"Nothing sane." Gail took the tea and sipped it, scowling.

Holly sighed and sat down on the couch beside Gail and was only a little surprised when Gail promptly put her feet in Holly's lap. Not a hugging night. She rubbed Gail's foot, pushing her thumbs into the arch. "I'm sorry."

Grunting, Gail slouched as far as she could and still drink the tea. "I hate people," she said with feeling. "There were kids." Well that made it worse. "I really need that vacation," Gail muttered.

Those were words never heard from Gail Peck before and Holly paused her massage. "Well. There was only one problem with moving it, besides the part where all my relatives will be over. We couldn't get a hotel."

Gail shrugged. "So? We can stay with your parents, right?"

"Yes, but that might be about as fun as camping," grimaced Holly. The lack of privacy was not an appealing prospect.

It turned out to be much more fun when they got to Vancouver. Holly hadn't been to the 'new' house since her parents moved there four years ago and managed to get them lost twice on the drive from the airport. When they finally pulled up at the house, Holly felt her jaw drop.

"Holly, is this supposed to be a log cabin?" Gail craned her head up, looking at the place.

"Yeah," muttered Holly, staring at the rustic house which looked like someone's imagination of how a log cabin was supposed to look. "When they said they moved out to some place pretty..."

Gail laughed and unlocked the car. "At least you got an SUV," she remarked. "This is way better than the suburbia hell I was expected, you know."

Both Holly's parents came out to hug and welcome them, Lily especially. Gail gave Holly a pleading look, but did not try to shove Lily away. There was something whispered into Gail's ear and Lily
smiled. "You'll like the guest house."

"It has the word 'house,' Lily. I'm already in love with it," Gail promised.

The guest house was tiny, just two rooms with a bathroom. The front room was pretty much just a couch that doubled as a day-bed and kichenette with a tiny pot bellied stove. But it was private, tucked away behind the house with a garden separating the two dwelling.

"Dad, did you buy the house for this?" Holly opened the french doors to the bedroom that basically just fit a bed. A full-sized bed, not even a queen. There would be snuggling.

Her father smiled, "Some dot-com kid sold it cheap when the bubble burst. This is your mother's retreat. It's too bad you're not here in spring. The garden between here and the house is amazing."

Gail bounced on the bed, "Do I want to know why there's a bed in here too?" She shot Holly's parents a smirk.

"For guests, silly," laughed Lily, tugging the black toque off Gail's head and blinking. "That is very short and blonde, Gail." The day before, Gail had gone back to a bleached blonde with the pixie cut first born in Holly's bathroom. It was still Holly's favorite hairstyle on her girlfriend, even when the blonde wasn't the platinum color but a more golden color. Gail's rationale was that she needed to change her head to clear it. Holly just found it sexy.

Shoving the suitcases to the side, Holly fell onto the bed beside Gail. "I like it." She fingered the fresh haircut fondly and got laughter from her parents. "When's dinner?"

"Seven. You two can nap." Lily rolled her eyes, heading back out.

Brian paused at the door, smirking. "Or not."

The privacy of the guest house made all the difference on New Year's Eve. Once her parents were drunk enough to sing, and her cousins enough to dance and shoot off fireworks, Holly could see the crowd of people wearing on Gail's patience. Poor Gail had been exceptionally popular with the kids, something Holly had expected, but it meant there was less relaxation for them as a unit. The adults hadn't been quite sure what to make of the detective, but they hadn't met any of Holly's girlfriends before so it was generally taken as a serious thing. And as her uncle put it, anyone who had the kids under her thumb was alright by him.

As the karaoke songs moved from pop 40 (and Gail singing a Lady Gaga number) to the Eagles 'Funky New Year,' Holly tugged Gail's hand and led her out to the kitchen. "Your family is crazy," announced Gail, putting her empty glass in the sink. "She's still smiling but her expression was wearing thin. Gail was clearly nearly done with people.

Holly sighed, "They're noisy too. Come here." She pulled Gail into an easy embrace, cupping her face. "Happy New Year, honey."

They kissed gently. It was an easy kiss, like the kind Holly had seen her parents give each other countless times over their life together. There was nothing pressing about it, nothing hurried and nothing rushed. They could just stay there, kissing in each other's arms for hours. Holly exhaled and leaned back to look at Gail, memorizing the pale face.

"Hey," breathed Gail, her eyes closed, lips curled up in a gentle smile.

"Hey," grinned Holly, kissing her again, lightly, lips barely touching. "Wanna go?" Gail squinted her eyes open and Holly tilted her head towards the back door. Gail nodded, but leaned in to kiss her
once more. Their lips met, this time with intent. No one was looking for them and Holly moved her hands up Gail's shirt, running her fingers across the soft skin of the small of Gail's back. Gail made a noise between a sigh and a groan, leaning into her and pressing one leg between Holly's.

The kitchen door opened and Holly father, face red and laughing, stumbled in. "We have another bottle," he called back to the living room. Gail startled, face flushed, and her head jerked back. "Oh." He smirked at Holly, who knew she was blushing to be caught trying to make time in her parents' kitchen, and jerked his chin at the back door. "Skedaddle."

Without a word, Holly held Gail's hand tight and led her out the back door. "Oh my god," giggled Gail. "Did we just get caught making out by your father?"

"Shush," laughed Holly. "If my uncle hears us, he'll start talking about annuities again."

The cold winter air bit into Holly's light sweater. It had been warm in the house so she hadn't thought about it, but the short walk across the frozen garden was indeed freezing. And the guest house, while cozy, wasn't exactly warm.

Gail shivered and locked the door. "Tell me he's at least going to make sure no one comes looking for us."

"He's probably telling them we're having a private party," admitted Holly. She was contemplating starting a fire when Gail's arms were around her, lips pressing into her neck.

"Let's not make him a liar," whispered Gail, turning off the lights.

Their hands and faces were still cold from the brief jaunt outside, but that was quickly remedied by the warmth of other body parts. Holly trusted no one was going to shoot fireworks or play with sparklers near her mother's garden, and quickly forgot there was a world outside of the two of them. The light from the bathroom cast enough illumination for Holly to see much of Gail's skin. If Gail had any problems seeing, it didn't stop her from mapping out Holly's body with her hands or her lips.

Much later, Holly became aware of two things. The party at the house was over as the lights were off and, even with the heat on and a thick quilt, it was really pretty chilly in the little guest house. She had a long shirt on, but it was going to be necessary to make a fire if she wanted to get more sleep. It was impossible to tell if Gail was really asleep and when she slid out of bed to make a fire Holly wasn't surprised to hear the bed creak.

"I had a fantasy about you naked by a fire, but it involved a bearskin rug and a fireplace."

Holly smirked and got the little stove cooking before cuddling back up with Gail under the quilt. "Sorry to disappoint."

Her body was chilled again but Gail had no problems curling around her to warm her up again. "Damn you're cold," she complained, snuggling closer in the small bed. "I wish I had the Peck Cottage."

"Why? Is there a fireplace and bearskin rug?"

"Fireplace," confirmed Gail, her hand moving under the shirt and up Holly's stomach. "The rug's wool." The warm hand left a fire on Holly's chilled skin and she shifted, moving to let more of her skin be accessible to the hand. "This is a nice holiday, Holly." Gail lightly kissed the neck and shoulder available.

Holly rolled over and caught Gail's lips with her own. "Better than camping?"
"Cleaner and nakeder, so ... Yes."

They eventually slept, only to be woken by the various mini-humans at noon, demanding to know if cousin Gail could come play. Gail growled loudly that she was having playtime with cousin Holly and they would come out for food and nothing else. Preferably pancakes or french toast. That, Holly got teased for by her cousins for the rest of the trip. And it was totally worth it, especially when her mother made pancakes.

It was earlier than anyone else would be there which was fine by Gail. It was even earlier than Holly ever woke up. The sun wasn't really even up. Technically it was a time of day Gail was rarely familiar with by choice.

Today was different. Today she was going to tackle things as head on as she could. She'd tried other ways to work around this. None had worked. Not even the last year, which at Holly's suggestion had been spent at Niagara Falls. So it was time to do something she'd been avoiding for four years.

"Hi," she said quietly, watching the mist off the grass lift up like fog. She sipped her coffee and sat down on the wet grass, making a face. Awesome. Wet jeans. "I don't know where to start."

Looking at the stone, she absently brushed off the dirt and dust. "Yeah, I'm not going to be buried, Jerry," she told him. "No way, cremation for me. Maybe Holly..." She paused and smiled, "Okay, so I'll start there. I'm a detective, a lesbian, and my mother got retired early for being the devil. Dad's stuck working ROPE detail in the boonies and I never see him either."

Gail could imagine Jerry laughing at that. She was starting to forget what his voice sounded like. "You never judged me for them. I liked that about you. Way more than Sam, god he's annoying. You and Ollie though, you just treated people like cops. You wouldn't have given me crap for wanting to help after..."

Closing her eyes she leaned against the headstone. "You did save me, I hope you know that. I mean, I'm here, right? And you're not." Gail rubbed the grit from her eyes. "Jesus, it's too early. But there's some commitment or dedication shit this morning, and I'm not sticking around for that. Traci's got Steve."

She sighed. "Shit. I should go, shouldn't I? Holly gave me a look, but she's being really careful right now. Sometimes I get weird... Um. Holly. Did you know her? You probably did. She's a forensic pathologist. Lesbian, duh. We've been dating kind of three years now. Well, two and a bit. I was a total idiot and she was kind of dumb too in the beginning. But I totally fell for her. Like... Like you fell for Traci. Like nothing else ever really was real? Yeah. If you tell anyone I said that, I'll name one of the horses after you."

That definitely would have made Jerry laugh. "I'm okay. Most of the time I'm fine. Sometimes I freak out. It scares her, Holly. Scares me. It's annoying, terrifying. I'm not in charge of what's in my head anymore. I was always a frigid bitch, but that was by choice. No one got me, no one understood me. God knows my parents..." She sighed and let her head fall backwards to touch the stone. "I have support now, Jerry. But I'm still screwed up. I'm trying to be better." Trying.

"So. Year one, I got drunk and when I tried to tell Dov why, I puked all over his feet. He was really annoyed, but I can't talk about it. Second year, I was with Holly and had this weird panic attack where I just... couldn't be alone. God, she actually came and sat with me. Do you know no one's ever done that? Just sat and held me?" Gail smiled at the thought of that, how it felt to have Holly just there.
"Last year she made me go to Niagara Falls. I know, I know, avoidance bad, but my doctor even said that was a good idea. Get out of town, try to make it a normal day." She sighed. "Didn't really work. I mean the day was good, but I woke up in the middle of the night, just … freaking out when Holly's hair was on my neck."

On so many levels, Gail was relieved she only freaked and fell out of bed rather than anything worse. Like hurting Holly. That scared the shit out of her, and took longer to calm down over than the nightmare. When they got home, Gail had a long talk with her therapist about that wonderful fear. "I really hate the nightmares, Jerry. I really hate them. I can tell I'm dreaming, that's the worst part. I know it's not real, but my brain's all messed up and wired wrong."

Gail laughed softly, "I know. I know. My brain's always been wired weird. It's the Peck thing." She stretched out her legs and drank more of the coffee. "Here's a fun one. I didn't have a tenth birthday party, or any after that, because I scored under 2000 in the ISSF competition the week before."

Never mind that she'd been shooting with a 39 degree fever, thank you very much. It wasn't a good enough score, that was all that mattered.

"Yep, Pecks suck," she lifted her coffee and finished it off.

The more the sun lifted over the graveyard, the more calm and pleasant it became. "If I don't freak out tonight, I think I'll try this again next year," she remarked, mostly to herself. Closing her eyes, she let the warmth of the sun hit her face. She was really just talking to herself. Gail knew Jerry was dead and couldn't hear her at all, but saying the words made it more real. That was something she'd figured out when she came out to her parents. Having this be real, his death and her brain drama, made it something she could wrap her hands around and understand.

She had no idea how long it was before she heard an exasperated was a sigh Gail was very familiar, seeing as she lived with the woman. "Gail." It was the sound of her very frustrated girlfriend. Her kind of mad girlfriend.

"I told you she meant here," muttered Traci, less annoyed.

Gail opened her eyes and looked up at the two women. "When's the thing?"

"After breakfast."

Breakfast. Gail nodded and stood up, brushing off her jeans. "Breakfast sounds good. Who's coming with?" She glanced at Holly, who had a serious fume going on. Which was weird.

"No one," shrugged Traci. "I think I'll have my fill of people. His parents are coming." Gail winced.

"They're with Oliver right now."

Resting a hand on the headstone, Gail thought about that. "I don't know if I'm staying for that, Traci."

"I wouldn't if I didn't have to," Traci confessed. Then she hesitated and glanced at Holly, "You freaked out Holly, you know."

Gail startled. "I left a note!" She looked at Holly, honestly confused.

"Your note said you were going to talk to Jerry!" Holly's voice was almost shrill. "You got up before the fucking sun and were gone with a note!"

"Yeah?" Gail looked between Traci and Holly for a moment. "What?"
Covering her mouth, Traci looked like she wanted to laugh. "Gail, think about that for a minute."

What the hell? "I did! I thought you'd freak out if I was just gone! Why are you—" The clue dropped as she thought about the note again. Oh. "Oh. That's... Huh, it made more sense in my head," she realized. That really did sound remarkably suicidal when you thought about it for a moment.

Holly huffed. "Just... Don't do that, okay?" She crossed her arms and scowled.

Okay, that had been a mistake, but it was entirely accidental. Gail cupped Holly's face with her hands. "Hey, I'm not suicidal, Holly." Holly looked away and Gail sighed, "Look at me. I'm way too narcissistic to kill myself."

That put a goofy look on Holly's face. Clearly she didn't want to smile, but there it was. "True," sighed Holly, and she unfolded her arms to wrap Gail in a tight hug. "You okay?"

"Hard to say," admitted Gail, resting her head against Holly's shoulder. "I'm hungry." Gail looked at Traci. "You want to call my brother and have breakfast? I promise if you tell him about this, he'll bother me more than you."

Gail kept Holly's hand in her own as they went to get pancakes and waffles.

And for one year, Gail found she didn't have a nightmare or a freakout on the anniversary of being kidnapped by Ross Perik.

Progress.

"Welcome to a grown up hospital," teased Rachel, as Holly scooted into her office.

"You have an office with a view now. I think Lisa needs to start feeling inadequate."

Rachel laughed. "She does get to look at boobs all the time. I gather that's a high point of her day."

Grinning, Holly went to the window. "I'd rather look at the same pair every night. You almost done? I've only got an hour."

As Rachel closed her laptop, she smirked. "Dead bodies don't wait?"

"They smell if we leave them alone for too long." They hugged a real greeting and went down to a tiny vegan wrap place Rachel had raved about. "So?"

"So what?"

Holly grimaced, "Oh my god, Gail won't tell me anything about it. Which either means John's not telling her anything or there isn't anything to tell!" She caught Rachel trying to hide a smirk. "So? Gimmie!"

"Food, then details about my very nice date, thank you very much for that."

"Oh it was all Gail."

When Gail suggested the idea of introducing the two, Holly eyed her girlfriend like she'd grown a second head. Gail Peck was not a romantic. Actually, Gail swore nothing about the set up was at all to do with romance, but just convenience. They were single, they were generally each other's types. They should meet and maybe if Rachel and Lisa made more cop friends, they'd stop thinking Gail was quite so weird. Holly drew the line at introducing Lisa and Jen Luck, however.
It took them almost six months of being on the same page for John and Rachel to actually date, though. Holly had given up until the phone call, right before she whisked Gail off to Vancouver, when Rachel asked if Gail knew what John was doing for the holidays. And then it was baby steps, inching forward. Coffee here, a lunch there, Rachel joining them for drinks at the Penny. Between John's caseload (which Holly was very familiar with) and Rachel's clinical trials (also familiar with), they didn't have as much overlap to free time as Gail and Holly managed.

"So we had a real date," smirked Rachel, sitting down with her pesto wrap.

"And?"

"And what?"

Holly suddenly under so why Gail often threatened people with bodily harm. "So will there be another? Did you kiss? What?"

A blush colored Rachel's face. "We went to dinner and a movie, which was nice. And we talked about things. I kissed him at his door and went home. Happy?"

The story from Gail's end wasn't much more enlightening but Holly didn't expect much. Gail felt strongly about not blabbing people's personal lives over the world, a trait she did not share with her gossiping brother, and just said John had a good time and was smiling more than normal. Though she did suggest they not tell Lisa that John was a community college drop out. Rachel didn't seem to care, finding him fun to hang out with.

Gail flat out refused to press the subject, even when Lisa caught wind of the burgeoning relationship and demanded information. And by caught wind, Lisa walked in on John and Rachel kissing on the deck at Casa Peck/Stewart (P came before S, Gail pointed out). The lunch was supposed to just be the med-school trio, but Gail and John had swung by to pick something up and apparently things were at the stage where couples kissed when they thought they weren't being noticed.

As Gail hopped back into the car, Holly heard her start to cheerful critique John's technique and recommend better places on that deck to make out without being spotted.

"What the hell was that about?" Lisa was her most shrill and demanding.

As Holly poured another glass of wine, she replied, "Gail wanted a different backup piece. God knows what crap she's getting up to." In the last year, Holly had become familiar with how Gail dressed and what guns she carried because of it.

"John didn't say," Rachel noted blithely, as if nothing odd had happened.

Lisa blew her top the way only Dr. BitchTits could. "You were kissing him!"

Catching Holly's eye, Rachel was a heartbeat from the giggles. "Yes."

"Straight people kiss too," quipped Holly.

"You knew!" Lisa pointed at Holly, nearly spilling her wine.

Holly moved the glass away from Lisa's elbows. "I did," she confirmed. "Rach, were you trying to avoid a Penny?"

"A little. That went so well for you two," Rachel noted. "Tell me we're not as sickeningly sweet as you still are. Seriously, it's been over two years and you're still all in love. It's gross."
"This doesn't bode well for your relationship," teased Holly. She and Gail had their arguments, of course. Moments where Gail was still trying to make an emergency situation in the tree, or overreacted to something mild. And moments where Holly panicked over Gail wearing a different gun (like today), or was in pain to see Gail with a fresh bruise, or even talk about their future, and wanted to run instead of deal. They argued about the normal things too, like taking out the trash and getting the dry cleaning.

But Rachel had a point. Holly was often amazed to have Gail just there, and it was hard not to want to touch her, to verify her solid existence. Sometimes Gail felt so ethereal she wasn't sure she really had her in her arms. A force of nature, Gail wasn't constrained by the laws of mere mortals, and created a world of her own. Cats in trees. Relationship Jenga. A person who absolutely hated people was in love with her. It was, in a word, weird.

It took Rachel and Holly almost an hour to talk Lisa down from her high horse of people keeping relationships secret, and by the way, they both sucked. But she agreed to give John the benefit of the doubt, since she'd been wrong about Gail. That was unexpected and Holly decided to press her luck and tell Lisa about the foster parent thing.

Strangely, as soon as Lisa understood the foster thing was just a possibility, she shut up and was fine with it, offering to help if needed. Sometimes your friends understood things and surprised you. Even friends like the shallow Dr. Judgmental BitchTits.

Of course Gail texted to ask if the house was free of boob doctors before she came home. Since she arrived with gourmet cupcakes, Holly forgave her the concern. "They're from John," smirked Gail before she went to lock away her guns.

"Is it an apology for making you wear your backup piece?" Gail's snort was audible down the stairs and Holly smiled. "So how was work? Catch bad guys?"

"Nope," replied Gail, popping the P loudly. "Spent the day sitting in a crappy apartment with Steve and his new partner. Who smells. I think he's got that ketosis thing."

Holly waited for Gail to get close enough for a proper hug and kiss before asking, "Kind of fruity?" When Gail nodded, Holly corrected her. "Diabetic ketoacidosis. He shouldn't smell..."

Shrugging, Gail touched Holly's hip. "He was adjusting his pump and apologized for it." The hand on her hip eased around to the small of Holly's back. "Sorry about ruining your weekend."

With a smile, Holly reached up to fix Gail's coat collar. She looked so damn hot in the leather jacket, but the suit coat was sexy in a different way. "I wouldn't call it ruined unless you have to work tonight and tomorrow."

Gail did not. The weekend was very much not ruined.
She knew very well why Holly sometimes referred to her as a storm. When Gail was in a mood, it was best to batten down the hatches and wait it out. She was a damned force of nature, not to be held back by anyone or anything. Especially her ex-fiancé and his asshole comment about being surprised that Gail was still with Holly, since Gail was a terrible girlfriend.

For the last hour or so, Nick had been doing that. Dropping little bombs like he expected Gail to break up, move out, and go back to dicks. Or maybe Nick. Hard to tell and Gail didn't really care. She finally had enough of it and snapped the way she knew terrorized most people. It was the reaction that sent Chris running for the hills, though Nick tended to stick it out and then blame her for being angry in the first place. Ugh.

"Jesus fuck, Nicholas!" Her voice was loud and ripped across the division floor. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

The room went silent, half staring at her, half at Nick. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Oliver's white shirt pop out from his office. Nick paled, as if fearing for his life, which was the first sensible thing he'd done all day.

"Oliver, give me anyone else or I will not be responsible for shoving my taser up his ass."

Clearing his throat, Oliver nodded. "Collins, my office. McNally, go."

Gail didn't wait to see how it played out and stormed to the garage where her own car waited. The mechanics seemed to know to get out of the way of Tropical Storm Peck and handed her the keys, telling her that they'd installed the iPad holder and the speed scanner. Holly was probably going to complain about the scanner.

Without a word, Andy slipped into the passenger seat and let Gail fume as she drove away to the hotel.

After a while, Andy ventured a question. "What are we working on?"

"B&E, hotels. Shit missing from rooms." Gail waved a hand at the backseat. "Grab the iPad, code's ... 1784 I think."

"You don't know your own passcodes?" Andy reached around and pulled the iPad out of Gail's shoulder bag. "Interviews?"

Grunting a yes, Gail stared at the midday traffic with disdain. It was going to be one of those days. She glanced at Andy, feeling the other woman's eyes on her. "What?" She knew she was snappish. No, she was out and out bitch.

Andy scratched her shoulder. "It's not just you."

"Really don't care, McNally."

"I know. I'm just ... He was doing the same thing to me earlier."
Gail sighed. "Don't. Care. I'm not his fucking emotional punching bag." She paused. "Neither are you, Andy." It was strange to be able to identify what was wrong with Nick though, that he was an emotional bully and needed to feel in charge of a relationship... Even when that never happened.

Eyes on the iPad, Andy replied, "I know. I should have let Sam hit him."

"Shit, I'll do it free of charge," Gail offered. There was a snort of laughter from Andy. Then Gail snickered. They both cracked up and Gail smirked as the light changed. "Seriously, he needs to stop that shit. It's not my fault he's not happy."

"No, it's not," agreed Andy, grumpily. "He doesn't cope well."

Gail hesitated and said, "Not with loss." She paused and mentally poked at a weird thought of a day she'd kept in mind for other reasons. "He got wasted that day… The football game. That's where he was, right?" Gail trusted Andy to remember that wonderfully awful day as well as she did.

It took a moment, but Andy caught on. "Yeah… How did you..."

She shook her head and wisely Andy said nothing. Dates. Gail was so horrible at them, but she managed to pull this one out of her memory. She could remember them, of course. You didn't grow up a Peck and not learn how to memorize everything from forms for spark plugs to the dates of the creation of each division in the city. And Gail had always rebelled by forgetting every single personal date she could. Except she remembered the date she got suspended, the date she didn't search a man, and the date Nick got drunk off his ass, trying to forget.

Pulling up at the hotel, Gail flashed her badge and they parked in the loading zone. The actual police work was a dead end. Nothing they didn't know from videos, nothing new or useful from the employees. Nothing nothing nothing. It was her least favorite aspect of police work and made Gail wish she was on patrol again, preferably with Oliver, looking for crime to happen, and going shopping for shoes and weapons when it did.

Instead she was left with trails and ends of a case neither she nor John were having success on and a feeling that Butler was keeping her out of a loop. After dropping Andy off and checking with her partner that he too came up empty, Gail went downstairs to the first floor to return the vest she'd not used. She chatted with the duty clerk about getting her own vest and he teased her that pint sized wasn't usually going to run out soon.

As she headed back to her car, contemplating dinner and maybe watching something mindless with Holly, Oliver called her name. "Gail, come here a second."

Gail. Not Peck. Not Petulant Peck, or darlin' or the other nicknames she allowed from him and no one else.

Putting on the mask of indifference she wore like a second skin, Gail sauntered over. "What's up, Ollie?"

He studied her expression, looking for the anger that had lashed out at Nick earlier that day. But like a storm, her mood had blown out and Gail just felt tired and a little lonely. All she really wanted was to be home in a slice of domestic bliss. "I sent Nick home. Do you ..." Oliver hesitated, clearly wanting to ask but not daring.

"It's fine, Oliver. Too much history."

Sometimes she told people Nick was her oldest friend who wasn't a relative, but that was a lie. Oliver was. Which was why, when he pulled her in for a quick hug, she returned it without a complaint.
"Be good, my petulant Detective Peck."

Gail laughed, a real laugh, and asked, "What do you call Steve?"

"Keystone Peck," grinned Oliver and he went back to his desk.

At her car, Gail glanced at the parking lot and saw Nick's truck still there. She'd expected that and instead of going home, texted Holly. She was going to be late tonight.

This was not something she wanted to do, but she had to. Andy wouldn't, and no one else really felt the responsibility of this kind of friendship. It still sucked. She found Nick at the Penny, practically draped over the end of the bar.

"How many has he had?"

The bartender winced. "I cut him off at four PM. He's been drooling there since."

Gail sighed. "Ginger Ale. Two. And a water." She eased onto the stool beside Nick and looked at him. "Hey." She nudged his shoulder.

One eye opened and he groaned. "Shit."

"Hi, asshole. Drink the water."

Nick lifted his head and managed to do that. "Why are you here?"

"Because you're drunk and avoiding things." She sipped one of the Ginger Ales. "Are you going to become an alcoholic? Because I have no interest in staying friends with a smelly drunk."

Snorting, Nick finished the water and grimaced when Gail slid the other Ginger Ale over. "Why are you being nice?"

"Haven't you heard? Holly made me nicer."

There was silence and Nick looked embarrassed. No. Ashamed. "I'm jealous," he muttered. "You... Beautiful girlfriend, happy, detective. It's... You're the perfect Peck and happy about it."

"Sure," sighed Gail. "Except the part where my homophobic father isn't talking to me because I got my mom fired for screwing with my career."

The funny thing was Gail remembered a story about a Peck, four generations back, who had shot his brother to get promoted. And another about how a corrupt Peck was taken down by his cousins. The Pecks played dirty. Screwing with each other's careers and killing (literally and metaphorically) each other over it seemed to be a family tradition of which Gail was an unwilling part.

"Bill?" The booze didn't seemed to be washing out of Nick's system, but he caught on to the thread. After all, he was the most familiar with her parents of any of her friends. "Bill is a... Your father?"

With a shrug, Gail sipped her drink. "He thinks he did something wrong that I turned out gay. Haven't talked to him in... God, a while." It was almost years, plural, since she'd even said hello to her father. Her mother was, officially, a year out of the service. The last Gail heard, Elaine was working with some charity group or another. She didn't really care, as long as it was far away from her.

"That sucks." And Nick's head went back on the bar.
"Holly's parents are pretty cool at least. They like me, even after they caught me making out with their only daughter." That made Nick chortle and Gail told him about New Years.

He sighed and repeated, "I'm jealous. How come you got happy?"

Gail reached over and squeezed Nick's shoulder. "I stopped blowing it up."

Drunk Nick didn't really follow and it took Gail a while to drag him back to her place. Entirely sober Holly was not pleased to have a drunk ex-fiancé asleep in the guest room, but when Gail explained exactly what today was an anniversary of for him, she sighed and let it go. They both agreed it was probably safer to keep him around rather than leave him to his own devices. As they settled for bed, Holly grumbled.

"I'm happy you're reaching out to your friends and helping, but did it have to be Nick?"

"True, Andy's a much more tractable drunk," sighed Gail, stretching out over more than half of the bed.

"I mean ... Nick."

"Well. That's his problem, Holly. I didn't let people in because they were going to hurt me, he does even though he knows it'll hurt him and gets mad when it does," she sighed. Nick wasn't wrong any more than she'd been been wrong. If you keep dating the wrong people, investing in the ones who don't care about you, and aren't willing to put all of yourself into making things work, they generally didn't work out well. And Nick? Was constantly putting his heart out for the wrong people.

Holly grumbled that Nick needed to get over it and shoved her lightly, making Gail cede some of the bed territory, and propped her thick novel on her knees to read. Instead of going to sleep right away, Gail watched Holly read. Seemingly absent, Holly reached over and ran her fingers through Gail's hair.

It was really scary, not running out of a tree every time things got stressful or weird or uncomfortable, but life up there was working out pretty well.

Echoing Gail's thoughts, Holly remarked, "It's probably good I wanted to be a fire engine when I was a kid, the way you get into trees."

"I like our treehouse," smiled Gail.

At lunch with her best friends, Holly knew she was distracted. She was lost in thought about little things, things they didn't care about, but ones that kept her awake at night sometimes. Holly poked at her salad thoughtfully, half-listening to Lisa tell them about a serious date. A third date, even.

Picking up the conversational slack, Rachel wanted to know when they were going to meet this woman, what she did, and so on. Lisa gave her grief over not telling her about John, which resulted in some serious teasing. But Holly's verbal absence was, finally, noticed by Dr. BitchTits.

"I'll tell you what," decided Lisa. "As soon as Holly tells us what's on her mind, I'll call her and set up a time for the six of us to have drinks. Unless you two broke up with your detectives." She managed to make it sound like an insult they were seeing people in public service, even though technically Holly was working for the city as well.

Holly sighed. "Thanks for the vote of confidence," she muttered.
Leaning over, Rachel pushed Holly's shoulder. "Lisa, I actually like Gail more than you half the time."

"Only half?" Holly felt a little offended, but highly amused.

"Yeah, Lisa held my hair back when I vomited at that party in school."

They all laughed at the memory of Rachel being Exorcist level sick. "Okay, fine. That's fair." Holly picked her fork up and took another bite of salad. "I don't want to say."

Both Lisa and Rachel looked concerned. "You're both moving to the States?" Rachel looked terrified.

"What? No!" Holly rolled her eyes. "I just got promoted." That started squeals from her friends, hugging her from both sides and Holly explained how she was going to be the new Medical Director for the lab.

Both her friends thought it was great, though Lisa teased her about being more of an administrator than a doctor. Naturally Holly teased Lisa about how getting to play with the same boobs every day was way better than once or twice. But they were, gratifyingly, happy for her.

Satisfied, Lisa agreed to call her kind-of-girlfriend-maybe and set up a time to meet. Which was also Lisa's cue to bail early, like nearly always.

"At least she remembered to leave money this time," sighed Rachel, just as annoyed on the outside as Holly tended to be on the inside.

"I'm trying to wrap my head around the idea of Lisa with a second date."

Rachel laughed. "Okay, now that Judgmental BitchTits is gone, give."

Biting her lip, Holly shook her head. "Remember Gail and I certified to be foster parents?"

"I do, and that's not terrible, Holls," sighed Rachel, looking a little annoyed.

"Aaaand I actually asked her about having kids." Not fostering. Having.

That clammed Rachel up and she stared at Holly, surprised. "You? Having kids? Like your own forever kids?" Holly nodded, then shrugged. Which was really her main problem at the moment. "Wow. Holly, seriously? Blondie's making you grow up!"

Nodding again, Holly sighed, "I started having second thoughts. About the job. I mean, am I making compromises? Am I going to have to have the top slot, be the chief of forensics by fifty at the sacrifice of more of a family? Or what if I have a kid and this is my limit for career? I just … I'm starting to feel like I'm being asked to run a race, but I have to cut one leg off first." She paused, "This is usually where Gail kisses me to stop me rambling."

Eyebrows lifting, Rachel laughed. "No wonder you keep her around. This is wild, Holl. You were always the one who wanted nothing to do with kids. You went from no kids to maybe kids to making kids a possibility in under two years. This is so not Impulse Girl."

"I still don't know that I do want them. I mean, I'm pushing 40." If she kept saying it that way, maybe she'd believe it. Holly was slowly realizing she wanted more that just Gail. And the permanence of that feeling made her want to avoid the topic.
"Thanks for reminding me," groaned Rachel, who was a half-year older. "I can't believe I'm going to be 39."

"Gail's just 30, too," Holly sighed. "Makes me feel old half the time."

Rachel started giggling, "And really lucky the rest of the time."

There was that, and Holly blushed.

Months ago, John had told her that B&Es were boring. Gail had to agree. "Why couldn't it be housekeeping?" She put her head on her desk.

John groaned and, judging by the thud, mirrored her action. "No kidding. I am so tired of watching videos. Did we piss Butler off?"

The Inspector had been working on a different case, very quietly, for the last week, shunting Gail and John off on cases that were both boring and useless. They were barely Major Crimes type cases, not that all of those were particularly large in size. They just had to be notable.

"I don't know, what did you do?" Gail propped her head up on her arms.

"Me? Why me?"

"Because I'm awesome and Champion of the Universe," grinned Gail, and John snorted. "It's not just in my head, right? They're avoiding us."

"Yeah," agreed John, his voice quiet and annoyed. "It's a kidnapping case, that's all I know."

That did, somewhat, explain why Gail wasn't involved. She'd noticed Butler tended not to assign cases like that to her, and while Gail appreciated it, she was also annoyed. She was a police officer, and a damn good one. It would be nice if they just treated her like that.

Grunting her acknowledgment of the statement, Gail pulled up her own boring car files and started doing the dull part of her job, which was calling and checking on people. Being a detective was far more glamorous on television.

And naturally it was one of the days where Holly was swamped at work, with her newfound responsibilities, so Gail ended up home alone at five. Bored. Boredom of that level caused crimes in normal people. Or as normal as Gail got. She went for a run, in an attempt to settle her brain and ensure she could sleep through the night, and still was home and clean before Holly had left the office.

It wasn't an abuse of power to use the 'find my friends' feature of your iPhone, was it? Gail grimaced and texted, asking if Holly had dinner ideas, and broke out laughing at the reply text of "Foooooooooood!"

Clearly Holly was not having the greatest fun, being stuck at work, so Gail decided on making comfort food. It was amazing how easy it was to be a great girlfriend with the right partner.

"All I'm saying is it would be easier if we did it as a couple," Holly insisted.

They'd been arguing about this for a couple days, off and on. Holly had brought it up, suggesting it as a possibility. That alone had surprised Gail, which Holly did expect. What Holly had not predicted
was the absolute negative reaction to the other part of the idea. She'd known Gail didn't like it, but this level of anger was surprising.

Gail stuck her lower lip out. "We are a couple. We live together. You put my name on the lease. This is my house too. We share a bank account, for god's sake, Holly, we're going to buy a new car together! I don't get the point."

Taking a deep breath, Holly tried to explain it differently. "Look. If we do this, we should do it together, so we both have protection." Gail's eyebrows shot up. "Legal protection, you ninny."

"So we draw up papers. Big whoop. We know lawyers."

"Sure and pay hundreds of dollars for something that is so stupid simple and easy. We just ... we just get married."

"I don't want to," snapped Gail. "And I thought we were talking about kids, Holly."

"We are!"

Gail made the most frustrated sound Holly had ever heard, "For Christ's sake, Holly! You don't even want your own kids!"

"I might!"

Silence. "What?" Gail narrowed her eyes at Holly, skeptical and doubting. "Is this why you were asking me about pregnancy?"

Holly threw her hands up, "Look I know, okay. I know I swore I didn't want kids. And I really didn't! It just wasn't a thing, a part of my life, until you. And ... God you were right, about having a Sophie, and I totally get why people reach out and help total strangers, small humans. Then, then I look at you with kids and how you are and I just want that Gail home with me too, all the time. Because you are amazing with kids, and you'd be an amazing parent. And I think, you know, if we do IVF or adopt or foster it'd just be easier to do it as a unit. A legal unit and ... Why aren't you kissing me? This is the part when you say I'm babbling, which I totally am, and kiss me..."

But Gail was staring at her. "You are so very weird, Holly," she said slowly. "Marry you. To have a kid with you."

Silence. "What?" Gail narrowed her eyes at Holly, skeptical and doubting. "Is this why you were asking me about pregnancy?"

Holly threw her hands up, "Look I know, okay. I know I swore I didn't want kids. And I really didn't! It just wasn't a thing, a part of my life, until you. And ... God you were right, about having a Sophie, and I totally get why people reach out and help total strangers, small humans. Then, then I look at you with kids and how you are and I just want that Gail home with me too, all the time. Because you are amazing with kids, and you'd be an amazing parent. And I think, you know, if we do IVF or adopt or foster it'd just be easier to do it as a unit. A legal unit and ... Why aren't you kissing me? This is the part when you say I'm babbling, which I totally am, and kiss me..."

"I had wondered why we took all those fostering classes," Gail replied, dryly.

"More than that. I want the possibility of more." She smiled awkwardly, "You make me want more."

"Holly," sighed Gail and then she fell silent. Holly almost started talking again when Gail finally explained herself. "I don't ... I don't want to have a wedding."
Well that was different and unexpected. Gail had a stronger aversion to weddings than Holly did, which was saying something since Holly had avoided them for years. But hating weddings and not wanting one were a little different. "With me?"

"With anyone!" Gail waved her hands, frustrated. "Can't we just be us? I like us. We're all legally tied up anyway, why does it matter?"

"Because if you're my wife, I can be with you if you're in the hospital," Holly snapped. "No one argues if I get to be in the room, and if someone besides Oliver or Frank or Butler gets the call, they'll know right away to get me and not your parents or Steve."

"You're already my emergency contact," Gail said weakly.

Holly pointed at her sternly, starting to think they were having different conversations. "Not the point." She frowned. "Everything about any of that gets easier if we're married. If we foster a kid for a couple days or a couple years, you know it's easier. And I want to be with you."

Sitting down, Gail asked, "Do you think I'm leaving you or something, Holly?"

"What? No!" Holly stepped into Gail's personal space and cupped her face. "No, no one's leaving anyone." She kissed Gail lightly and was relieved to have it reciprocated. "I love you. I want to marry you."

"This is really out of left field," sighed Gail, but her hands secured themselves on Holly's waist, keeping her close.

Leaning in, Holly put her forehead against Gail's. "I love you, Gail."

"I love you too, Holly, that's not the point."

Something was making her girlfriend skittish and Holly tried to think back as to what it might possibly be. "Do you want to live with me forever?"

Gail sighed, "Parlay?"

Smiling, Holly nodded. "Okay, I promise." Gail had never once called Parlay in their years together and it was interesting that she felt she had to now. She leaned away to get a better look of her girlfriend while she spoke.

"I don't know if I want to be with you forever." And Holly blinked. Okay, that explained something. "I want to be with you now and I want to live with you and stay with you, but I don't know about forever. That- that's a really long time and I don't know if I can know the answer to that." Gail took a deep breath. "And after that absolutely awesome fiasco with Nicholas in Vegas, I don't want to do a wedding. Ever. Just … no."

When you came into someone's life as adults, you came in to the middle of their story. There had been so much to happen to both of them before meeting, so much that made them into the marvelous people you fell in love with, that you could never separate them from it completely. Not that Holly would want to. All the shit that made Gail the beautiful person she loved had to come along with them forever, and she would never trade it away. She had to fall in love with someone in pain, didn't she? Gail had never had support from anyone for any length of time, which would make it hard to feel comfortable with a forever promise.

"Okay," said Holly softly. She could understand some of the problems. "I want to be with you now, Gail, and I don't see wanting to not be with you any time soon."
Gail nodded, "Foreseeable future? I'm in, Holly. All in."

"Good," smiled Holly and kissed her again. But after the kiss, Gail was chewing her lip and Holly thought about the other problem. "We don't have to have a wedding."

Both of Gail's eyebrows shot up. "Uh, what?"

"Uh, no wedding," she replied in kind. "I don't want a big poofy white dress."

Gail snorted. "Like you'd wear one."

"Hush," instructed Holly, smiling fondly. "No dresses, no church, no priests, no parents." Rubbing her thumbs on Gail's cheekbones she whispered. "Just you and me. Plus ones forever, right?"

"You want to elope?" The eyebrows went up again, confused and amused.

"Going to the courthouse and getting married is not eloping."

"Kinda is."

Now Holly snorted. "We are grown women, Gail. We can do whatever we want. And I want to marry you."

Her hands tightening on Holly's waist, Gail tugged her a little closer. "Did you at least get me a ring?"

Of course that's what Gail would ask. "I did not."

"Well how serious could you be?" Gail was blithe and flippant.

Holly was totally serious, though. "Gail. I want to marry you. And I want to start seeing what it'll take to have a kid with you. That's not a promise we're going to have children, but ... I want to start that. With you. Only you."

Changing directions, Gail asked, "Can we share an urn?"

That was new. Holly frowned a little. "An ... urn? What for?" How had they gone from rings to urns?

Gail looked up at the ceiling in a classic Peck 'I am tolerating you, slowpoke' maneuver. "Ashes. You know. In a million years when we die? Can we have our ashes in the same urn?"

"That's weirdly whimsical. And creepy," decided Holly.

"I know," Gail admitted, sheepishly. "A couple years ago, there was this guy who left his ashes to his kids. And they left him in an apartment when he died and no one wanted them. It was sad. He'd left his wife for this other woman and they had their ashes in the urn."

The story, like many of Gail's, was dark and weird. "So you want to be in an urn with me?" Holly squinted at Gail, trying to make sure she understood it, trying to figure out what Gail had done with the unwanted man in an urn. "What did you do with the ashes?"

"Drove to the lakeshore and poured them in."

"Isn't that illegal?"
"Totally," admitted Gail. "Nick was with me, but he just thought I was weird."

"You are." Holly kissed her softly, lips barely touching. "But you're also charming and sweet and sensitive and prickly." She smiled. "And I think that's probably the most romantic thing anyone's said to me."

Gail was blushing, but smiled. "That's me, the Ice Queen of Romance," she quipped. They kissed again, a little deeper and Gail sighed, happily.

"Yes," decided Holly.

"Yes?"

"Yes, I will share an urn with you. It's not very green, most of the time. Does it have to be cremation? We could do promession, where they freeze you with liquid nitrogen and then turn you into dust. You're probably not thinking composting, but that would be nice. A little Holly and Gail tree forever. They made biodegradable urns, boxes really. We could do both, unless you want to sit on a mantle, in silent judgement of people. Which is kind of you, now that I think about it." As she rambled on, Holly caught Gail's look of absolute amusement. "What?"

Instead of an answer, Gail kissed her a little forcefully, almost hungrily, as if she wanted to imprint the kiss forever in her memory. Breaking apart, Gail was breathless, "God, why did it take me forever to find you, Holly?"

That was a compliment. Holly smiled and suggested, "You were looking at men?"

"What a waste," agreed Gail, drawing her in for another, lighter, kiss, and then letting go to pick up her iPad. "Okay. Yes urns. We can work out those details." She tapped on the iPad and changed directions again. "If it was me, I would have gotten you a ring. Except I hate weddings, so this was always gonna be you, I guess. Do you want a ring? That's such a weird thing, engagement rings. Would we have a long engagement? We could just go tomorrow at lunch. Seems a little abrupt." Gail looked up from her iPad and pursed her lips. "That's a no on the engagement rings, right?"

Holly blinked at the lengthy ramble. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm planning our elopement?" Gail waved the iPad in the air, "We could schedule an appointment now, pick up bands on the way, and be done with time for lunch."

Had Gail really gone from no marriage to planning that fast? Had Holly really identified the issue that fast and that accurately? "So you're okay with marriage but not a wedding?"

"Yes," smiled Gail. "Exactly that. Because you're right."

"Oh, now I'm right," Holly laughed and leaned on the counter. Meeting the motion, Gail leaned in to kiss her softly and tenderly. "I did not get you an engagement ring. Do you want one?"

After a moment, Gail shook her head. "No, I don't want an engagement ring. They get in the way. You?"

"No, same reason." They were a nightmare in gloves, too. "Plain bands? Should we get them engraved?"

Gail smiled, "Plus Ones Forever? That is so cheesy."

"You said it, not me!" Holly laughed. "We need a witness."
"Pretty sure they have them around."

Winding her fingers in Gail's collar, Holly pulled her close. "Steve will be very upset if you don't tell him."

Gail's hand reached out to the table, but she let Holly haul her in for another kiss. "My brother is not the one I'm marrying, Holly." With a smirk, Gail held her iPad over. "Tuesday or Wednesday?"

Chapter End Notes

I kept telling you guys I wasn't going to write a Golly wedding, and I was serious. That doesn't meant I wouldn't write a marriage. I can't see Gail tolerating her own wedding very well, so a nice, quick, civil ceremony with the judge. Done. Not every marriage has to be this huge affair.

Besides, would you invite the Pecks? The Stewarts may be pissed off later. Steve will understand.

http://urnabios.com - go check out that site. Holly wants that.
It was later than she wanted to be back but it was still technically her lunch break. Everything always ran longer when you were in a rush, or someone lost an order, or both. That the courier was, actually, sick at the jewelry store was hilarious to both her and Holly at least. They decided it was fitting and went on with their plans anyway.

Once Gail walked into the office, she heard a group talking about her, and eyed her partner. "What's going on, John?" He knew what was going on with Gail, but had promised to keep it to himself.

Simmons was also watching their boss argue with a small group of detectives, and the name Peck came up. The moment they saw Gail, they got even quieter. "Not sure," he admitted. "They wanted to know when you'd be back."

With a grin she knew was a little goofy, Gail sat down and pulled out her laptop. "Lunch went a little long." And they didn't know. Good. She was going to have to figure out how to explain it to people.

"Everything okay?" She flipped him off and John grinned. "You're going to tell me what the big secret is sooner or later, Peck. You love me."

"I tolerate you." It was hard not to smile however and Gail looked down at the keyboard. After a moment, she logged into the system to update her information.

John looked at Butler in the back of the room, "Boss is looking over here."

"I didn't tell him either, if you're asking," Gail replied, glancing at Butler and the group. The Inspector caught her eyes and waved her over with a grim expression. "This looks fun," she drawled and closed the laptop lid before joining her boss. "Sir?"

"I have a case." He looked upset and Gail frowned, confused. Everyone had a case. They always had a case, if not twelve. "You know about the kidnappings?" She'd heard about it, but no details. Everyone clammed up when she came by. When Gail nodded, he went on. "There was a woman, early this morning, who escaped from the back of a taxi." Gail felt her body tense and worked hard to keep her expression level and calm. It had been years and she still felt fear thinking about that day. "The tox results came back Ketamine and ACP."

Oh. The slightly giddy elation of that morning's semi-secret event faded fast and Gail felt far too rooted in the shitty reality of the part of her life she hated the most. Holly would probably tell her the medical terms for the feeling of her blood being cold, her skin clammy, and her head dizzy. The world took on a funny focus, too sharp and yet kind of wobbly at the same time. She took a moment to process and then Gail exhaled slowly. There were only seven words she could say here. "Okay. What do we need to do?"

She knew in her heart that she was never going to escape this. Perik was always going to be a part of her life, her psyche, just like her mother, Holly, and everything else. This was part of that which made her and had the potential to unmake her if she let it. So the answer was not to allow that to happen. Concentrating on that, she felt the tunnel vision subside and the clamminess fade. She still felt cold.

Inspector Butler frowned, "I'm not giving you this case, Peck."

She nodded, not having expected to work the case. "Not asking for it, sir. But you need me to talk to him." She didn't ask it, she didn't have to. She knew. It was the only possible answer.
Pained, Butler nodded. "He won't ... I don't like it, Peck. I don't like that he still thinks he has us under his thumb."

"He doesn't," she said, forcing herself to sound calmer than she felt and hoping it worked. "He's just another loser who wants to feel important."

"Peck, I'm serious. You don't have to do this again."

Why was everyone so damned dedicated to sheltering her from this? It's not like it would change a damn thing about how she felt right now. "I'm a cop, David. Let me do my job," she said firmly, letting the fear lash out as anger.

Frowning, Butler studied her face and then nodded, still unhappy but now accepting. "Alright. You and Simmons go to Millburn. I'll tell them you're coming. We already have someone going to talk to Sawyer."

There was nothing else to say. The copycat wasn't her beef after all. Gail grabbed her bag, "Simmons, you're driving. I'll meet you at the lot."

The ladies room was usually empty on her floor. There were only seven women on the floor and only two were detectives. Gail knew she had a good chance of privacy in the bathroom as she washed her face and shakily caught her breath. She could do this. It was just talking to a sad, petty, little man who tried to kill her. Gail took the time to clean her face, to make herself look healthy and sane. War paint in the form of tinted moisturizer and chapstick. She looked at her hands and was, momentarily, glad for some of the Peck rules in her life. You never went out looking scared.

John was waiting for her, leaning against his car and looking concerned. "Butler told me," he said and got in as Gail did. "You don't have to do this."

"No one else can right now," she replied, buckling in and looking out the window. She couldn't look at him, she knew there would be sympathy in his eyes.

He sighed and pulled out of the lot. As they got on the 401, Gail had started to get comfortable in the silence. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No." That was a lie. She did. She wanted to tell him that she was tense and unreasonably scared about seeing the man. That she dreaded the sleeplessness remembering a night she wished never happened to her or anyone. But trying to say the simple three letter word 'yes' was impossible. It caused her throat to tighten. Panic. It had gotten better in many ways, but so much worse in others. After years, people assumed you got over this sort of thing, but it didn't work like that. It still hurt. She turned her face further away to watch the world stream by out the side window.

It was just over two hours to get to Millburn, in Bath. At best they'd be back at the station by six, and that was only if Perik wanted to talk. After the last time, he'd not been permitted to talk to anyone except guards. Isolation had to be incredibly lonely. Thinking about that reminded Gail of being alone in the dark in his basement and she gritted her teeth. Did he fear the dark now?

"You didn't call Holly, did you?"

"John, can we not talk about this?" She knew she sounded bitchier than normal, that she was putting up walls and shoving her partner away, but this was not something she really felt she could deal with sanely at the moment. She could deal with Perik, that much she knew, but not him and everyone else. Not even Holly. Not today. Anything she could do to delay Holly's introduction to this moment was paramount.
"That would be a no," he muttered, but lapsed into silence again.

Gail would have closed her eyes but she knew she'd see Jerry falling in front of her. She wanted to read or sing or do anything, but there was really no way to stop her brain from making those connections she hated. She hadn't been in a taxi in almost four years. She'd be 30 in November and she still slept with a nightlight on. This was her broken-ass life. She clenched and unclenched her hands repeatedly, as if that would change things.

The radio flicked on and John turned to the pop station. Gail glanced at him and smiled as he started singing along with CeLo Green. He was probably someone she might be able to tell later, but not right now. She still couldn't tell Oliver everything even with their shared experiences, and other than Holly, she didn't want to tell anyone else.

The Warden greeted them, apologizing to Gail specifically, and leading them to the interview room. Gail glanced in and was surprised to see how terrible Perik looked. Waxen pale, an unhealthy color compared to her naturally pale skin, he was haggard and tired. She only half listened to the Warden telling them about how Perik had been kept from conversing with people, only let out for meals mandated by humanitarians, and they were already running background checks on the guards.

Finally Gail took the folder and walked in. "Hello, Ross."

"You're not in uniform," he said, startled. "Did they bring you here on your day off, Officer Peck?"

He knew nothing. He knew absolutely nothing about her anymore and it felt good. "It's Detective Peck," she corrected and sat down.

"I see. Congratulations are in order," Perik replied and his gaze shifted to her hair. "You cut your hair. I don't like it."

Not rising to the bait, Gail opened the folder. "There was a woman last night, abducted and put in the trunk of a taxi."

Playing the same game, Perik continued with his own train of thought, "It's so short. And the color. You'd look better with a lighter blonde. But not that bleached job you do. Just wash out the red." He moved as if to reach towards her and the cuffs halted his motion. Gail prided herself on not twitching.

"She pulled the trunk's emergency release on the road. In the middle of traffic." Gail let her eyes drift down the report, keeping on track. "The driver panicked, ran off. Witnesses described him as wearing a black jacket, jeans, black baseball cap. Pretty generic, but we're sweeping the taxi for trace."

Caught up in her story, she finally got Perik to reply to her words and not his own thoughts, "That was not very smart."

"No," agreed Gail, allowing herself to fall into the comfort of interrogation. She'd grown to enjoy it in the last year. "Funny thing, though. She was a call girl." Flicking her eyes to Perik, she saw him frown. Good. Leaning back Gail asked, "Talked to anyone lately?"

"You know I haven't spoken to anyone." He stopped and she just waited. That was something she'd had to master. Waiting, patiently, for someone to talk. Patience didn't come by her naturally, but she could do it now, even with Holly. "My lawyer. Guards. You know I haven't had a visitor since you." Gail arched her eyebrows, silently implying 'so what?' to Perik. "It's lonely," he whispered. "No one tells me anything."
Ah. That again. He wanted a secret but Gail did not offer one. "The Warden said you've been writing."

"That's allowed."

"You tried to mail your story to a publisher."

"I'm permitted reasonable access to mail and telephone."

"You were," agreed Gail. There was no need to say anything more to that. Perik knew why his access was restricted; Adam Sawyer.

The prisoner slowly smiled at her, a knowing smile that made the hair on the back of Gail's neck rise. "Seeing anyone new?"

She didn't get mad and she didn't yell. She sure as hell wasn't about to mention Holly. The last thing she needed was a serial killer who already managed to slip his secrets out to the world knowing about the most important person in her life. "Are you?"

Perik was taken aback and Gail bit back a smile. He looked to the glass behind her, "Have you asked him?" She allowed him a small nod. There was something to Perik's look that reminded Gail of other interviews, ones where the subject was holding back and she narrowed her eyes silently, watching him slowly get less and less comfortable.

They talked around the subject for a while. This was the build up, the lead in to understanding what the game was today, why it was today. Everything had to be carefully stated and this time Gail was careful not to give herself away. This time he would have nothing of her. This time he told her about his cell, his isolation, his limited access to books. And like before, he talked psychobabble that didn't impact her at all. Every time he tried to get her to reveal something, she let it wash away and lead the conversation where she wanted.

Finally Perik sighed, "I haven't spoken with anyone."

There it was. Spoken. She'd missed it the first time. Not a visitor then. Gail did not keep up with Perik's various restrictions. She'd tried it, once, but after not sleeping for a week, decided it was better for her own health to just push it away. That hadn't really worked well either, of course. "You get a lot of mail," she noted, leaning back in her chair. John was watching, she hoped he followed along.

"People are interested in me," smiled Perik. He was so vain, she knew she had to coddle that. "You're interested in me. You think about me, I can tell."

And Gail lied, "Not particularly."

"Your shadow self is lying again, Gail. You can't hide it with new clothes or a new job. And you can't cut it away with a new hairstyle." His voice quieted. "You're lying. You can't ignore me."

"I'm not interested in you at all, Ross. I'm actually a little tired of you," she admitted, letting her irritation show for a moment. "I bet your little pen pals feel that way too. It's the same story over and over again, whinging about how all you have is that cell because you got caught." She leaned in, letting her voice drop to a whisper, "And you're all alone, Ross."

He jerked towards her, his motion aborted by the cuffs, and Gail prided herself in not flinching. After all, it was nowhere near as terrifying as the Perik in her nightmares. This wasn't the man she feared anymore.
Perik looked at his hands in agony. "They're not," he hissed. And Gail waited. "They're not tired of me."

"How long has it been, Ross? A week? A month? They used you and they threw you away." That John hadn't buzzed her yet meant he didn't have enough information, or was asleep at the switch. She bet on information; she bet on John.

Looking away, Perik yanked at his cuffs again, digging them into his skin. "Give me something," he demanded… No. This wasn't a demand, this was a plea. And the pressure fell away from Gail. She was in control, not Perik. She didn't have to give him anything, and she had what he wanted so desperately.

She studied his face thoughtfully. "Why? This isn't your crime, is it?" Closing the folder, Gail made as if to leave.

"It is!" There was the moment she'd waited for. She was in charge. He was tied to a table, not her. He was scared, not her. "Ketamine and ACP, that's why you're here isn't it," Perik added.

Alright. Unless someone had told him, Perik knew about the drugs on his own. It was time to give him a bone. "Yes," said Gail, easing back in the chair.

"Do you read?" Gail shot Perik a dirty look and he smiled, uncomfortable, but looking for his own position of power. "Suetonius wrote about the lives of Roman Emperors."

That, Gail actually knew. "De vita Caesarum." God bless Catholic School and Peck educations. She couldn't even point to Holly about that one.

Apparently that was unexpected and Perik paused. "My, my. You have changed." He smiled thinly and Gail scoffed internally. He didn't know her at all. He never knew her. "I want one. You know I do."

She did know he wanted a secret, to know something about her, but she couldn't put Holly at risk. And it was only something personal that would ever work with Perik. "No," She motioned at the folder. "I'm not giving you anything unless you give me what I want. You haven't given me anything I didn't already know, Ross."

It was clear Perik was torn. He wanted to know something, but he hoarded his secrets jealously, like that stupid dragon in the Hobbit movie. The back part of Gail's brain remembered the movie mostly for Holly's rant about how it was nothing like the book and they'd ruined the troll scene. "Read between the lines."

"Oh, Ross," she sighed, giving him the best 'you are an idiot' look she'd learned at her mother's knee. "I know that. You told all your stories in a letter. And we have copies of all of yours. That's not a secret. You're just delaying the inevitable. We'll read everything and find it." She stood up now. It was going to be a dreadful slog through all his communications and Gail did not look forward to it.

He broke. "Wayne Martin."

Gail stopped at the door and collected herself. "Why?"

"He listened… No one listened to me, but he wrote back. He understood Suetonius."

"What about Suetonius, Ross?" She raised her hand to knock and looked over her shoulder at the inmate. "I need more. You know what I want."
Ross Perik looked wildly around the room. "A is D, B is E…"

The asshole always wanted to feel smarter, but that tidbit locked itself into Gail's brain. Suetonius. Letters shifted. "You can't write a whole letter like that, they would have noticed it." She stopped and thought hard about how she'd hide things with Steve, when one or the other was away and they knew their mother read their mail. "First letter or last letter or ...?"

His eyes widened. "It changed by the day. The date," Perik whispered. And Gail rapped her knuckles on the door. The door buzzed and she opened it. "Wait, tell me his name! You are seeing someone! I can tell! You promised!"

She let the door close on his pleas for more information and looked at John, "You got it?"

"I think so. Is he talking about a letter shift cipher? That's the Caesar Cipher isn't it?"

"Yeah, it's one of the easiest, if you know what letter to start with. Perik put the information as a letter in each line though. It's going to be in a lot of mail, Simmons. And it changed based on the date."

"So we can use the day of the month in the letter for the shift to A, and the month as a number for the letter on the line." John nodded, thumbs flying on his phone. It was a relief that he understood all that as well. "We know who he mailed. The techs are on it." He paused. "You did good, Gail."

She felt impossibly drained and empty. There was no emotion to explain it, and it was barely a 'feeling' at all. She was exhausted. "I'm a cop, John. I did my job."

As she left autopsy, the secretary bounced off her. "Oh! Dr. Stewart, you are free!"

"Hi, Katie. What's up?" Holly smiled, feeling just far too happy for the universe to contain.

"You have a call on line four." Thanking Katie, Holly turned towards her office. "It's a detective. Someone named Simmons?"

The universe was not that evil. It couldn't be. Holly's blood felt cold, a vasovagal reaction to stress and fear. Why would John call her land-line? There was no logical reason except the worst. She fought the panic, lost, and ran to her office leaving a very confused Katie in her wake. Slapping the phone line, she blurted out a name as soon as she heard it click though, "Gail?"

"She's fine!"

Holly closed her eyes, feeling herself sway, and put a hand on her desk to steady herself. "Jesus."

"I'm sorry," John replied, sounding really apologetic. "I tried your cellphone and you didn't answer."

She looked at her desk, where she'd left her phone, and tapped the home button. "I was in autopsy," Holly muttered, and skimmed through four missed calls from the man, as well as a text to please call him when she was free. Nothing from Gail. "What the hell is going on?"

"Do you know who Ross Perik is?"

Now Holly sat down. Really she fell into the chair, her legs gone weak at the knee in the bad way. "Yes," she whispered and started to understand exactly why John had called her so many times. "Please tell me he's dead."

"No. There's... Gail's interrogating him right now." Oh sweet Jesus. Holly couldn't think of anything
to say. How had Gail gone from a bright future to dealing with her nightmares in such a short time? "She's… she's fine right now, but I thought you should know. She didn't want to worry you, I guess."

That didn't sound like Gail. "She didn't want to be distracted," guessed Holly. She remembered the time Holly had shown up before Gail went off with ETF to storm a building and save Oliver. While she hadn't know all the details beforehand, they made sense now. When you had to concentrate, you had to concentrate.

John seemed to agree. "That sounds like her. Look, she doesn't know I'm calling you, but she was so damn happy today, I thought maybe you should know—"

"That tonight's going to be not happy. No, no, thank you, John. I really, um, thank you." She took her glasses off and rubbed her face. "Why?"

"He won't talk to anyone else. Butler said she didn't have to do it again, but she said she was a cop."

Again. Of course, that was the time he'd had a copycat, the time Gail said was the reason her adoption of Sophie had been rejected. God. What if Gail worried about that again? If Gail having to do her job delayed their ability to foster kids for a year or three, they'd deal with it. Gail wasn't the same person she was three years ago, though. She wasn't alone anymore. How could she possibly convince Gail she didn't care a damn thing about that, so long as Gail was okay?

Nothing was going to be okay, though, not today.

"She's not going to want to talk about it, John."

"I had noticed that," he replied, dryly. "Don't worry, I won't push her." John paused, "I have to go."

"Go, thank you." Holly hung up the phone and buried her face in her hands. What a horrible way for the day to go. Her head felt blank and heavy and she felt so close to waterworks, one small comment would do her in.

Which is why there just had to be a knock at her door. "Holly?" Looking up, she saw her boss. "Is everything okay?" He looked terrified and uncomfortable. He was a great administrator, a wonderful chief pathologist, and a brilliant mind. Just don't get him involved in your personal life.

"No," sighed Holly. "No one's … dead or anything. Just got some news." She couldn't tell if it was good or bad, to be honest.

"You scared the hell out of Katie." Holly muttered an apology. "Listen, you can just go home, Holly. God knows you have enough sick time, okay?"

She nodded, not up for arguing, and drove home. Now what? As soon as Gail saw her, she'd know Holly knew and god knew how that was going to go over. Sitting on the couch she turned her phone over in her hands, trying to decide how best to approach it. When the phone rang, she freaked and threw it up in the air.

Small blessings that Gail wasn't there for that wonderfully athletic moment.

Holly grabbed her phone on the fourth ring, saw Gail's name, and swiped to answer. "Hey."

"Hey, I might kill John," sighed Gail. She sounded stretched.

Relief. "He told you?"
"Yes, and he's lucky he waited till we were back in the car."

Smiling, Holly hugged her knees. "Saying sorry feels like a total understatement, honey, but I am so, so sorry."

Gail sighed again, loudly, "I don't... Can we... later?"

The stilted words told Holly what she'd wondered. Gail did not want to talk about it right now, possibly not tonight at all. "Of course. Whatever you want."

"Oh so cupcakes from the fancy place and a deep dish pizza?"

"Your wish," laughed Holly, "is my command. Though that sounds like a recipe for heartburn. When will you be home?"

"Late. We're just leaving Bath," grumbled Gail. "A couple hours till we get back to the station, so maybe seven? Probably nine, if Butler wants to pick my brain."

"Let me know, I'll make sure you have totally terrible, unhealthy, food waiting for you."

There was a pause and Gail replied very softly, "Thank you."

Her own therapist had suggested Holly not push on this subject, given that the symptoms did sound like PTSD and not just a normal reaction to a traumatic event. When Holly heard, from Gail's friends, how Gail had been before and after the kidnapping, it read like a textbook. She clearly hadn't had the support structure in place to cope with such a thing and shoved it as far away as she could. That never helped. Instead of getting help, Gail had shut down and pushed things away. She'd dated Nick, but Gail said it was because he was there and easy and she didn't have to think.

"I wish I could do something," sighed Holly.

"You already do."

That made Holly feel better, but she wondered about Gail. "You should... Maybe tell John?" Gail made a grumpy sound and Holly smiled. "I know, honey, but expanding your support..."

"Yeah. I know. I'll think about it."

Holly chewed her lip. "I love you, Gail. You're insane and brave for doing this."

"Thanks," laughed Gail, not really with any humor.

"I love you, Gail," repeated Holly, firmly. "Okay?"

After a moment, Gail's voice was very soft on the phone. "Okay." She knew John was there and didn't expect Gail to say anything more. So Holly was surprised when Gail spoke again. "I love you too, Holly."

That was progress. Right?

According to the GPS, the traffic was going to take them at least two more hours to get through. That was in addition to the hour and a half they'd already suffered through, and the half hour to get through the city back to the station and then home. John had suggested she sleep, but Gail just fiddled with the radio before calling their Division to find out why the traffic was so god awful.
"Someone rolled a semi filled with lentils," she informed John, all but throwing her phone into her lap.

"Lentils," he replied slowly. "Like … Lentil beans for soup?"

Gail sighed, "Yep!" She popped the P as loud as she could. None of this was helping her mood. They should have stopped for food on the way.

Wisely, John said nothing more and they sat in silence for another twenty minutes. Gail looked out the window and thought about the day. Perik himself didn't scare her anymore. He hadn't for a while. But her subconscious did things without asking for her approval and she still couldn't live her life the way she used to. Everything was different. Facing the different had driven her and Nick apart and then her and Holly together, so it wasn't all bad, but…

"I'm glad I filled up the car before we left," John remarked at length. "We could pull off and get some food—"

"Holly and I got married," Gail interrupted, looking out the side window. "Today. That's where I was at lunch."

There was no immediate reply and Gail peeked over at John, who was looking a little stunned. "Shit. Why didn't you tell me? I could have— we could have— You didn't have to do this on your fucking wedding day, Gail!" For the first time in their partnership, Gail saw John actually angry as he slammed his hand on the steering wheel. "What the hell?"

She didn't flinch or shy away from the reaction. "John," Gail sighed. "I've been living with this Perik crap for four years. It doesn't— It never gets easier, talking to him. Talking about him." Sighing, Gail leaned back and then pulled the seat rest to tilt back even further. "What did Butler tell you?"

John looked at her, frustrated. "About Perik?" When Gail nodded, he grimaced. "I … a little. That he kidnapped you and killed a detective. Would have killed you and worse, but Fifteen found you."

It was a fair summary. "He drugged me," she explained. "Ketamine and ACP. Put me in the trunk of his taxi. Twice, actually. I don't remember the first time." Gail frowned, realizing that. She let her eyes roam left and right. "I, um. I haven't been in a taxi since. I don't sleep with the lights off. Sometimes I get weird panic attacks." She didn't say what it was, that it was probably (hah, totally) PTSD. That was dangerous. That was risky. Even with John, the man she was supposed to rely on with her life, she couldn't tell him that.

John exhaled slowly. "Butler doesn't know. He can't know. He'd never had let you do this if he knew."

"No. He doesn't. Holly knows." Gail closed her eyes for a moment. "Now you know."

The traffic inched them forwards but not far at all. It took almost twenty minutes to creep a mile. Technically, if Butler found out about it she'd be suspended pending a psych eval. She should have been diagnosed before, by a competent therapist instead of the idiot her mother picked. While Gail was reasonably confident she could 'pass' any evaluation, she didn't want to deal with it again. And now she'd given the secret to someone who had the ability to make her life very uncomfortable, just by telling their boss.

Finally John spoke, "I'm not going to tell him, Gail."

A weight was lifted off her shoulders. "Thank you." She looked at her partner for a long moment but couldn't think of what else to say.
He did and asked, "Are you okay? I mean, I know you're not, but …"

"I know what you mean." Gail smiled a little. "I'm okay. Don't know how," she admitted. It was funny to her that the worse things got and the harder she had to work to keep it together, the more people seemed to like her.

John nodded. "What do you need me to do? I don't think you want me to be that guy who tries to protect you and shit." Interrupting him with a laugh, Gail confirmed she didn't want that. "Is there anything I can do to make it suck less?"

Was this what support structures were like? People just offering to help or stay out of the way as needed? She looked at him again and then the road. "I don't know, John," she sighed. "I barely know the answer to that when it's Holly."

"Well. What would it be if I was Holly?"

The flippant, outright mean, comeback died on her tongue. "Be patient. Sometimes I just … can't talk about things. If I freak out, don't let me run. But— John, seriously, that's not—"

He cut her off, "I can do that. I can call her if you want."

"You already did that," noted Gail, a little snappishly, and John smiled. "What?"

"I think we're real friends now, Gail. You set me up on dates and you insult me."

She snorted, "Wait'll you see how I treat my friends."

But John just smiled. "Yeah, you like me."

"Fuck you, John," she smiled back. She did like him, though. He was a decent guy. "Wake me up when we get home." While she didn't sleep, Gail was at least able to relax for the rest of the drive.
That Gail slept through the night astounded Holly. Certainly she didn't, waking up multiple times just to check that Gail was indeed there and okay.

When Gail had gotten home, her need for a shower was absolute and first in her mind. Holly had given her space, not sure how the blonde was going to process things this time, and was not surprised that she returned clean and taciturn.

After one piece of pizza, Gail announced she was full and could they just watch something brainless on TV? Her mood was clearly off and Gail willingly turned on a baseball game before wedging herself in the corner of the couch, her feet on the coffee table. Holly sat near her, giving her a little room just in case, and drew her own knees up to hug. She wanted a hug from Gail, but these weren't her personal demons out on display.

Then very quietly Gail asked, "Is it okay if I just hold you for a while?" Her voice was small and timid.

Sometimes Gail made her heart melt. Holly nodded and settled against Gail, squeezing the arms that wrapped around her. They sat in relative quiet for a few innings until Gail started to tell her about the case, the reason she went to talk to Perik, the way he shared his knowledge with more people. This story was not told haltingly. It was terse and uncomfortable, but it didn't seem to induce any of the signs Holly had come to associate with a flashback or, as Gail called them, a freak out.

And Gail told her some of the fears she had, that he'd convince someone to go after her. Or worse, go after Holly. Which was why she didn't tell him about her and never would. The arms around Holly tightened, Gail pressing her cheek against Holly's head. They had an analyst going through all of Perik's letters, looking for more patterns, but right now no one thought there was anyone more than Wayne Martin, whom they were hunting down.

"What if he wants to talk to you again?" Holly covered Gail's hands with her own, squeezing them.

"Someone else goes first, yells at him because he isn't worth my time. See how that goes. Butler wants to get him off this whole kick where he only talks to me." Gail sighed and loosened her hold on Holly, relaxing a little.

Holly thought about that for a little while. "I'd be really happy if you never talked to him again."

"Mmm, yeah. After his little copycat gets caught, I'm sure I'll see him at the trial." Gail took hold of Holly's left hand in her on and caressed the still naked ring finger. The rings would be there tomorrow. "I'm not going to wear it at work," she decided. "Not in the field. Remind me to get a chain."

Before Holly could ask why, her brain filled in the answer. If a criminal knew she was married, it could be used against her. "I was more worried about you degloving your finger," mused Holly
"That sounds gross. What is it?"

"An avulsion where ... It's when a hunk of skin is pulled completely off the muscle, like a glove." The thumb touching her ring finger froze and Gail made a grossed out noise. "You asked," she giggled.

"That is so entirely nasty," gagged Gail, lacing her fingers through Holly's and kissing the side of her head. "You know very disgusting things, you nerd."

Their hands looked so remarkable together, Gail's pale skin against her own tanned was so marvelous. Holly lifted their joined hands to her mouth, kissing Gail's fingers. "That's why I was going to take mine off for work." She let go of Gail's hand and turned around, kneeling on the couch.

Gail's face was worn and tired, the day having done its best to drag her down. Still, she smiled at Holly and reached out to cup her face tenderly with one hand. "You don't care about the game tonight." It wasn't a question. Gail never asked a question when she was certain of the answer.

"I care about you," countered Holly and she leaned in slowly. It was very possible the last thing Gail would want was this. She could just want to hold Holly and be held, to connect on a more elementary level and less on a romantic one. And that would be alright too, decided Holly. She just wanted the moment of a kiss, to reassert her feelings and tell them both that they were still there.

Their lips met and Holly reminded herself that sometimes Gail defied normal definitions. The hand on her face tensed, fingers behind her jawbone drawing Holly closer until she all but crawled onto Gail, bracing her hands on the arm of the couch. Gail's other hand found the small of Holly's back and they fairly quickly settled into making out like teenagers, a little messily and awkwardly.

"Can we take this upstairs?" Gail's voice was breathy and deep. "I mean, I did get married today, and I'm pretty sure there's something we should be doing about that."

"In a minute," agreed Holly, taking advantage of her on-top position on the couch for a little longer.

While they did eventually get upstairs, it was more than a minute later. Upstairs, the sex was a little more needy. It was a mix between the emotional pain of the day and the physical need they caused in each other. They knew each other and their bodies well at this point, they knew what made each other tick. If, right now, they wanted to use each other to forget about part of the day and celebrate another, it was alright.

There was more time spent before actually falling asleep, which Gail did first after saying she just needed a minute to find her brain again. Her body rather quickly became the heavy weight of pure exhaustion and Holly knew she was out for the night. But that was Gail. Holly slept less well, her body finding the tension in the night that Gail had probably carried all afternoon.

By the time the morning came around, Holly knew her face was puffy and her eyes were slitty from the lack of sleep. Gail saw it, frowned, and asked if she should stay home.

"You're going to work?" Holly's voice sounded flat to her own ears.

"We have a copycat," sighed Gail, clearly not thrilled about it.

Holly sighed as well. Work was work and her girlfriend was a cop who wanted to do her job well. No. Her wife was a cop. A silly grin spread over Holly's face, wiping away her annoyance. "Can we
have lunch together?"

With her face in the coffee bag, Gail made a disgruntled noise. "Maybe. Probably. Butler's trying like hell to keep me away from the case. Did you get more beans?"

"In the cabinet." She watched Gail fuss about with grinding beans and realized she was still grinning.

"Thanks." Gail glanced over and looked confused. "What's got you so goofy looking, nerd?"

"Wife," replied Holly and was delighted to see Gail blush. Her wife muttered 'oh' and looked at the coffee pot, but an equally goofy smile was on her face. "I should tell my parents." It was three hours earlier on the coast, so she'd have to wait for lunch.

"I told John. In the car coming home." Gail brought Holly the first espresso.

Grateful for the caffeine, Holly inhaled the smell first. "Think he'll tell Rachel?"

"No," Gail was firm about that. "It's a cop thing," she added, making a cup for herself.

And Gail was right. When Holly popped in to see about lunch, Gail's boss was indeed trying to get her uninvolved in the case and her partner had told no one. Had he not given Gail a smirk, Holly might not have even thought John knew at all.

Lunch was cut short by Holly getting a call for a body and ended up working with Traci on a murder (and forgetting to call her parents). Traci had not heard about the Perik copycat, which Holly felt was a small blessing, and the day was spent remarkably stress free. She got home late and found Gail had not only made meatloaf but picked up their rings. That was a definite mood improver and they spent more time on the couch looking at each other's hands and grinning than actually watching Downton Abbey.

Four days later, Gail's department arrested the copycat.

The four days had seen Gail get more and more tense and the sleeplessness Holly had expected to find Gail on the first night finally came to fruition, with her wife (hah) simply not sleeping at all the last two nights. Even short naps were cut off with a jerk of mental pain. The last day, John picked Gail up, insisting she wasn't safe to drive. In the brief, private, moment with Holly, John promised to keep an eye on Gail, keep her out of trouble, and not let her shoot anyone. They both agreed that wouldn't help Gail's mood at all to deal with IA or SIU.

Neither John nor Gail were part of the take down. Unlike the arrest of Perik, this was controlled and planned, which Gail admitted was nice. However before they actually arrested him, the man shot himself. That had not made Gail very happy. About the only thing that did please her was when forensics determined the trace evidence of victims indicated that only the woman who got away had been abducted. There were no other victims.

That was when Traci found out about the case at all, and she was not happy. She yelled at Gail for keeping it from her, which Gail denied. It simply hadn't involved Traci, it wasn't Perik, it didn't matter. Traci had also yelled at Holly for not telling her anything. But Traci's anger turned out to be at Gail's general bull-headedness.

Probably the only reason Holly figured that out was because Traci came by her office to apologize for shouting at her and Gail the day before.

"You know you don't have to take all that on yourself," Traci pointed out, sitting in the spare chair in Holly's office.
"I'm not," promised Holly.

"Seriously, Holly. Just because Gail keeps it all inside doesn't mean you have to."

It was very odd, the different sides of Gail Peck everyone knew. "She doesn't. Keep it inside, I mean. We talk about it, she's ... Um, she's weirdly okay right now. I mean, not the last couple nights of it, but she's really doing okay."

Traci narrowed her eyes, "Gail talks about it?"

Holly nodded. "She said it was easier to talk to people who weren't close to it."

Slowly the understand crossed Traci's face. "But... She scared you, when she was at the gravestone."

"Oh, she's still an idiot," grimaced Holly. "On the level of shitty notes, that took the cake." And Gail had realized how horrible it was later and spent days acting guilty about it, until Holly finally made her promise to tell her with out loud words next time.

Shaking her head, Traci sighed. "She's different with you."

"Is that a compliment?"

"I am in a little awe of you taming our wildling Peck," replied the detective with a grin.

It made Holly feel guilty, keeping the marriage a secret. But if they told Traci, she'd tell Andy and Steve and then everyone would know. And Holly wasn't ready for that. Of course, her wife found the idea hilarious and had decided not to tell anyone else and waited to see who figured it out first.

The guilt made her blush, but Traci only laughed at it, saying it was a good thing to see Gail grow and change. If only they knew how much.

That night at home, she finally picked dialed her father. "Dr. Stewart," he said, with a laugh.

"Dr. Stewart," she giggled in reply. Her father always managed to make her smile.

"How's my favorite daughter in the universe?"

"About to be grounded."

"Uh oh, what did you do? You're not moving to New York, are you?"

"Hah, no. No, um, I eloped." Sometimes it was easier to take a page from Gail's book and just say it flat out and from the start.

There was a long silence on the phone. "With Gail?"

"Yes." She suddenly felt meek but also indignant. Why did he even have to ask if it was with Gail? "Of course Gail, Daddy. I love her."

"Huh." He was silent again. "You're married. How's it feel?"

Holly was not about to explain the layers of insanity that had surrounded their wedding. She started to smile, "Really good, Dad." It felt amazing. Wonderful. It was weird how great the change of the name of their relationship felt.

Her father laughed softly. "When you were seven, you announced you were never getting married. I
just thought it was because you were gay."

"You knew I was gay at seven!?" She could scream for him not telling her, first of all. Secondly, why didn't he warn her mother?

"Oh, sweetie, I knew you were gay when you were born." Her father chuckled. "You just had this look to you. That's why I hated all those boys you brought home."

Holly grimaced. "You hated half the girls too."

"They weren't Gail." He cleared his throat. "She loves you. She makes you laugh and you smile more. Your mom and I like her, but even if we didn't, she makes you happy."

Smiling, Holly kicked at the kitchen island. "I really fell hard for her, Daddy."

"Then be happy. I'll talk your mother out of murdering you for not giving her a wedding," he added. "Unless..."

"No, no wedding ceremony, Dad. You saw her at New Years." Her father grunted, clearly remembering how Gail's patience with people had worn thin the longer she was around the masses. "Thanks. For telling mom."

"You're my favorite daughter, Holls. Go tell your wife we're happy for you two."

Maybe everyone would be that understanding.

Butler clearly planned to break the news to her gently. He even brought Oliver upstairs to do it, with John in the room. And Gail knew what was going on before it happened because it was obvious the universe hated her. "They're giving him a new trial," Gail said dryly.

"I told you she'd know," muttered Oliver, annoyed.

Hushing Oliver, Butler tried again, "He's appealing, and the Crown's office wants-"

"Me as their star witness, fine." She sat down, too mentally empty about the mess to really feel upset. The only part that surprised her was how soon after the copycat it was, making her think Perik set the man up. She'd have to tell the Crown's office that.

Oliver smiled. "Told you. Peck, we're having lunch later."

"Whatever," she smiled at her friend and watched him leave the room.

When she made no move to get up, Butler frowned. "What don't you want Oliver to know? And should I kick John out?"

There were reasons she liked her boss. "John knows," she sighed. "Uh, so I got married." Butler's eyebrows lifted to his receding hairline. "Two weeks ago. Eloped."

"Wasn't expecting that," muttered Butler. "Before or after?"

Sometimes the best thing about being a cop was not having to explain things with full sentences. When you worked with people trained to read between the lines, they often just knew and could shorthand, much the way Gail and Holly did now. He just wanted to know if she'd been married when she interrogated Perik. "Before. By an hour."
Now her boss's eyes went wide. "Jesus, why didn't you say?"

"Because I'm a cop, David," she sighed. "Because ... who else?" Gail slouched in the seat, annoyed. Everyone kept trying to protect her.

"It's because you're a cop, Peck," snapped David Butler. "You're one of us. Family. You don't do this shit on your own, you let us help you. Understand?" When she didn't answer, he grunted, "Damn Pecks. You and your brother are the same way. It's like you expect shit to happen and that you'll have to deal with it alone."

Gail hesitated. "We do." That was how it had always been. From being dropped off in the woods, abandoned at stores, and everything else. It was just the Peck way. "I'm trying not to," she added, mumbling under her breath. She wasn't used to having people to rely on like that, not even other cops.

"She is, David," remarked John, speaking up. "The real question is when do we get to tell everyone."

"When they figure it out for themselves."

Both her boss and partner rolled their eyes but let that go. Holly had as well, though when she passed on well wishes from her parents, Gail allowed that was alright. They lived three time zones over, after all, and she'd thought that Holly would have called them before. Perik. Stupid fucking Perik, ruining everything.

If she was ever going to break the law in a serious way, Gail would probably kill him just to get him out of her life. Of course that would land her in jail. Ugh.

"You okay?" Holly's head popped up from her laptop, working away on the couch with a beer, giving Gail a concerned look.

She must have made the sound out loud. "Sorry, I was thinking. I'm having the most wonderful shitty fantastic week."

Holly pressed her lips together and closed the laptop. "Which one am I?" Gail shot her an 'are you stupid?' look and got a laugh. "Alright, what's wrong now?"

"You won't like it," warned Gail, sitting down on the coffee table. "Perik's appealing and it's probably going to court."

Yep, Holly didn't like it. Her face went somewhat still and she stared at Gail for a moment before handing over the beer. "You need this."

Gail put the bottle on the table beside her. "I'm sorry—"

"Hey, no. No, no, you don't be sorry. This is not your fault, honey." Holly shoved her laptop onto the couch and put her hands on Gail's knees. "This is no one's fault. This is just ... This isn't anything you did."

Looking at the hands on her knee, Gail sighed. "I did one thing, Holly, I brought you into this."

The hands tightened a little. "And you told me about it. Before we got back together, before we moved in together, before I married you, I knew that you were a wonderful, insane, brave, person who hates everyone and everything." Holly scooted so their knees were touching. "I knew you and I still love you and I want to be with you, so ... Don't apologize for that shit."
Closing her eyes, Gail leaned forward until she bumped her head against Holly's. Much like with her brother, she had an awareness of her lover. Her *wife*, damn it. How did that happen again? Gail smiled and marveled for a moment at the fact that she, Gail Peck, was married. Reaching into her shirt, Gail pulled out the ring on its chain and asked, "Why are you perfect?"

Holly snorted. "I will remind you that *you* said this the next time you get mad about how I folded your shirts." Gently tugging, Holly leaned back onto the couch and Gail opened her eyes. "You hate that I go with the flow," she added.

True. Holly tended to be very passive when it came to her friends. She didn't make waves, pick fights, or want to offend anyone. In fact, she went out of her way to compromise her own happiness for others. And yes, it drove Gail up a wall and down another when Holly did things like let her parents throw a big New Years Eve party, when she hated them as much as Gail did. But Holly pointed out it made her parents happy.

"Move the laptop, wife," ordered Gail, picking up the beer and sipping it. Holly smirked but moved her computer to the coffee table and Gail promptly took its place on the couch, leaning against her wife and looking at her ring.

"We're not perfect," mused Holly. "I hate that you get hurt. Mentally, physically, all of it. I worry about you all the time. And I absolutely cannot stand how you organized the fridge."

Gail giggled. Their fridge had been in various states of reorganization in the last two months. The problem was it was a *new* refrigerator, the first one they had picked and purchased as a unit, and it was a different model than Holly's old one. Gail had been experimenting with the best layout for everything. "As a scientist, you should be more willing to experiment."

Those were the easy things to deal with. Far less easy was the continuation of sleepless nights thanks to pouring over the details of a night, four years ago, with the Crowne's office. Luke showed up to go over his notes and was startled when Gail expanded on the night's events. "I thought you didn't remember," he accused at their lunch break.

"I didn't. For a while."

"And it broke up you and Nick. I shouldn't have let him stay."

Yes, that she had to give him. "Yeah, if that ever happens again and you let Holly watch me interrogate someone, I will pierce your nipples with a nail gun." The flinch made it worthwhile.

She ended up spending almost a week with the lawyers going over everything. There would be no mistakes. There would be no third chance. They wanted to lock Ross Perik away and lose the key
after he'd managed to train not one but two damned copycats. Gail joked that he'd read the Tess Gerritsen books, something which only Holly found amusing.

That was why they ended up watching the TV show based on the books. Gail knew her rule about not watching comedies about cops made the show a little iffy, but she found the concept amusing.

"They remind me of us," Holly decided, her feet in Gail's lap.

Gail blinked, "A detective and a medical examiner who are women? Is that all it takes?"

"Jane's grumpy and rough around the edges. Maura's ... Not like me at all."

Snorting, Gail started to rub Holly's ankles. "You're both bossy and chatty. The Google mouth thing." Of the two, she was more like Maura with her weird and somewhat antisocial behavior and love of fancy things.

"I'd like to think I'm a little more cognizant of pop culture."


Holly scowled, "So you're a fem? Is that where you see this going?"

"You never wear a dress, Holly! I love the opera, you tolerate it."

Her wife pulled her feet away in a mock pout. Gail could read her mood and humor, and knew she wasn't actually in trouble. "That's your criteria for gender and sexual stereotypes, detective?" Holly sat up and leaned towards Gail. "I like sports, I wear pants, so I'm the man?"

Gail drew her legs up, one foot on the floor to help her lean in. "The whole point about us being lesbians is there is no man. In fact, that's one of the best things about it."

That won a laugh from the doctor and her wife kissed her briefly. "They do have insane sexual tension, you have to admit it's cute."

With a head toss, Gail announced, "Crappy American import version. At least we're lesbians."
While Gail had assured her it didn't bother her if she was there, Holly still felt out of place with the other police officers. "I should go. Right? I should just go back to the lab. I mean, she's done this a million times before. So have I. We do this all the time. So this is just the same as all of that, and its not a big deal. Right?"

Traci, in her suit, looped an arm through Holly's, "You ramble too much. Does Gail ever tell you that?"

"No. I mean, yes, but she usually stops me— Um." Holly flushed. When she rambled, Gail generally kissed her or watched her smiling until Holly felt self-conscious and stopped. Rarely did Gail use words to tell her to stop. "But this is a bad idea. Isn't it? Why am I here?"

Somewhat against her will, Holly was hauled into the courtroom. "Because I need someone to stop me from jumping over the railing," Traci said firmly. "And no matter how Peck-ish Gail's being, she'll want you to be around."

"I could wait outside," Holly said weakly.

But Traci was now clinging to her and they took seats in the back by an exit. "You'd go crazy. So will I."

The room slowly filled in, mostly news reporters and cops. Holly saw Detective Swarek and half raised her free arm to him. He seemed relieved and sat next to her in his uniform, "Good, you found a sanity check, Nash."

Holly arched her eyebrows. "I'm the sanity check? I don't even want to be here."

"You need to be here," Swarek said firmly. "For her. For you. This is going to be around for a long time. Him, the copycats." He shifted in his seat. "I'm gonna have to go sit up there, but ... Just hang on to Traci." It almost made her forgive Sam and the stupid softball incident.

More of Gail's fellow officers came to sit with Holly and Traci. Dov took the seat in front of Holly, turning around to talk to her. "I can't believe this is happening again," he grumbled. "How the hell did he get a new trial? They convicted him!"

"It's the appeals system," Holly explained. "His lawyers claim he didn't get a fair trial, that the copycats mean anyone could do this, and it was enough to get this." She sighed. Gail hadn't gotten angry about it at all, which had surprised Holly. "It makes sense." Immediately, all the officers stared at her and Holly felt set upon. "And this," she gestured at them, "is why. You protect your own, which is laudable. But your thin blue line makes people think about cases like Ferguson, where the police will do anything to protect their own."

The group was tense, glaring at Holly, until Swarek laughed. "I see why Peck likes you, you just say what you think." He reached around Traci and patted Holly's leg.

Traci didn't say anything, she just held on to Holly as the lawyers and Gail came in from the side room. Gail held her hat under one arm, having chosen to wear her dress uniform, her short hair brushed back as much as the cowlick allowed. She'd gotten a haircut and dye fix the week before, hiding what was left of her years of on-and-off platinum. Once again, she was clearly a blonde instead of her almost ginger/brown natural color which was, technically, still blonde but somewhat confusing. The lawyers started arranging papers, while Gail listened quietly. She didn't look at the
That was probably for the best, when Holly spotted a certain red-head, in civvies, walking in. "Oh shit." Holly didn't mean to say it out loud, but in the last year, she'd come to loathe the woman. While her personal life was doing much better, the professional world was filled with sniping and snideness from many people who still sided with Elaine over the entire matter. They didn't live with Gail, who simply had no interest in talking about it save to intercede between them and Holly and tell them if they had an issue, take it up with her. None did.

"Wow," whispered Traci, looking past Holly. "I haven't seen her since the ... thing."

Holly hadn't seen Elaine at all since the time she'd been accosted by her car, save one very awkward elevator ride in the big building. Thank god there had been other people there as well.

The familiar, and friendly form of Steve Peck stepped in beside his mother, looking stiff, and gestured at a seat far from the rest of the police. He looked around and, spotting Holly and Traci, made a quick hand sign before sitting done beside his mother.

"What was that?" Dov sounded confused.

"He said it was okay, Gail knows." Holly had slowly been learning ASL, mostly out of self defense. Unlike Gail, who picked up languages like breathing, Holly felt every single step was a painful struggle. She returned a simple thank you to Steve and sighed. "She didn't tell me," grumbled Holly.

Traci squeezed her arm, "Maybe she didn't know before this morning?"

That sounded better and Holly nodded.

When Andy came in she too was in uniform, looking stiff and uncomfortable. "Hey, Holly." She clearly did not want to be there. "Sam, they want us now." He nodded, gave Holly's leg a comforting pat and walked with Andy to the row where the other potential witnesses sat. The only ones of Gail's rookie friends not there were Nick and Chloe. Even Frank and Noelle had come. John came in with seconds to spare and sat by Holly.

The room fell silent as the court officers came in, leading a handcuffed Ross Perik. For the first time, Holly put eyes on the man and she felt conflicted. Certainly she hated him, for the murders of innocent people as well as what he'd done to Gail, but he didn't look threatening. He looked like an older doctor, the sort she'd studied under for years. Genial and strange, in the way all eccentric professors were. It was all the more terrifying. As he sat, Holly got a good look at his complexion and started to diagnosis the vitamin D deficiency.

On her arm, Traci stiffened and Holly glanced at her, not surprised to see the rage. This was the man who killed her fiancée. Back at the tables, Gail had turned to regard the man with remarkable impassivity. Her face was set and unyielding. At a motion to her side, Gail turned back to the lawyer and answered something. She did not look at Perik again.

At last, the judge walked in, in her full attire, clearly ready to begin. Holly had sat in on a couple court cases as a viewer, but it was her practice of years as a professional that had drilled the rote into her. Stand up, wait, sit down, wait. Wait. Listen. The preambles she could ignore, concentrating on her breathing and heartbeat, both of which were too fast. Finally, as it inched towards noon, Gail was called to the stand, sworn in, and asked to state her full name and rank for the court.

"Detective Constable Gail Antonia Peck, assigned to Organized Crimes, Fifteen Division, Toronto, Ontario." Holly quirked a grin, knowing others were finally getting the answer to the mysterious
middle name that Gail had only revealed at the courthouse. From the look and sound of things, Gail was far from calm but she was firmly set in professional mode.

The defense ran through the basics of what Gail did, and her involvement in the case. Holly frowned as they kept calling Gail 'Officer' even though she knew it was a tactic to make the jury side with the defense. "Did you volunteer for the assignment?"

"Yes, I did."

"Even though you knew it would be dangerous?"

Gail tilted her head slightly. "I'm a police officer. It's my job- it's my duty and responsibility to do these things for the protection of the city. Yes, I knew it would be dangerous."

"And you're aware the initial arrest was erroneous?" Again, Gail replied she knew that now, but had not at the time. "So your division, made a mistake?"

"We followed our theory to it's logical conclusion and reassessed when it was proven invalid. It's police work, not a magic trick." There was stifled laughter from the audience, though none from the police.

Holly was, momentarily, distracted when Oliver and Celery snuck in and nudged her down the row. When she got her attention back to the case, the defense had moved on slightly. "Four months after you were released from the hospital, you were suspended. Is this correct?"

"Yes, I was suspended for three weeks."

"Can you tell the court why?"

There was no objection from the prosecution and Gail nodded briefly. "Following the arrest of three men at a football game, for disturbing the peace, one was killed in the station following a stand off with a handgun he'd had on his person." She paused a moment, "In the course of the SIU investigation, it was determined that my actions led to the direct result of the victim bringing the gun into the station."

"You made a mistake?"

"Due to extenuating circumstances, yes."

"Extenuating circumstances such as residual trauma?"

"No. The situation at the football stadium escalated quickly and my fellow officer requested backup. I made a judgement call that the man I had in custody had told me the truth when I asked if he had any weapons or items that might harm me on his person. I put him into the back of my squad car without a complete search, in order to assist my partner."

In front of her, Dov squirmed and glanced around, guilty. Oliver reached forward and squeezed his shoulder, whispering to him, "Its alright."

"So you made a mistake." That wasn't a question, and Gail did not reply. "Normally when this happens, officers are released from duty. Why do you think you were not?"

"Because of the circumstances," Gail said coolly. "SIU was aware of the entire situation."

"And not because you're the daughter of Staff Superintendent Peck and Inspector Peck?"
Goddaughter of the Commissioner? The Peck name is practically police royalty."

"No, it was unrelated to any family ties," Gail said firmly. "At the time, Superintendent Peck was not involved with Fifteen Division."

"But she was the Superintendent for internal affairs and standards, correct?"

"At the time, yes."

"And your father the inspector for your Division."

"Yes."

"They had significant sway, I'd imagine."

"You're welcome to imagine what you want." Again, laughter in the audience. The judge quelled it with a look.

The questioning continued down that line, showing various mistakes made by Gail or Fifteen, clearly laying groundwork to make it obvious that mistakes were made in the arrest of Perik. Finally the lawyer pointed out one important fact, "And the only eyewitness, to any of this, was you."

"And the officers who pulled over the cab," she replied coolly.

"But the stabbing, the fight with Detective Barber. Only you."

"All the other women he kidnapped, and Detective Barber, being dead does tend to do that."

"Can you take us back through what happened in the house?"

Now the prosecution spoke up, arguing there was no need to drag Detective Peck through this. The defense argued that there was no reason not to, as sufficient time had passed. Both lawyers went to the judge and the argument became very, very quiet. Gail seemed to ignore it, sipping water and brushing dust off her hat.

"Don't they have this from last time?" Dov was surly and frustrated.

"They didn't ask last time," replied Oliver. "Gail's written testimony was enough."

"So... What? They think Luke screwed up?"

Traci sighed, "Wouldn't be his first."

The judge spoke Gail's name and she turned to listen attentively. There were gestures made at Perik and Gail and the clock. Finally Gail was asked a question, glanced at her watch and shook her head.

A moment later, the group dispersed and the judge said, "You may answer the question, Detective." The room murmured their discomfort.

While Gail nodded, she did not immediately reply. "Do you need me to repeat the question, Officer-excuse me Detective Peck?"

"No." She scratched at the side of her eyebrow and then folded her hands in her lap. "I came to in the basement-"

"How did you know it was a basement?"
Without getting angry, Gail replied, "The smell, mostly. Basements, the damp concrete, have a distinct smell to them. This one smelled of cleaning chemicals and hospitals, over an earthy kind of scent. Musty."

"So you couldn't see the room?"

"Not until later, when he removed the blindfold." Gail paused and, finding no further interruptions, continued. It was harder to listen to the second time. It was far more clinical and dispassionate, the way Gail told it now, and Holly wondered if anyone else heard the pain, the fear, in her voice. This was not the part of the crime Gail told her. This was the darker part, lying in a room, cold and alone, wondering if she'd die. But she didn't mention that either and just told it simply and directly.

Then Gail explained how Perik came downstairs, angry that she was a cop, wanting to know why she didn't tell him. The defense asked for elaboration. No, Gail had not revealed she was undercover, not even while kidnapped. She never confirmed it either, even when Perik yelled at her. Yes, she had the blindfold off when she was dragged upstairs, and yes, she saw Detective Barber lying on the ground in a pool of blood. Gail described the fight, somewhat disjointedly. It was all something Holly had heard before, but it felt much worse.

"But you didn't try to help?"

"No, I did not."

"And only your hands were tied?"

"Zip tied, plastic." A beat. "But yes, only my hands."

"Why didn't you assist your fellow officer?"

Gail's gaze sharpened. "Have you ever taken strong painkillers?" The lawyer startled and did not reply. "I was on a medical grade anesthetic. It's a dissociative drug. That means in high doses it causes psychotropic reactions. You're lucky if you can move, let alone think. He combined that with a sedative and muscle relaxant used in animals." She paused, "The drug he used has a high risk of burning a hole in your brain stem. Normally it takes three days, on doses that high, to make your head stop feeling like a lead weight."

Holly covered her mouth to hide the inappropriate smile. Over their time together, Gail had asked her about the effects of ketamine and acepromazine. Gail had described the effect once as feeling like her brain had been unplugged and waking up to a thick and dulled sensation, which was why she hated most painkillers with a passion. They gave her flashbacks at best. When pressed, Holly told Gail that she'd been at risk for tardive dyskinesia and permanent physical damage. To hear Gail slap the lawyer with the words Holly had given her was delightful.

"I could barely walk with assistance. When Perik let go of me in the fight, I wasn't able to stand."

"Were you scared?"

Silence. Holly swore she could feel the entire room hold it's breath. "Yes," Gail replied, in a tone of slight surprise. "There was a man with a gun who had drugged me, beating up Jerry- Detective Barber, right in front of me. I was scared, which helped burn off the drugs, but not fast enough to move or run away."

Not to mention she'd been barefoot and beaten. The defense lawyer continued to poke and prod as Gail finished the retelling. She'd tried to kick as she'd been shoved in the trunk, but was not strong enough to fight him off drugged any more than she had been when sober. At that point, Gail simply
stopped.

"And then?"

"You asked me for what happened inside the house," Gail pointed out. She did not offer anything more. A few more questions were made about key points in the testimony, suggestion that Gail had failed at her duty in the house, just as she had in failing to search the man a few months later. This went on for a short while and then the prosecution took over. They started with a simple question.

"Detective Peck, do you feel you did everything in your power to aid in your being found?"

"Yes."

"What did you do?"

And Gail recited everything she had done, scratching herself to leave evidence in the house and the basement and the trunk. Pulling out her own hair, scratching Perik to have his DNA under her nails, spitting when possible. Memorizing every scent and sound and, when possible, sight.

"Did you think you were going to be rescued?"

There was a long pause and now, for the first time, Gail looked at the section of the room where her friends sat. "No," she said softly. So softly Gail was asked to repeat it and Holly wondered if she'd imagined hearing it at all. "No. When I saw Detective Barber was alone, I felt that the odds were people didn't know where he'd gone." Gail's eyes rested on Traci, "He was absolute shit with technology and had a new phone. I thought, at best, they'd trace the phone to the house and maybe arrest Perik on the trace. If I was lucky, they'd find my body." Gail scratched the side of her face.

"The only good thing was Jerry screwed up his timetable and he was just going to kill me and not rape me."

The officers stiffened. Oliver visibly winced and Celery squeezed his arm tight. Looking at them, Holly wondered if it was that painful for Oliver too. Did the fear and memory keep him up at night? Did he wonder how they'd found him? Was it all luck and chance? Holly knew, because Gail had told her, that it was good police work that found Oliver. But Traci had told Holly that it was dumb luck they'd found Gail.

But that ended the questions and the trial broke for lunch. Gail was asked to come into chambers and did so with barely a nod. The officers started to break, though the ones closest to Gail lingered.

"I didn't know all that," muttered Dov. "She doesn't talk about that with... Anyone."

Holly felt many eyes on her and she cleared her throat. "Traci, come on, I know a good place for burritos." She was not surprised that John, Oliver and Celery joined them, though she did find it interesting that Dov went with Andy and the others up front. Lunch was mostly a silent affair, Oliver holding Celery's hand tightly, and Traci and Holly both deep in thought. Finally Holly spoke up, "They want to make it look like Jerry made a mistake."

Solemn, Traci nodded. "Putting a dead man on trial," she muttered.

"Jerry didn't make mistakes," Oliver said firmly. "Except with that damn phone."

Holly sighed and hid her fingers under the table, fiddling with the ring. She wanted to tell them, as if it would make them feel better, but they were Gail's friends first. Sighing, she looked at Traci. "Thank you for making me come."
And Traci smiled. "Thanks for coming with me. You may need to hold me down if they talk shit about Jerry."

Back at the trial room, they took their original seats and Holly watched for Gail to walk back in. To her surprise, Gail did not arrive until after Perik was escorted in, and even then she lingered at the corner with a bailiff before Gail returned to her seat with the Crown's office.

The trial went on but clearly many things had been discussed in chambers over lunch. They skipped right to calling Perik to the stand. His version of events were somewhat different. His fight with Jerry was self defense. An out of control cop. He did not, however, deny kidnapping Gail and Holly sucked in a breath. He was trying to get out of killing Jerry. Traci stiffened and Holly held her firmly in place.

Through his testimony, he countered that Gail had not seen Jerry fight. That she had put the cell phone in his pocket having acquired it when she fell near Jerry's already dead body. The prosecution pointed out the lack of blood on Gail, outside of her own, and the lack of DNA evidence. This went on for a while, until Perik was dismissed and the Jury went to discuss matters.

They didn't need to wait long at all before the appeal was rejected, though no one cheered. No one made a noise as Perik was escorted out. He looked at Gail at the door and said, softly, "You are so beautiful."

A shudder rippled through the entire room but Holly watched Gail calmly pick up her hat, stand, and turn her back on the man. Gail stayed up front as the room cleared out a little and then made her way through the crowd. She shook hands, not one person offering a hug, but made a b-line right for Holly, hauling her into her arms.

"Hey," she breathed softly.

"Hey, Traci wouldn't let me not come," whispered Holly.

"I'm glad you're here," replied Gail quietly. The hug was not as long as Holly would have expected and Gail was not crying. Oliver just nodded, though Traci grabbed Gail's arm to thank her and John squeezed her shoulder.

John cleared his throat. "Call me if you guys need anything." Like Gail, he tended not to ask it as a question. Holly nodded and mouthed a thank you to John before he left.

"You okay, darling?" Oliver rocked on his heels.

Gail shook her head. "No." It was possibly the most honest answer to the question she'd ever had. Oliver stepped forward but Gail shook her head, eyes wide. It was the same look Holly had received when she showed up at the station when Oliver was missing. Gail had to be professional Detective Peck right now; Oliver's hug would undo her. Holly's was clearly safe.

And he understood. "Okay. Tomorrow. Dinner at our place?"

Nodding, Gail took hold of Holly's hand, "No kale smoothies, please." There was laughter from Celery and they left. "Traci... Just go talk to Steve, okay? He understands."

"Yeah, I really can't deal with your mother, Gail."

Now Gail looked over, taking in her mother and brother. "Ah." She nodded at Steve, who nodded back. It was an unspoken cue, but the siblings traded positions. "Come on, Holly, it's okay."
"In what universe?" But Holly kept hold of Gail's hand as they crossed the aisle and stood in front of Elaine Peck, leaving Steve and Traci alone.

"You did well," Elaine said quietly.

Gail looked at her mother carefully, up and down. "Thank you," she replied, equally quiet.

"I'm sorry you had to go through that again." And Gail just shrugged. "I'd like to talk to you. Both of you. Later." Elaine hesitated. "I was wrong."

That was it? Holly stiffened and was prepared to snap, but Gail squeezed her hand. "You were," agreed Gail. "Are you going to keep the name?"

Holly turned to eye her wife, completely at a loss. "What?"

But Elaine replied to Gail first. "Yes. The world knows me this way. It would be too confusing." Then she looked at Holly, sadly. "I'm divorcing Bill."

"Oh," Holly blinked a few times and looked at Gail again. "How... How did you...?"

"She's not wearing her ring," Gail pointed out. "You always wore it out of uniform." And so did Gail, Holly realized it was another Peck thing.

Elaine smiled broadly, if sadly, at her daughter. "You are going to be a marvelous detective, Gail. But I will be proud of you no matter what." The woman's eyes dropped to their linked hands. "Are you changing yours?"

Looking down, Holly saw her ring glinting slightly. "No," Gail squeezed the hand. "Neither is Holly."

This seemed to make sense to Elaine, who asked "When?"

"Seven weeks ago," replied Gail, smiling fondly at Holly. "We haven't made a thing about it." Her mother looked disapprovingly at Gail and jerked her chin at Gail's left hand. "What? It's fun to see how long it takes."

"I wish you'd told me before. But that's my fault, not yours Gail." She hesitated. "If you want to talk, I haven't lost my cellphone in months."

"Alright," Gail replied coolly, but not angrily.

Elaine nodded and turned to go. "Gail... Holly. I am sorry."

While Gail nodded Holly could only scowl. It was hard to believe Gail was even considering accepting the apology, but in the car ride home Gail admitted she was just overwhelmed by the day and not up for making a decision about her mother just yet.

That night, after dinner, Gail was almost desperate to touch her in bed. She was beyond eager, her hands everywhere, her lips hungry, and Holly didn't fight it or try to control the night. These were Gail's nightmares and the sex was clearly Gail's attempt to ground herself in the reality, the here and now of who they were and where they were. Holly could hardly fault it, as she too wanted a reminder of Gail in her arms at all times. Maybe that was why people wore wedding rings, Holly thought, curled around Gail in the early morning, the gentle twilight before the dawn. A ring was having a permanent reminder of the other person in your hands at all times.
Before the sun was up, Gail stirred. "You haven't slept," she whispered.

"Can't," sighed Holly. Now that she'd seen Perik in person, sleep had eluded her. She heard his voice, saw his smile, and imagined him touching Gail. A shudder ran through her and she pressed her face into Gail's back.

Gail took Holly's hand and snuggled it close to her chest. "I'm okay right now, Holly." That was as much as she could offer and Holly knew it. There had been so many sleepless nights leading up to the trial, possibly Gail had slept out of sheer exhaustion. But now, saying in this moment she was okay, was the only promise to be had.

"He scares me."

"He doesn't scare me anymore." Gail remarked, her voice quiet. She let go of Holly's hand and rolled over to face her, cupping Holly's face in her hands. "The nightmares aren't fear," she whispered, kissing Holly lightly. "They're memories of fear. Flashbacks. Nothing more. They're then, not now."

Holly wasn't sure if Gail was telling her that, or telling herself. "They're not now," replied Holly as softly as she could.

"Now is you and me," confirmed Gail. "Now is this." There was another kiss, this one less soft. "Now is us. And tomorrow is us. And the next tomorrow is us."

Sniffing back a tear, Holly reached for Gail's hip and pulled her close. The kisses became something more, far less desperate than the night prior. This was tender and slow, taking time to touch and savor each other. And this time the release relaxed Holly enough to finally fall asleep on Gail. When she finally woke up, fully rested, it was noon and Gail was downstairs. Based on the noises, Gail was talking to someone. The other voice registered as soon as it spoke. Rachel was over?

Quickly showering, Holly made her way downstairs in jeans and a t-shirt. "Hey sleepy," smiled Gail, holding out a hand. They shared a brief kiss before Holly mumbled a hello to Rachel and went right for her espresso machine.

"She's normally friendlier in the morning," joked Rachel.

"She was very friendly earlier," Gail replied reassuringly. "Yesterday was just really long."

Holly grumbled, "How the hell did you sleep at all?"

"By not sleeping the week before," Gail slid a box over and Holly peeked in. Donuts and scones. "Rachel is my favorite of all your friends."

Shaking her head, Rachel asked, "Is that why you set me up with John?"

"He's nice," argued Gail. "Besides, the only other options are my brother and two of my exes, and Steve's taken."

"No more cute gingers in the family?"

"None you want to meet."

Holly watched the bantering with amusement. "Rachel, not that I'm knocking breakfast, lunch, whatever, but... Um. Why are you here?"

"My best friend got married and was a total bitch, not telling us."
Holly looked from Gail to Rachel and back again. "Uh, well it was kind of spur of the moment."

"We eloped." Gail leaned back, "Did you know her uncle was a judge?"

Wrinkling her face, Holly thought about that. "Oh. I may have known that." The judge who'd married them had looked familiar.

"Imagine my shock at dinner when he showed me the lovely couple he'd married for his hundredth gay wedding." But Rachel did not sound annoyed. "Gail said I could come over this morning. What was going on this week?"

Holly scratched her head, "Gail had a big case."

"Gail was on trial," corrected Gail. "Long story, lots of drama, bad guy's appeal was chucked. Gail goes back to work tomorrow. Woo." It was amusing to watch her downplay it.

"You forgot the part about Elaine."

"Bah. That can wait." To Rachel's confused look, she asked, "Did Holly tell you about my mother?"

Rachel looked between them and nodded. "Crazy shit. I can't believe anyone would ruin a life, two lives, like that."

"She said she was sorry and she's leaving my dad, so ... I dunno. Maybe she really is. Steve talked to her."

"He sat with her instead of Traci," Holly noted, scooting her stool behind Gail's so she could lean against her. "Was that your idea?"

Gail nodded. "He talked to me after I left yesterday. I figured if things got nasty, he'd haul her out." And now that was explained as well. Holly exhaled and rested her head on Gail's shoulder, "See what you missed by being a doctor, Rach? You could have all this fun drama!"

"I'd rather deal with both my fathers being frustrated that I'm not into drama, and their disapproval of every boy I've ever brought home," she replied and Holly grinned. "You remember Lewis?"

"I remember having to explain to your dads why you weren't in your room while I was over," Holly smiled. "She totally was."

"I will owe you forever for that," laughed Rachel.

Gail, munching on a donut, asked the obvious. "When do they get to meet John, and can I fill his heart with fear first?"

The small semblance of normality settled around them as they joked about life. Rachel had nothing to do with the drama, perhaps she was the only one of their mutual friends who would be both friendly and unrelated to anything. It made the day easier, and the next day bearable.
Mommy Issues

The coffee shop was one that Gail liked, not too far from home. Her mother had agreed to come, alone. That had been easier than convincing Holly not to come. Her wife had been very angry at the suggestion of Gail going alone, and only conceded when Gail pointed out she'd like to not have to arrest her own wife.

Wife.

Gail smiled softly and looked at the ring on her hand.

It was still a novel concept. Half the time she still wanted to call Holly her girlfriend. But as the days crept into weeks and now months, her brain had started to correct itself. She was married. And yes, that was very, very weird. Gail Peck was married.

Oliver had sussed it out and told no one, but was happy when Gail confirmed it at the dinner at his house. Traci, wrapped up in the Perik drama, had not, and neither had Steve. Gail and Holly told them at one of Leo's hockey games. Since then, word had rippled through the division and then the entire force. Holly had been perturbed by the random condolences people gave her, though Gail found it amusing.

She'd started wearing the ring more often as well, not just when off duty. If she was at work and not going out into the field, Gail wore the ring. Taking it off became part of her pre-flight checklist. You checked your gun, your backup piece, your badge, your cuffs, and your ring. John thought it was cute and Gail offered to buy him a cock ring if he was so interested in them.

"This is nice," Elaine Peck said, breaking in to Gail's thoughts. "Hipster?"

"I forgive them for the strength of their coffee," replied Gail casually. Calmly. Her therapist had reminded her she would gain nothing from being mad at her mother. Picking a fight would not move them forward.

Elaine sat down with her coffee cup. Black. Always plain black. The source of Gail's sweet tooth remained a mystery. "Where's Holly?"

"She still wants to punch you, so I thought it was better, just the two of us."

Her mother had the grace to wince. "How are you? After the trial I mean..."

There was no ulterior motive that Gail could see in that question. She was an expert at knowing when her mother had a secondary motive in asking something, but this was not that. "I'm okay," Gail said slowly, watching her mother curiously. This was a different approach than Elaine had ever taken. Perhaps she was sincere.

"It was harder, hearing you say that. Reading your statement was easier. Callaghan's report." Elaine sipped the coffee and added, "It's my fault you volunteered."

"Maybe," sighed Gail. "It's always more complicated than that, y'know."

Tilting her head to get a better look at Gail, Elaine looked guilty. "I sure gave you a lot of issues, didn't I?" And Gail could only nod. "I don't know if I can ever make amends for what I did, Gail. I don't know how I could even try without making things worse."
"How about you tell me what you want right now."

Gail had talked about this, meeting her mother, with her therapist. The suggestion was for Gail simply listen for now. Certainly, Gail knew what she wanted was simple. If possible, she wanted to know if her mother loved her. And that was a tall order.

"I want? I don't really know any more, dear." Elaine ran her finger around the rim of her coffee cup, the same way Gail did when troubled. "I wanted you to follow my footsteps and be a police chief. You have so much potential and ... " Elaine paused. "It's my fault, you know."

That was unexpected. Gail blinked a few times trying to sort that out. "What's your fault?"

"I listened to ... that doesn't matter." She screwed up her face, trying to pick her words, and Gail just let her mother take her time. "You know you're smart."

"Yeah," Gail replied slowly. She wasn't as smart all around as Holly, but she could nail cop stuff and languages. Of course, being a cop had been drilled into her head from birth.

Elaine studied Gail's face for a long moment. "You're smarter than I am. Or your father, for that matter. You pay attention."

Snorting, Gail leaned back. "You told me to," she remarked, annoyed.

"Yes and Steven pays attention to people and you pay attention to your surroundings." Elaine frowned. "I'm not explaining myself well, and I'm going to, ah, screw this up, so I apologize in advance. I was cold to you on purpose."

Well that made some sense. Gail sighed, trying to tamp down the anger she felt in the moment. "Holly and her friends have this thing, called Parlay. Where they call it, and everyone has to shut up and listen and let them talk it out even if it comes out wrong." When Elaine arched an eyebrow, Gail made a carry on gesture.

Her mother quirked a smile. "Parlay." Elaine laughed softly. "Alright. Being a Peck comes with a price, Gail. Even for me. Especially for me. I agreed to certain things when it came to raising you and Steven. Things I regret. It turned Steven into someone who hordes secrets and you into someone who doesn't always understand people... And that was not my intent."

Describing Steven as a secret-horder made sense. A lot of sense. Gail looked at her coffee and sipped it to buy thinking time. "I understand people," she finally said. "I just don't like them."

Shrewdly, her mother elaborated. "You don't trust them, because you never learned to trust anyone." Gail begrudged her mother a shrug. That much was true. "Do you remember being bullied in kindergarten?"

Of course she did. "You mean when Michael shoved my face in the dirt?" She'd hated him for years after that.

"Do you remember why he did that?" Gail frowned and shook her head. "It was when you started learning French," explained Elaine.

Gail didn't really remember not knowing how to read and speak French. "Oh. Kindergarten? Really?"

"Your school had an hour a day of French immersion." Looking at Gail with some trepidation, Elaine continued, "By the end of the first month, you spoke it better than anyone in the class. You
were fluent, as much as you were in English, by summer.

For a moment, Gail thought to make a snide remark, but her mother's face was surprisingly scared. She thought about how Holly reacted to her absorption of languages, with awe and respect. And then she thought about everyone else and how they gave her a look like Gail was a freak of nature. And she remembered the kids at school calling her an alien, chasing her until she cried and the Pecks telling her she had to take care of it herself. "So I learn languages fast," she said, half dismissively. "Big whoop. I still nearly choked on my shooting re-cert as a rookie."

Elaine waved a hand. "Performance anxiety, which would also be my fault for telling you that you absolutely had to excel... I was under a lot of pressure." Before Gail could make a pithy comeback, her mother added, "That's not an excuse. It was the wrong choice. Just like telling you to ignore the children at school was wrong. It told you, I told you from day one that you had to be the best and we wouldn't help you."

She wasn't wrong, decided Gail. That was similar to what her therapist had been telling her, the reasons for her lack of 'bonding' with people was that she expected them to be disappointed or to not help her. Ironically, the only time she didn't feel that way was in uniform, or wearing her badge. They would help the badge, if not the Peck. But she had to fight for herself because no one else would. No one would say it was the Peck who helped them. If she wanted credit, she had to grab it with both hands.

Gail groaned and ran her hands through her hair. "You never said that wasn't normal to learn fast." All the Pecks did it. Even the stupid firemen.

"It's terrifying, Gail," sighed Elaine, confirming Gail's fears. "You just inhale things. You can memorize license plates on speeding cars, you could quote procedure back to front before you were ten... It was frighteningly inhuman."

Gail leaned back, processing what her mother wasn't saying. All those things were true, so why would her mother step away from the weird machine-like abilities Gail had? "So. What? Did you step back hoping it'd make me more human or something?"

The slow nod of reply stunned her and Gail started laughing. "I see you found the irony," said Elaine, dryly.

She certainly did. In her mother's misguided quest to keep her grounded, she'd pushed Gail away into anger and laziness, which explained why Gail'd always been able to get away with that, and then humanity... Holly. She could only imagine her mother's reaction to being told that Holly made her feel more human. The coldness her mother always chastised her for, the aloofness because she couldn't connect with people.

"Who?" Gail gestured at her mother. "Who's stupid idea was it?"

"Mine," admitted Elaine, though Gail wasn't sure it was true. "Your... Your Peck family has very strict rules about how one raises children. I knew it was wrong with you, but I let it happen anyway."

That meant it was really her father's idea, or his inherited idea. Gail felt a little sick. "And you hoped being even further away would help?"

"Entirely stupid, I agree."

"You should be damn happy I met Holly," snapped Gail.

And her mother smiled sadly. "I am very grateful you met Holly. She seems to inspire you."
Gail tried not to flush. "I can fail anything, Mother, but I won't fail her. Not again. I screwed up once." When her mother looked questioning, Gail grumbled, "Peck isn't the only chip on my shoulder, thank you very much."

Again, her mother had the grace to be embarrassed. "I didn't realized how little I'd given you until you started seeing Nicholas again."

"He was convenient," admitted Gail. "And I would have divorced him in a year anyway, so … I'm still pissed at how you did it, Mother, but I appreciate the sentiment." Now what?

Of the same mind, Elaine finished her coffee. "What I wanted ... What I've always wanted for you, Gail, was for you to succeed. Professionally, personally."

"And now?"

"I don't know." They looked at each other, Gail thoughtful and her mother adrift. "I am sorry. I was wrong."

How come her mother could figure that out and stupid McNally had to be hand held. "I don't know that I can forgive all of it," temporized Gail. "But … Thank you."

Elaine nodded. "Can... You tell Holly that I've cleared up the misunderstanding with the US?" Gail arched an eyebrow. "I actually did that before our little tête-à-tête with IA," Elaine explained, ruefully.

"Was that what the dinner was supposed to be about?"

"The dinner? Oh no, no. Bill was planning to explain how your career would be better served in Guns and Gangs. He thought you weren't ready for the high profile crimes. What was it you all call it now?"

Now Gail flushed. "Major Crimes. We know it's not really called that, but —"

Her mother cut her off, surprised, "The television show, how appropriate." Elaine smiled. "You'd make a wonderful Sharon Raydor."

See, now that was creepy. "I'll keep that in mind," she muttered.

Elaine nodded. "At any rate. If Holly wants to work in San Francisco, there won't be any problems."

"They sent her an apology letter last year."

"Homeland Security? Yes, that's that. This is this. I've spoken to the San Francisco police office and explained the situation."

Gail tapped her coffee cup, her ring making a slight ting on it. "You understand if she leaves, I go with her, right?" And Elaine nodded. "Okay. I'll tell her." Of course, Holly the newly minted Medical Director wasn't going anywhere. But still.

There wasn't much else to say. They'd never been given to serious endearments before, and Gail didn't feel that was going to change yet. But as Elaine stood to go, she surprised her daughter once more. "Gail... Are you happy?"

And Gail had to stop for a moment. "Yes," she said, simply, as she thought about everyone and everything she had. Her left thumb rubbed the ring and Gail smiled. "I'm happy."
"Good."

As her mother left, Gail brought her left hand up to her face in a fist and pressed it to her mouth. She stared at the simple gold band for a moment and then held her hand far enough away to get a good look at her hand. Everything was different now. Ugh. It was so confusing and weird to hear her mother confess to poorly raising Gail, and she was pretty convinced she wasn't getting the full story here. Not even a detective could make people tell things they weren't ready to tell. It was clear that Elaine had more to the story than what had been said but, frankly, this was all Gail could stomach at one time. Her Peck family thought she was smart and tried to humble her? At kindergarten? If she needed any more reasons to cut them out of her life, she had them all lined up right there.

Gail squeezed her hand into a fist again, feeling the ring pinch a little. She was going to have to keep talking to her mother to eventually get the rest of the story. She wasn't sure she wanted to.

After Gail called it stupid a number of times, she finally agreed to go with Holly to the baseball game. It was an invite from Gail's godfather, after all, who wanted to treat Holly to something for having married in to Gail's life. Gail called it punishment for the elopement.

They sat in the box seats with Uncle Al, for now Holly had to call him that outside of work, his wife, Steve, Traci, Leo ... and Gerald. The last person in the room confused Holly until Al's wife introduced herself as Laura Moore. Holly had read the name Moore stitched on Duncan's shirt more times than she'd care to count. She looked between Laura and Duncan a couple times. Laura was as tall as her son and pale, though nowhere near as much as the Peck siblings.

"It's nice to meet you, Laura ... I'm sorry, Gail's told me nothing about you."

Laura laughed, "Gail and I hardly know each other, don't worry. Gail, were you even at the wedding?"

"She was not," Al announced, an arm around Gail's shoulders. "Why was that?"

"You know I hate weddings," whinged Gail, petulantly. Holly covered her mouth with one hand. Squirming out from her godfather's arm, Gail scooted towards the beer.

Her brother laughed, "Gail Peck. Hates weddings so much she skipped her own."

The game was on and Gail sneered at her brother, "And when are you making an honest woman out of Nash, eh brother?"

"Oh so you asked Holly, sister dear?"

Gail's hands moved, telling her brother to piss off. Before the insults got much worse than Steve's "douche canoe" (and Gail's rejoinder of how that wasn't even a thing), Holly cleared her throat. "Honey..." With a huff, Gail picked up two beers, handing one to Holly with a scowl. "Thank you," smiled Holly, kissing Gail's cheek.

The American National Anthem started and they all started to pick their seats. Since Gail had no sense of propriety, she skipped out to the bathroom. Sitting nearby, Al asked, "Holding up alright? After the trial?"

"We're doing okay," sighed Holly, staying standing as the strains of "O Canada" started. She loved the beginning of the games, the thrill of her national anthem gave her shivers of delight. Taking her seat, she watched the players take the field and jumped when Al's hand landed on her arm.
"Sorry," he looked embarrassed and glanced at his wife, who was fussing with Duncan. "I'm about as good at this as Gail is."

For some reason that made her feel better. "Al, we really are doing alright. We're not trying to do all this ourselves."

"Well that's a change for Gail," he laughed.

"Stop harassing my wife, Uncle Al." Gail's hands gently brushed Holly's shoulders, moving her ponytail aside to kiss her neck. "I know you like her better, she actually likes baseball."

"I've known you for your whole life, Gail, and I've never even see you at a sports game," teased Al. "All of the sudden, you asked for basketball tickets, a hockey game... You love opera and ballet and orchestras."

Gail snorted, her most unladylike sound, and sat beside Holly, lacing her fingers through her wife's. "The basketball was because I ditched Steve and Traci at the monthly dinner." She paused and looked at her brother. "It's so weird to think they're over."

"No more passive aggressive digs at how I'm not an inspector yet," replied Steve. "No snide comment about how Traci just made full detective and you haven't... She probably wouldn't have anything bad to say about Holly, though, she's kind of perfect. Doctor and Medical Director?"

"Alas, lesbian," smirked Gail. "And Traci's black, so don't forget that. We've pretty much done the most anti-Peck things ever with our personal lives. The lesbian got married and you're living in sin."

While Steve laughed, Holly frowned at the comment about Traci being black. She looked at Al and then back at Gail, her confusion probably evident on her face. "But... Al?" Never before had Holly felt awkward or embarrassed or even remotely shy about her mutt heritage, but in this moment, she really wondered how that impacted Gail's family.

"Gail was black," Al shrugged.

"He means his first wife," Gail interjected with a wry smirk. Clearly not her and she took Holly's hand again and squeezed it, but Holly couldn't help but notice the stark difference in their skin color. Normally she thought of nothing but beauty when she looked at her tan skin against Gail's porcelain color. Now... "They named me after her."

Al gave Gail a look as if to chastise her for not mentioning that before. "Bill's a little puritanical about interracial marriages," he explained. "And let's not get into how Pecks don't move in together before marriage." Laura laughed, derisively, at that remark. "How did your they take you moving in with Holly, Gail?"

"Mother told me not to get pregnant, and Dad..." She shrugged and then signed a thank you at Steve. Holly frowned and poked Gail in the ribs but got no answer.

Around the fourth inning, Al finally asked, "Have you talked to Elaine? Either of you?"

Steve cleared his throat, "She called me before the trial."

"And I talked to her after," chimed in Gail, dutifully helping Holly keep score. She might have said more, but there was a crash from behind them and everyone turned to see Duncan standing before an upturned tray of hot dog condiments. "Damn it, Gerald!"

There was silence as Laura stared at Gail, dumbfounded. "Gerald?" Laura smothered a smile as Al
winded. So he hadn't told her. "This sounds like a story..."

And it was.

The letter had to be a lie, of this Gail was certain. No one sent those things in the regular mail, right?
But there it was, the papers to a house in her name, complete with keys. She called the lawyer, who
confirmed it was hers. Then she called the finance guy who handled her trust fund and learned that
the maintenance was paid for out of a separate fund that was set for years to come, also it was
making a nice amount of money, and by the way did Gail want to do any renovations?

Gail hesitated over the next number to call about the situation but finally pressed the name she had
not deleted off her phone.

"Hello, Gail," greeted her mother, sounding apprehensive.

"Who owned the cabin, you or dad?"

"Well that was direct," muttered Elaine.

Gail sighed, "I learned that from you, Mother."

"The land was your father's. I renovated the cottage." That didn't really answer Gail's question and
she growled reflexively. This seemed to spur her mother onward. "It was ours, jointly. A wedding
present from your grandfather Harold. Neither of us wanted it in the divorce, and you liked hiding up
there..."

"Except for the part when I had to walk to it, yeah." Gail looked at the keys and frowned. "It's been
in the family for, like, a hundred years, why am I getting it? There are thirty other Pecks..."

Her mother hesitated. "Do you not want it?"

"I don't know." Part of Gail wanted it, but mostly to fulfill a fantasy with Holly and the fireplace and
dammed if she was telling her mother about that, thank you. She had loved the little guest cottage at
the Stewart place and this was wonderful and remote and having a slice of the world where she
could just climb up a tree with Holly and have a nice safe way to get down ... Yes. Gail wanted it.

Elaine let the silence carry on for a while. "You're the only one who liked to go back there after you
were a teenager."

"Can you blame them?"

"No." Her mother paused, "Your grandfather made me do that too, you know. Before I married your
father." That was a hell of a thought and Gail choked on a laugh. "I had the place cleaned, top to
bottom, moved out everything except the furniture. The beds are new. Sheets and towels... It's
stocked. Cheese puffs included."

It was strange to note how much her mother really did know about her. "Why?" The question fell out of Gail's mouth, blurted over the phone.

"Because I can't remember the last present I got you, Gail."

Gail did. "The Beretta Tomcat." It was still her favorite backup piece, though it didn't fit well in all
her purses.

"I meant an actual gift, not something useful. A present."
"I like the gun," she sighed.

"Gail." Her mother sounded exasperated but fond, which was weird.

"God, don't do that, Mother. You sound like Holly."

There was a short pause. "How is Holly?"

"Good. She's at work still." Gail toyed with the keys. "This is weird. And kind of uncomfortable."

"Just a bit," laughed Elaine, mirthlessly. It was nothing like Holly's laugh that she used to convey myriad emotions that defied language. This was an unfunny laugh at herself, bordering on self-deprecation. Gail made the same laugh from time to time.

"Thank you. For the cabin. I do like it, and... I wanted to take Holly there last year."

"Good. Someone should enjoy it," Elaine said firmly. "She looks like the outdoorsy sort."

"God you have no idea. Her dad dragged us to go snow hiking," groaned Gail. "Hiking in snow, Mother. People actually do that."

Her mother stifled a laugh and Gail took a moment to wonder why she felt alright talking to the woman who nearly torpedoed her wife's career and their relationship. Possibly because there was affection in there, somewhere. She didn't like her mother very much at all, but somewhere down there she felt what was probably love for her. Relationships were complex and weird. "You met her parents?"

"Spent the holidays in Vancouver with them. They're nice. You probably ran a background check on them..."

Elaine coughed. "Before you moved in with Holly, yes. Did you?"

"No." The thought did occur to her but Gail felt it was a remarkably assy idea. "I may have scoped Holly's phone number, though, the first time I called her." That got an actual laugh from her mother. "And that is as much as we are talking about that, Mother. Thank you for the keys."

"You said that already, Gail. You're still welcome." There was an awkward pause, "Have a good night, dear." Gail fumbled a reciprocal farewell and hung up.

Pulling up her schedule on the computer, Gail put in for a week of vacation and tagged it 'honeymoon' before emailing Holly to tell her to do the same. That would get the dates approved. Immediately, Holly texted to ask where they were going and Gail grinned evilly.

"This," she drawled, "will be more fun than getting dressed."

"Only you think that getting dressed is the fun part," smarted Holly, and she swatted Gail's ass before going upstairs. "I feel like I should get a say in our honeymoon," she added from the second floor.

Gail followed her wife (hah) and shook her head. "No, I think since you proposed, I get to pick the honeymoon."

Unwillingly conceding to defeat, Holly let it go until time came to pack for the vacation and she asked what to pack. The reply gave Holly clear pause. "Jeans, comfy shirts, and outdoors shoes? Gail, you hate the outdoors."
"I do not, I hate lack of indoor plumbing and being filthy. Neither of those will be an issue." To prove her point, Gail threw her own comfy clothes into a suitcase haphazardly. The groaned 'Gail' that followed her back out the bedroom door meant Holly would be distracted and repacking Gail's bag for her. Excellent.

The one thing Gail did pack that did catch Holly's attention was a rifle. Gail bringing a gun along was normal, if something Holly disliked. The rifle, complete with bullets, Holly had never seen except when Gail took it to the range.

"Okay, seriously Gail, where are we going?"

"Three hours north, depending on traffic, to a really tiny town where…" She paused and looked up at the ceiling briefly, "Where I have a cottage." She bit her lower lip and smiled at Holly. "Surprise.”

Holly put the suitcase down. "Your … Peck Cabin?"

"Technically cottage." Gail shrugged. "You know how people wonder who gets what in a divorce?"

Hesitantly, Holly nodded, "Yeah."

"I got the Peck Cottage."

Skeptical, her wife agreed to go, though the remark about no internet or TV caught her by surprise and she teased that Gail would have nothing to do. Promising she could think of a few things, Gail loaded up the car and they left after work on Friday.

Gail was excited to see it, to see if the cabin matched her memory. Until she was twelve, the cabin was just fun. She could swim all day, sleep if she wanted, and it was a week or two where she didn't have the stupid Peck Obligations hovering over her head. In her entire childhood, it was the one time she remembered as fun. They'd tried to ruin it, twice, with the inane family lessons and certainly it'd soured Steve to the notion of the cabin. But after surviving her winter hike through the woods at night, Gail had demanded breakfast and stayed at the cabin the rest of the week.

It occurred to her now, half her life later, that her parents had been surprised she wanted to stay. She only stopped going there when she started college, and was suddenly too busy. If it wasn't school it was work, because being a waitress was a good life experience. And if it wasn't that it was a stupid, stupid whirlwind affair with Nick whom she never considered bringing up, and then nearly a wedding and then…

"You're lost in thought," remarked Holly.

"I was trying to figure out why I don't hate the cottage and everyone else does."

Teasing, Holly put her hand on Gail's knee, "You're insane, that's why. How about music?" Giving Holly control of the music, she laughed when her wife turned on a road trip mix filled with Indigo Girls, Melissa Etheridge and other lesbian musicians.

By the time they got to the cabin it was dark and late and Holly just wanted to sleep. The stop at the country store had taken longer than expected, as Gail had decided that instead of cooking they should eat at the tiny restaurant. Those were good choices, but it did get them up to the place later than Gail wanted.

The tour was brief, though Holly giggled when she saw the fireplace and rug. "The land of Gail fantasies?"
Damn it, Gail blushed. "I'm allowed to be romantic," she grumbled, leaving the food downstairs for a moment. The bedroom, the master bedroom, was totally re-done. "Jesus, Mother," she whispered, realizing her mother had gone out of her way to erase herself from the room. The photos of little Gail and little Steve were on the dresser, including the one of Gail flying off the rope swing. She couldn't have been more than eight years old. But the photos of Bill and Elaine had been removed.

That made Gail check the pictures in the hallway and saw they were now all artistic photographs of landscapes. Things both Gail and her mother liked.

"Gail! The lake is right there!" Holly practically squealed and Gail heard the porch door open and slam shut. "Sorry!"

Laughing, Gail stepped onto the balcony off the bedroom and looked down. "Hey, sexy."

Holly looked up and smirked. "You didn't say there was a lake right freaking here."

"I said it was on the lake. There's a canoe and a rowboat in the garage, I bet."

"It has a dock. You have your own dock, Gail." Holly ventured out onto the path to the dock. "Is that a fire pit?"

"It's the old washing machine drum. You can look."

Glancing back up, Holly sighed. "I don't have a flashlight. What about neighbors?"

"Not for three miles in any direction," she smiled. Tearing her gaze away from the woman below, Gail pointed. "Back down the road, at the last T junction, if you go the other way is this old couple. They're still there, but they only come up for summers now. Along the lake shore by us, a couple couples. The other Peck cottage is halfway around the lake, my cousin the accountant has jet skis."

Taking all that in, Holly nodded. "So. No one can see us if we were naked on the deck, watching the sunset?"

Gail laughed. "Not right now." September had decided to be unseasonably cold, ending most people's cottage season early.

Giggling, Holly headed back to the inside. "There's a bathroom in there, right?"

"Mm, ensuite even. The downstairs is one of those Jack and Jill things." Gail hated sharing it with Steve. He took an insanely long time in the mornings and she just wanted to pee and go swim.

"I want a shower," Holly sighed. "And I want to relax."

"We can do that."

She let Holly have the first shower, taking the time to put away food and the guns. There was no way Holly would be comfortable with the rifle mounted on the wall, which was where Gail wanted it, so she put both guns in the safe in the master bedroom closet. By the time the guns were away and the bed was made, Holly came out of the shower in a fluffy robe. "Oh my god, your mother is insane but she has amazing taste."

"It's a bathroom, Holly," laughed Gail. "It's clean, it has hot water."

"Speaking of... How does this place have all the amenities? It's ancient."

"Solar panels. It's on the grid, though. And there's probably still a generator in the garage."
thoughly modern cottage, Gail hadn't realized most people didn't upgrade them like this. Most people weren't Elaine.

Holly fell onto the bed, her hair wrapped in a towel and the robe falling open to show off her legs. "I'm not forgiving her yet."

Looking at her wife, Gail smiled and felt horribly flushed as her eyes drifted up Holly's legs. "That's... Can we not talk about my mother when you're all legs?"

The things Gail hadn't known about herself were few and far between. She was a Peck after all and Pecks knew who they were. Then she had met Holly and everything changed. Who knew she was a lesbian? Who knew she liked women's boobs? And legs and pretty much everything about women? Women were soft and wonderful and the sex was insane. Maybe it was just Holly.

"Go shower," smiled Holly taking her towel down to dry her hair. "And when you get back, we won't talk about anything."
Gail's cottage was much better than her parents' guest house, decided Holly. The very first day, waking up mid-morning with her arms around Gail and nothing but the sound of nature was restorative. Even at her parents', there had been the noise of family and friends. This was quiet. It was peaceful. And it wasn't boring to just lie there in bed with someone, which was weird. Gail teased her about being frisky in the morning, but it was Holly's low capacity for boredom that caused it. Once a person was up, they were up.

She stretched a little and curled back around Gail's warm form. Her wife was curled on her side, so Holly let her hand glide over the gap between the sleep shorts and slinky top. Holly watched Gail's face scrunch up. Lifting herself up slightly on one arm, Holly eased her hand across the plane of Gail's stomach, tracing her ribs. This continued until Gail caught her hand, stilling it's movements.

"Hi," Holly whispered, her lips lingering over Gail's neck to kiss her softly.

Her wife stirred, grumbling, "You and mornings."

Holly grinned and pressed herself against Gail. "It's your fault, being all sexy and sweet when you sleep." She lowered her voice, keeping it no more than a whisper. "You can't expect me to keep my hands to myself when you're in my bed."

"S'my bed," Gail pointed out, her eyes firmly closed. "My cottage."

"My wife."

There was no reply to that for a moment and Gail let go of Holly's hand. Holly resumed running her fingers across Gail's stomach, under her shirt. "What time is it?"

Holly shrugged and propped herself up on her elbow. She could see her glasses and phone on the counter. "My glasses are over there." There was no point trying to look over there and Holly leaned down to kiss Gail's shoulder as she eased her hand up to caress the softer skin of Gail's breasts.

"You're lucky I'm becoming a fan of morning sex," Gail muttered. She rolled onto her back, slowly, so she didn't lose Holly's hand. Gripping Holly's shirt with both hands, Gail pulled her down so they could kiss.

It had not been an exaggeration that there weren't going to be visitors and that that were just going to spend the days resting and having sex. One afternoon, when Holly had opted for a delicious afternoon nap, Gail went to town for fresh food. She woke up to a mouth watering smells of a grill and found Gail had picked up venison from a local hunter. There had also been seal, which Gail had not purchased and actually objected to on principle, but she had gotten fish and fresh winter vegetables.

The early dinner was perfect and they spent sunset cuddling under a wool blanket with mugs of tea, watching the sun set on the lake. It was damned gorgeous, and while chilly, sitting in the cradle of Gail's legs was perfect.

"Okay, this is beautiful," Gail noted, one arm tight around Holly's waist. "And the sunset's not to shabby."

Holly laughed, her fingers finding Gail's under the blanket. "Are we really going to spend the whole week relaxing and having sex?"
"There are some nice caves, we could go hiking there." Resting her cheek against Holly's head. "Go to the winter farmer's market. It's too cold to go swimming, but if you wanted to try..."

"I always wanted to skinny dip," mused Holly and she felt a ripple through Gail's body. Yep, that was a hit, she grinned. "You just like seeing me naked."

"Have you seen yourself naked, Holly? Shit, there was no going back to men after that."

Holly smiled more, aware Gail couldn't see her face. "You have a pretty stunning body for someone so lazy." She ran her hand up Gail's leg, fingers scratching at the inside of her thigh.

Groaning, Gail put her mug down. "Woman, you have some weird control over me." Both hands now held Holly's waist. "I always liked sex, but damn it, you drive me crazy."

That reminded Holly of a comment from drunk Nick one night. "Nick told me you couldn't be a lesbian because you liked sex," she informed Gail. "I could only presume he meant you liked sex with a penis."

"What? When the hell was that!?" The mixture of relaxation and sexual tension in Gail's body gave way to irritation.

"Back before you moved in with me," Holly soothed, putting her drink down and settling against Gail more. "I was waiting for you at the Penny and he was pretty blasted."

Gail grumbled, "Nicholas is such an ass sometimes. Please tell me you said something cutting like how your hands are way better than his prick?"

"I just told him the sex was awesome." She'd tossed the idea around, at the time, of telling him that they did have penises they could use if they wanted, but drew the line at sharing actual details about their sex life. When Nick was sober, he was generally mortified to even hear about Gail's private life. It did made Holly wonder how they'd ever dated at all and also why Nick was so different drunk.

"You should have told him it was mind blowing. And you are way better than he was." Gail kissed the side of her face and pulled the blanket more snug. "Sometimes I think I'm going to wake up and this is all some weird fantasy in my head after you kissed me in the coat room."

Pinching Gail's leg, Holly pressed her back against Gail. "Not a fantasy."

She couldn't have told Gail why she kissed her at the wedding. It was an impulse, a moment she'd been thinking about for weeks ever since Gail texted her and asked her to see *The Karate Kid*. Sitting in the theater, she'd been struck by Gail's beauty and the ease that came from being with her. The kiss was a whim, just a faint hope of a fantasy no matter how inappropriate, and while it hadn't worked out the way Holly dreamed, it really had become something wonderful.

With a deep sigh, Gail toyed with the hem of Holly's shirt. "And in interrogation," she added.

"You kissed me!"

"The second time. Seriously, you never told me why you were suddenly all into me," teased Gail. "It was just, wham, attack of bullet lips." Pinching her again, Holly shifted around to look at Gail.

"You are insane," smiled Holly and she kissed Gail lightly. "I didn't know how to express what I was thinking in words." They kissed again.

Gail smiled, her canines showing. "That's why you laugh sometimes." Holly blinked, sitting up to
look at Gail with absolute confusion. She what? "You laugh, when you're nervous or happy. It weirded me out the first time. You laughed when we had sex and I figured that was just how you communicated when your nerd brain ran out of words."

There was a downside to being married to a detective. "You need to stop talking," ordered Holly and she kissed her deeply. The wool blanket slipped off Holly's shoulders as she sat on Gail's lap. Eventually, the temperature drove them inside and Holly brought one of Gail's fantasies to life in front of the fire. Afterward, Gail decided that while it was insanely sexy, it was not comfortable to have sex on the floor.

In the end, most of the week was spent in the cottage, sleeping and eating and having sex. And all in all, Holly thought that honeymoons were wonderful things.

When Gail came back from her vacation, her coworkers had decorated her desk with pictures of wild animals. John did his part by bringing her bear claws to eat, which was far more acceptable. Moose photos aside, work slid right back into work. Cases were cases, even if they were often as petty as Holly teased about.

As late summer finally edged towards autumn, Gail and John worked a series of house robberies in an upscale part of town. When Gail lingered over a for sale sign, John elbowed her. "Moving?"

"What? No, I love our place. The kitchen's just small..." She rolled her eyes. "Shut up, I'm fucking domestic, I know, it's depressing."

John chuckled. "You got married, Gail. It's all over."

Groaning, Gail headed back to the car. "This case needs to be over. Oh my god, someone stole your ugly ass tchotchkes."

"Big words."

"I'm finding it hard to give a shit over being upset at losing things, that's all."

"You're just a minimalist," John explained, looking at his notes. "Okay. Did anything stand out at all in those places?"

Gail closed her eyes, "Different house cleaning staff, one had a cook, traffic wear on the stairs... Hours they're home? The break-ins happen when three houses in a row are empty, so the owners all keep some schedule in common."

"It's something," John agreed and wrote that down.

Their phones went off at the same time and they shared a look. That was never good. Gail stared at the text. Prison riots. She swallowed and looked at John. "Station." She was closer to the car door and he lobbed the keys at her.

They pulled in to see most of the division in an uproar. The prison where it started was hours away, but any time there was a riot in one, the risk of a riot in another kicked up. The East Detention Centre was always the problem child, due to rampant over-crowding, and most of the uniforms were being readied as backup.

"Peck! Nash!" Inspector Jarvis was standing by Oliver's office, looking stern.

What was the word Holly used? Vasovagal? That was how Gail felt all of the sudden, feeling a rush
of coldness run through her body, and she knew something bad had happened. There was no magic trick, no secret to just magically know what someone else was thinking. For her entire life, Gail had been taught to pick up on cues and read between the lines. When the Division's Inspector called for her and Traci together there were only two possible outcomes. Both were incredibly morbid.

John touched her arm, "Are you okay? Should I call...?"

"I don't know what it is yet."

She knew, though. She knew what it was and the clues came together like a puzzle. It was so obvious what it had to be. Just like she knew the trial was happening. It was the only reason they'd call both Gail and Traci in together right now. This whole year had been a brutal series of ups and downs, being absolutely shattered by her part over and over. Her body felt cold and clammy, her head spinning slightly as she sat on Oliver's office couch.

"Gail, what's..." Traci stepped in a moment later and stared at Oliver, Jarvis, and then at Gail. "What happened? Is Steve—"

"It's not Steve," Gail said flatly. The bullpen had been too quiet, the buzz that came with a hurt or killed officer was not there. The only action was a prison riot and Gail knew in her heart the truth. "Did Perik start it or is he dead?"

Jarvis' head snapped around, but Oliver laughed softly. It wasn't a funny laugh. Jarvis glared, "He's dead. They're bringing him in for autopsy." Nodding, dumbly, Gail rubbed her hands on her knees. "Peck... Your..."

She blinked. Her... what? What would anything of hers have to do with an autopsy? Except Holly. Oh. "Wife? She... You can't ask her to do that, Jarvis!" Gail knew she looked horrified, and she didn't care. Bad enough she'd have nightmares, Holly didn't need that.

"She's the Medical Director, Peck. It's her job."

Gail stood up, starting to pace, "Yeah and she's married to me, that's got to be a conflict of —"

"Hey," Oliver cut in softly. "Gail." He pointed at the couch and she fell back onto it with a groan. "She's forensics, let her do her job, right?"

Damn him. Damn him. She grimaced and covered her face. If she was Holly, she'd be pissed about not getting to do her job. Traci's hand tentatively rested on Gail's back and she asked the question Gail was thinking. "What happened?"

"During the riot, he collapsed, foaming at the mouth," replied Jarvis. "Oliver, can you..."

"Yeah, yeah, they're mine." The door closed and Oliver grumbled, "I really hate him. Gail, can't you get your godfather to fire him?"

But Gail shook her head, not finding words at the moment, and Traci patted her back again. "Oliver," sighed Traci. "What happened?" The question had to be repeated.

"Not sure yet. Conflicting reports. Either he went down and then the riot started, or he went down right after."

"I thought he was in isolation." Traci's voice shook. She was livid.

"He's in segregation," corrected Oliver. "After the trial, his lawyer got him access to eat and mingle
with other prisoners under guard. Stem the psychological impacts of isolation, things like that.

Humanitarian. Of course. Gail grimaced and concentrated on her breathing. The slow and steady breaths her doctor suggested to stave off a panic attack seemed to be working. It wasn't fair to be having a near flashback when the man was dead. Dead meant it should be over, right?

"I love how nice we're being to a man who murdered eight women and then trained two copycats while in prison," growled Traci, anger seeping off her.

Gail didn't, couldn't, feel angry. She felt empty, similar to how she'd felt when Holly told her she was moving to San Francisco. Something that had been such a huge part of her being was ripped away. The hole, the ache of emptiness, reverberated in her soul. She'd felt anger at Perik for years. She'd felt the absolute hate that kept you up at night wanting to burn the world just so everyone could share the depth of your own pain. But as the months slipped into years, that anguish had faded to an almost comfortable hate. Gail had worn her hate like a shield, wrapping it into her Peck Shell, locking it away to protect her from a repeat.

But Holly. But Holly. Thank god there was Holly.

"Either way. The riot was on when he went down, so it was almost half an hour before they got him to the medical ward. He was DoA. They just zipped him up." The two talked about the situation for a while and Gail felt like a radio station that was tuning in and out.

She couldn't really concentrate. Every other moment, she saw flashes of that day. A door hitting her face, waking up on a table, Jerry's dying eyes looking at her. The damn trunk of the car. The feeling of absolute helplessness in her body, when it just would not listen to the screaming in her brain. Gail knew what she was supposed to do. Kick the taillight, pull the emergency release on the trunk. But her vision was swimming, it was hard to breath, and her legs just would not move.

Forcing herself to remember, Gail told her brain to shut up. That was then, not now. She wasn't alone anymore. She had someone who came to her side when she flipped out, who held her when she cried, and who loved her. Gail was not Holly's second choice or fallback plan. They could share an urn, a biodegradable one if needs be, but they could find an 'as long as possible' together.

Finally Gail found words. "Holly's going to have a shit fit over the forensics," she grumbled. "Contaminations up the ass. No way to process the scene properly."

After a moment of silence, Traci snort-laughed. "God, you're right. What a mess. Couldn't he die in his sleep?"

That would be too convenient and Gail rubbed her face again, as it that would erase everything. "I'm watching the autopsy," she decided, saying it quietly.

"Gail, are you sure that's a good idea?" Traci sounded worried.

"No, but ... Closure, Traci." Her phone buzzed and Gail pulled it out.

*Please tell me you've heard.*

God bless her wife. Gail exhaled and tapped a reply to Holly, ignoring Traci and Oliver for the moment.

*Oliver's stoping me from jumping out a tree.*

*Do you need me to come get you?*
No. I need you to be you.

Not sure what that means, honey.

They want you to do the autopsy.

I told them they're insane.

No one else will let me watch it. Please.

There was no reply to that right away, and Gail put the phone down. Holly was probably chewing her lip trying to figure out how to tell Gail no. Then the phone beeped with four letters. 'Okay.' Holly had given in to logic. "She's going to do the autopsy. Holly is." Gail tapped in a text to John, asking if he could drive her to the lab. "I'm going."

Traci sighed, "I'm coming with you."

Looking between them, Oliver sighed. "Fine. I'll tell other Peck. He can pick you up." That surprised Traci and she thanked him. "Darlin' ... Are you okay?" When Gail shook her head, Oliver sighed again but did not press.

John had not left yet and at Gail's request drove the two to the lab, where Holly was already staring at the body bag. "He looks smaller on the table," John muttered.

"Everyone looks smaller when they're strapped to a table," Gail sighed and was surprised to see Traci wince. Oh good. She'd seen the transcript? Holly, on the other had, gave her a quiet, quelling look, as if to ask her not to be quite so dark right now. Gail didn't want to see her wife in this moment, though. "Hey, Doc, thanks for waiting."

It was harsh, but Gail had to set the tone properly. This was a professional situation. She could deal with Perik as a professional. She was a cop, and cops sometimes had to deal with these things. And this ... This was the last time.

"Detectives," Holly glanced at Gail, her expression wavering between professional pathologist and worried wife. "Are you sure-"

It was John who cut Holly off short, "If anyone's got a right to watch this, it's Detective Peck." He paused and added, "And Nash."

Traci muttered her thanks and wrapped her arms around herself to watch. Gail's hands gripped her belt, wishing she had the heavy, solid, duty belt on. That was always so comforting, like armor or a shield. There were things she missed greatly, being a detective. The simple comfort of being a patrol cop, with fewer responsibilities and drama, had been fun. But at the same time, she'd had that itch to do more and be more.

It was probably Holly's fault, she realized. Finally someone saw her for who she was and loved her anyway, even when it freaked her out. It gave Gail the feeling that she actually could succeed, that she wasn't a second choice. Gail clenched her left fist, feeling the ring tug at her skin slightly. As Holly pulled on her gloves, Gail noticed the ring was off and her eyes drifted to the chain on Holly's neck.

She kept silent through the autopsy, watching as Holly fell easily into work-mode and ignored them all. Samples were taken, post and peri-mortem bruises were noted, and finally she cracked the chest. John and Traci flinched, though Gail did not, and just stared at the body now lain bare and open on the table.
"Gail," hissed Traci. "You're going to give yourself a headache." Blinking, Gail widened her eyes and felt some weird tension in her head lessen. "Unless you've got laser vision or something, glaring won't help."

"Heat vision," muttered Holly from the table. "Superman has heat vision. All internal damage is unrelated to cause of death. He was trampled but that didn't kill him."

Gail grinned a little, taking a bit more joy in the idea of Perik being trampled as he died than she probably should have. God, her therapist was going to have a damn field day with this one. When was her next appointment anyway? Tearing her eyes from the autopsy, Gail checked her calendar and realized she'd need to schedule something sooner than the week after next. Ugh.

As Holly started to process the stomach contents, the door opened and everyone but Holly looked up to see the slightly harried face of Gail's brother. "Oh good, I didn't miss the best part," he deadpanned.

Only Gail smirked. Her brother signed a quick question, asking if she was okay with a nonsensical sign: Are the doves singing?

It was one of the most random signs he'd ever made, back when they were children. The first time he used it, Gail erupted into laughter at dinner and they'd scrambled to explain it away. She was sure her parents never believed the excuses.

Replying with an OK sign, Gail went back to watching. The first autopsy she'd seen, this was the part that had made her lunch consider a return trip. There was just something about the sloshing nature of a stomach that bothered her even now. Never to the point of vomiting, of course. She'd never puked or passed out seeing an autopsy. She might have skipped lunch the first couple of times, but Gail wouldn't let herself fail at that.

"Undigested," muttered Holly, mostly to herself. "Prison food looks disgusting." There was a puff of laughter from all four detectives and Holly looked up, surprised at the audience. "Hello, Detective Peck," she noted, using her wrist to nudge her glasses back up. She'd clearly zoned out on who was in the room and now looked confused at his appearance.

"Dr. Stewart." He paused, "There's a practical reason for me being here, the riots were started by one of the gangs I'm watching."

Gail blinked and looked at her brother. "He pissed off a gang too?"

"Hope not, but if it's not a suicide..." He trailed off and put his hands in his pockets.

"Well. We won't know until the tox results," sighed Holly. "The food could have been poisoned."

Steve flipped open his notes. "Guard says he was served the same food as everyone else, and no one else had any symptoms."

"Videos?" Gail shoved her hands in her pockets, peeking at the notes.

"We're waiting on a copy. Not sure it'll be of any use."

From the other end of the room, John asked, "What was he doing? In GenPop?"


"Sure," John shrugged, in that quiet way he had. He managed to look like nothing drove him
forward but he had a very quiet passion that matched Gail's loud one. "I mean outside in general. Did he have any interactions with inmates? A job?" He looked at Gail, curiously.

She shook her head, "Don't know, didn't care." She'd not wanted the nightmares and tension that came with thinking about him. Initially she'd tried keeping track of Perik, as it seemed like a Peck thing to do, but quickly she'd had to stop. The dreams had been far worse, the more she'd paid attention to him, driving her to do stupid things like get drunk on tequila and sleep with Nick again.

Her brother, not having the same fears and issues, looked through his notes. He needed to, where Gail would not have. Steve didn't have her memory, but he had a remarkable talent for reading people and motives, which Gail did not. After he'd watched Gail conduct an interrogation, Steve told her she broke people by being an unscalable wall that smothered them into submission. It was probably a compliment. "He did have a job," Steve remarked. "Cleaning."

Holly made a noise Gail recognized. She was science-ing in her head. "He was a doctor. It wouldn't be that hard to find or make a poison to kill himself with," she mused. "Hell, all he'd need was some rat poison." Holly stepped back and pulled her gloves off. "Detective, I'm going to need a list-"

"Of every chemical Perik could have conceivably gotten his hands on, right." Steve already had his phone out and was calling his partner.

Getting her assistant, Holly explained what she had done, and asked him to finish up. "He looks twelve," muttered Gail, feeling all of her 30 right now.

"He's 25," smiled Holly, walking towards her office. All four detectives followed, but John stopped at the door. "You can come in..."

"I was thinking I should go back. If the East Centre is rioting, they'll need people to fill in on patrol." Gail sighed. "Wonderful."

"You're not coming," he noted. "Seriously, Gail. I'll taze you myself if you try."

She smirked at him but nodded. Gail wanted to go do her job, but even she could recognize the potential for stupidity in that one. "Traci, you need a ride?"

"I don't know," she sighed, looking at Steve.

The silence held for a moment. "I think," Holly spoke slowly. "We need a goddamn drink is what I think."

After drinks, after what felt like a hundred people coming to the Penny to ask if he was really dead, Gail and Holly went home. There was quiet touching, holding, and whispered questions and answers. They weren't okay, at least Gail wasn't. She felt empty, scared about what happened next, and alone. Holly held her close, promising to be right there, to never leave their tree.

Somehow, in the hold of the arms, in the hug she hated from anyone else, Gail felt safe. She felt protected. She wasn't alone anymore. She was never alone again.
After determining that Perik's death was a suicide, that he'd planned for a moment like this and just waited and waited for the time, Gail had flipped out. Not at Holly, or at anyone at all, she'd just been mad. Oliver dragged her out to the range, letting her shoot for a crazy long time, and the next night Holly made her go to the batting cages.

It was all justified anger. Almost five years of pent up fear, terror and pain had to come out somewhere. Gail's old behavior was to pretend there was nothing wrong, get drunk, and lash out at people. Her current behavior was to inform her wife she was pissed off and had no idea what to do about it, which was why the shooting and the batting cages were a thing. So was running, a trip to the gym with Nick and Traci to try boxing, and pretty much anything to work out her aggression.

By the middle of the week, Gail had finally worn herself out enough to face plant into the bed, fully dressed, and conk out. Holly only took Gail's shoes off, leaving her to hopefully get some rest. That gave her time to talk to her mother about things, which did not go as well as Holly might have wished. Between the clandestine marriage, the trial, the honeymoon, and now this, they really had very little downtime to discuss things like how annoyed her parents were about being left out of it.

It had gotten annoying enough that Gail joked how BitchTits was the only one who hadn't given them crap about the lack of ceremony. Lisa thought it made sense, limit the damage Gail might cause at a wedding. Lily was not amused, but did let it go enough to tell Holly she was happy that Holly was happy, and assure her that the Stewarts found Gail adorable. Yeah, Holly wasn't going to use those exact words on Gail.

Holly still had not spoken to Elaine since the trial and, while Gail had apparently met her mother a few more times since, there had been no attempt to have the three of them talk. Gail made no push to have them meet, nor did she bring up the conversations. Twice, Holly asked about Elaine and each time Gail told her short answers. Simple ones, like how her mother was doing charity work and considering running for city council in the next election. When Holly asked if Gail was going to vote for her mother, the blonde had shrugged.

All Holly really wanted was for things to calm down so she could stop thinking of their marriage as some sort of weird curse, intertwined with Gail's trauma. She was starting to think that asking Celery for some sort of spell to mellow things out would be in order, but the rational part of her brain refused to let that happen.

"You're thinking way too hard," grumbled Gail, knocking Holly out of her thoughts.

"How did... I was going to let you sleep."

Gail was still mostly dressed, having only shed jacket and socks and, apparently, belt. In just a snug green shirt, she looked adorable and rumpled. "I needed a nap," she admitted. "But there's this thing called a sleeping schedule? Where you get to be awake with your wife?"

Smiling, Holly reached up as Gail came near, smoothing her hair down. "When have you ever obeyed a schedule?"

Miffed, the blonde tossed her head and went into the kitchen, pulling out potatoes. "You got me that Jawbone thing." Gail lifted her left wrist to show it off.

"I didn't notice you put that on..."
"After we got back from the cottage. Speaking of, wanna go up next weekend? It's getting warmer and we could go swimming."

Holly watched her wife dice and season the potatoes and toss them in the oven. "We could invite your brother." She got a dirty look from Gail. "What? I don't mind the cottage being a sex cottage, but it is your family cottage."

"Summer," allowed Gail. "They can come up in summer. Maybe it'll give Steve flashbacks, though."

The word hung in the air for a moment. "Speaking of…"

"Not since the autopsy." Gail pulled leftover corned beef out of the fridge, along with bell peppers and zucchini. "That's weird, right?"

"A bit." She got up to help Gail with the dinner, though, and started to feel like life was on its way towards being normal again.

That was clearly a cue for the universe to piss all over her. This time it was in the form of a pair of homophobic detectives. It started innocently enough at the autopsy, Holly gave them some of the results, explained about the lab running more tests, when one asked if she was busy that night.

"I'm married," she smiled, absently. More than once, Holly had heard Gail reply 'Lesbian' to men, but really that wasn't Holly's style. Gail was far more in-your-face in general. To reinforce the point, Holly took her ring out of her pocket and slipped it on.

That should have been the end of it, but he pressed. "What kind of guy? I mean, I just want to know what I'm up against."

"A cop," she sighed. "Excuse me, I have work." She shouldered her way past them and was partway down the hall when she heard it.

"Damn dyke."

Holly stiffened and kept walking, looking ahead but not down. Thank you so very much, universe. That was just what she needed.

The man's partner laughed, "Seriously, don't you know? She's married to that lesbo in Major Crimes over at Fifteen."

"What? There's only one chick in that unit, the hot blonde. You telling me she's a dyke too?"

"Yeah, and she's a Peck."

"Well that explains it, fucking Pecks get away with murder. Should've known she was gay from that damn haircut."

"Too bad, too, right? That's the super hot Peck. All the hot ones are going to hell."

This was a time to just keep walking. She caught a pained look from Katie, who reached for the phone. "They're leaving, let it go," sighed Holly, trying to ignore the commentary about how maybe all she needed was a good bang to be straight. Jesus, some people…

Behind her, there was an annoyed male voice who snapped out, "What the hell are you two doing?"

There was something about the cadence that caught Holly's attention. "Who is it?" The man snapped at the two detectives, informing them that they were losers and fools, and sounding like Gail at her
"Someone Peck," whispered Katie.

It wasn't Steve or Gail, that was for sure, and Holly turned around to see which Peck she was going to have to thank. She did not expect to see Bill Peck.

"That woman you are so blithely insulting is the Medical Director. She is the second highest ranked pathologist in the Province. Her private life, whomever she chooses to marry, is not your damn business. Get the hell back to work."

Holly was torn between the delight of watching the men scurry and the weird feeling of it being at the hands of her wife's homophobic, racist father. It was very weird. When Inspector Peck turned around, she cleared her throat. "Thank you, Inspector."

The man looked awkward and uncomfortable. "It's not..." He sighed, "I'm sorry. They were out of line." He scratched his head, just like Gail and Steve did.

"It happens."

"Does it?" He seemed surprised, which, frankly, surprised Holly as well. How could he not know? "I meant at work. That's... That's not acceptable."

Of course. Pecks had rules. Gail had been adamant about no more messing around at work and about not being unprofessional. They didn't intentionally flirt at crime scenes, they didn't act like work was an extension of their personal lives. They were detectives and doctors and that was okay. Bill's private thoughts on the matter were one thing. They clearly were not to impact his professional life.

Holly sighed. "Not everyone is that professional, Inspector." She turned to go to her office and he cleared his throat. She'd already said thank you, but paused and looked back.

All Bill Peck did was look at her awkwardly before mumbling an apology and leaving. Katie leaned over her desk. "That went from weird to weirder. What was up with him?"

Holly looked at Bill's back. "I really can't say." And she went back to her office.

Public speaking sucked. Gail hated it and avoided it at all costs. She had actual panic attacks about it, had for years. The only time she'd ever done anything like it was reading Jerry's wedding speech at the Penny, and that was different. There was a possibility she was also still on painkillers at the time. Just below that was being put on stage for a show. For years, her parents had done that to her and Steve and it left a bitter taste in her mouth. So having one more day in her full dress uniform was positively annoying and frustrating. And this was a big deal. Fifty people stood on stage with her, Gail the youngest by far and the lowest ranked.

It was all the things she hated about being a good police officer. Why couldn't they just say good job and be done with it? No, no, they had to bust out the stage and a hundred people in uniforms and everything else like a damn brass band. She wasn't even really sure why she was getting the biggest props for the stupid Two Lakes thing this late, anyway. Gangs were stupid. At least Gail knew it was Jarvis who'd put her name in for it. He wanted to overwhelm any of the stupidity from the IA investigation and probably make it look like it hadn't been a total random that Gail had tumbled into the case in the first place.

Of course Traci, who had come with Steve in support, had teased Gail. "It's like you're playing dress up, except you actually like that."
"Shut up," growled Gail. "Just because you made full detective now."

That had happened the week before. "Just smile and be glad the Queen isn't here."

"I'm a damn monkey with a cymbal," she sighed.

"Clang clang," agreed Steve. "You need more fruit on the salad, sister." Holly expressed confusion, and Steve gestured to the ribbons on his regular uniform jacket. "It's called a fruit salad. I've already got three bravery citations to your one. Better hustle, little sister."

Gail rolled her eyes and glanced over at Holly, "He got stabbed. Whoopie."

"Is that all?" Holly smirked and studied Gail's medals instead of her boobs. Like Elaine, Gail only wore the big ones. "Hang on, why do you have one?"

Checking her own ribbons, Gail sighed. "Exactly why you think." She thought of them as stupidity citations and hers was from Perik. At least this one was for the whole Two Lakes fiasco, which was awesome and annoying.

"You didn't even go to that ceremony," Traci pointed out.

Not rising to that bait, Gail chastised her brother. "No one actually calls it that, Steven. Stars and bars, ribbon bars, medals."

"Okay, Gail, go be pretty on stage." Like Steve, since Traci wasn't required to be on stage, she just wore her regular uniform and not the full hassle of a damned starched shirt and gloves. Traci looped an arm through Holly's. "Come on, Doc, let's get good seats for this. I'll take photos."

As the women walked off, Steve squeezed Gail's shoulder. "Come on, it's not so bad. You made the Order!"

"I really don't give a rat's ass, Steve. It's stupid. I was doing my job." Gail shoved her hands in her pockets, not caring that it wrinkled her dress uniform. She wondered how much they fast tracked her award too, thinking of the timing of it all.

"Look, be a Peck, be a Stewart, I don't care and no one else does. But today, the country is going to thank you for doing something most people can't. So shut up, stand up straight, and look serious."

Her brother's words had an odd impact. She had done something most people couldn't do? That thought carried her through the ceremony itself, letting her zone out a little and not stress about the whole being up on stage crap. When she heard her name called, she stood up straight, took the scroll and let the Governor General pin the medal on her jacket. They shook hands, and it was done.

It was hours before the rest was over, and everyone mingled waiting for the dinner to start.

"Have I mentioned how amazing you look in a dress uniform," drawled Holly, handing over a glass of champagne and finally getting a moment to congratulate Gail.

"Yuck it up." Gail sipped the drink. "When they start the dinner speeches, I'm running for the hills."

Holly laughed brightly, tossing her hair back. She'd opted for contacts, which Gail realized she didn't like as much as the glasses. "It's not that bad. A nice dinner, a new award." She reached over and adjusted the new ribbon on Gail's chest. "Member of Order of Merit."

"A MOM award." Gail glanced at the other, minor, awards on her jacket. "Whatever." This was a
ribbon she'd have to wear every time she dressed up, too.

"Pretty sure this is a big deal."

"It's a huge deal and I hate it."

Leaning in, Holly kissed Gail briefly. "Hush. The city of Toronto thanks you for your service. And if you behave, I'll thank you personally when we get home."

"That's a better offer then anyone has made all day, Holly," sighed Gail. She wrapped one arm around her wife's waist and grinned.

Cupping Gail's face with her free hand, Holly smiled. "Go be Detective Peck until the dinner speeches. I'm sure we can slip out then."

With a dramatic sigh, Gail put down her glass, half empty. "I want you sober, Stewart." Her wife made a snazzy and inaccurate salute, leaving Gail to mingle with politicos.

Yes, she was the daughter of Elaine and Bill Peck. Yes, granddaughter of Harold. Yes, she was a detective. Organized Crimes. Well, Major Crimes. Why? Because she liked the diversity. Yes, that was a wedding ring on her finger, she was married to a doctor. Yes, the Medical Director. Yes, the woman.

The conversations were all the same. A couple muckity-mucks remembered her from the pride parade and were impressed to know she was a detective now. Other than those deviations from the script, it was insanely rote and boring.

"Gail?"

She nearly shot her Roy Rogers out her nose. "Dad?" Not the person she was expecting to see at all.

Inspector Bill Peck looked ... bad. He was tired, pale, and not as well groomed as when he was married. "You look good," he smiled at her.

"Uh, thank you." She couldn't say the same and looked at his hand. No ring. "I'm sorry. About the divorce." Her mother had not been explicit as to why she left him, but Gail had a theory.

"It wasn't you, kiddo," he sighed. Gail tilted her head to one side. "No, it wasn't. This was a long time coming." Her father looked away. "It's strange, hearing the things you think said by someone else at your little girl. Did ... Did your ... Did she tell you I saw her?" He glanced over at where Holly was laughing with Steve and Traci.

"About the assholes in the hallway? It happens, Dad." Gail shrugged. That part of lesbian life was her next to least favorite. The silent judging bothered her more. "I made her file a complaint, though."

He nodded. "Good. I wrote them both up." There was silence and they both looked away. "This is awkward."

"Well... I'm still a lesbian and you're still not okay with that." When he didn't reply, she sighed. Right. Gail shifted her weight. "I'm going... Somewhere else."

"I don't understand it," he finally said. "I don't get it at all, it's strange and different and I don't do change well... That's why I'm a white shirt, Gail. I can do this. This job, this work. But you... You aren't me. And you're not your mother. You are an amazing detective, and a wonderful woman. But
I don't know if I can change enough for you."

Gail flinched. "Then don't. Or whatever, Dad. It's fine. I don't need it." That was a lie. She wished
she had her father or mother to talk to, that she'd been able to confide in them four years ago, or
maybe ten when the stupid Nick thing happened the first time. What would have happened if she'd
never accepted the proposal? Would she still be a cop? Would she still be here? What if they'd been
there for her after Perik? Would she still be this screwed up?

"That's my fault," he grimaced. "We made you too independent. You can do it all on your own, and
... I'm sorry for that, sweetheart. I truly am."

"But you can't change, Dad," she sighed. "If you do, if you ever really want to, maybe that would
matter. But it doesn't because it's the same shit. Okay? Don't do this to Steve too."

Her father looked like he was slapped. "Gail."

"You know, at last Mother tries," snapped Gail. "She tried to explain and apologize. You're just
making more excuses." Narrowing her eyes, Gail asked, "So why? Why did you do it?"

Bill looked a little confused. "Do what?"

"Start being disappointed in me."

That won her a moment of silence. "Sweetheart-"

"No," she frowned. "No. You are. I can tell. You've been disappointed and distant and ... And
unsupportive for years. You want to talk to me now, you tell me why or you get out." When her
father's face stilled and his lips pressed together, she knew he had no answer. And that hurt worse
than anything she'd ever felt before. Her own father had no reason for being this way. It was just
because.

"I didn't know," he finally said, tersely. "I suspected, but I supposed I knew inside." His eyes
flickered over Gail's shoulder. "You were always different."

"Oh bullshit," snapped Gail. "You were disappointed because you thought I might be queer? Crap,
at least Mom had a reason I understand." While her mother's reasons we're screwed up, at least she
recognized it and was sorry.

Bill Peck shook his head. "Not that." He looked away. "My father's expectations of you... And you
just did your own thing."

She blinked. "I'm not the Peck he wanted? So no matter, what, how awesome Mother was, or Steve,
I was the failure?" And her father nodded. "Right. You're an asshole, Dad." Turning her back on her
father, Gail walked over to the hors d'oeuvres and picked up a canapé.

It wasn't like she was mad at her father. She was just disappointed and sad. Parents disappointing
children. It seemed backwards. Wasn't she meant to be the disappointment? The Peck who did it all
wrong? But there was her answer. Her father projected the feelings of his father, who didn't
understand a weirdly gifted kid and pushed her away instead. They made Elaine do it too. Jesus, no
wonder Gail had been so screwed up.

"Well you look like someone pissed in your beer." The familiar voice of her brother brought her
back down to earth. "What's wrong, sister mine?"

"Dad. He came."
Steve's head snapped up, startled and angry. The red spots on his face, the ones she'd first seen when a neighbor called her a four letter word starting with a C at age ten, shone brightly. "That son of a bitch," he growled.

Grabbing his arm, Gail hissed. "Stop that right now, Steven. Not now, not here."

He stared at her but did not move. "Shit, you sound like Mom."

"Fuck you too," she snapped, letting go and picking up another snack.

"Crap. What did he say?"

"The usual shit. He can't change, he doesn't understand. Oh, and he didn't like someone else calling me lezbo names." That revelation made her brother double take. "Yeah, who knows. It's fine." She left the rest out for now. They could talk about it later.

Steve put a hand on Gail's shoulder. "No it's not. Don't do this again, okay? The walls and shells or whatever the hell you call it. See those hot ladies over there?" He turned her and gestured at Holly and Traci, who were laughing about something. "They love us."

"I know, brother, I know." She knew. She really had no idea how it all happened, though. How did meeting a pathologist in the woods change her life? "It sucks, though. You never get to have it all, do you?" Gail glanced at her brother.

"You mean the kid and our parents and Holly?" At Gail's nod, he sighed. "Traci and I are hung up on the kid thing."

That was news and Gail eyed him. "I know she's open to the idea." They'd talked about that, years ago, when Nick and Andy were undercover. Traci had been thinking about more children with Jerry, at least.

Steve shook his head. "I don't know how you thought you could be a mom." Before Gail could take umbrage, he added, "Have you seen our parents? They're insane. What if we're that bad?"

"We won't be. We changed, Steve." She leaned into her brother's shoulder and smiled. "You're great with Leo, you'll be great with your own."

"Until they're teenagers."

"So long as they're not firemen," Gail joked.

They went back to their ladies, suffered through pre-dinner speeches. Holly made it more fun by whispering made up back stories to the speakers. That one was a nuclear physicist who lost his job by not being able to pronounce nuclear. This one was had a hobby of trains, and filled his attic with a miniature town.

Sadly, they did not escape without injury. The dinner held off desert until after the post-dinner thank yous, which Gail felt was foul play, but they lingered together over the really good cake and coffee, not talking much at all. Being in public and getting to be silent was a joy, since it reinforced a sort of them-ness, even when Steve and Traci hung out. That didn't stop the world from popping it's nose in and a few stuffed shirts came to introduce themselves to Gail and Holly as a unit to express their own congratulations.

Including Gail's father.
"I just wanted to say congratulations," he said, quietly. "I don't know if you care, but you're the youngest Peck in the order." Inspector Peck left it at that, tilted his head at Holly and Traci, said "Son" to Steve, and left.

A long moment of silence reigned at the table. "That was weird," Traci decided. Everyone agreed. "Does he even know you're married?"

Nodding, Gail took Steve's last bit of cake as her brother frowned. "You're the youngest Peck in the order?" When Gail looked at him, surprised, she saw the twinkle in his eye and shoved his shoulder.

On the drive home, Holly sighed after Gail related the conversation with her father. Holly explained, "Sometimes I feel like our marriage is cursed."

"Wow, that's comforting," laughed Gail from the wheel.

"No, seriously, not us. Just the marriage." Holly ticked things off on her fingers. "We get married, you interrogate Perik. We have a honeymoon, he dies. You get the biggest award ever, and your father's a dick. It's worse than when we try to go to the opera or ballet."

Those nights had been pretty horrible how they ended. "So you want me to give away the tickets to Yo-Yo Ma?" That had been a rare request by Holly for a show. She really liked the music.

Holly shook her head. "No, God no. I want to go. I even know what I want to wear," she smiled. "I just think ... It's weird, seeing your father."

"Even for Pecks, it's incredibly weird." Gail sighed. "It does sound like a a curse. Maybe we should ask Celery to exorcise us or something." There was silence from the passenger seat and Gail peeked at Holly. Her lovely scientist was looking incredibly guilty and Gail started to laugh.

"Shut up!" Holly groaned and covered her face. The idea of Holly even considering the supernatural was hilarious. She'd tease her wife about that later, though perhaps after talking to Celery first herself.

"She could do a whole sage smudging in the bedroom," joked Gail. "Purify the house. Take her up to the cabin, too."

"Oh my god, I'm never living this down, am I?"

"Dr. Holly Stewart, contemplating a Wiccan purification ritual? No, I'm hanging on to this for years."

Another groan and Holly shook her head, "How about I bribe you with incredibly awesome sex."

Gail smirked. "Oh and I'm the raging narcissist?"

But Holly was right. It damn well was amazing.
Science. She was a scientist. Listening to Gail and Celery actually discuss this as if it was a logical, rational, thing was galling.

Technically, Celery was just here to talk about the wedding. While Oliver had indeed proposed over a year ago, they'd waited to marry until things were in alignment. That had prompted Gail to joke that she and Holly should have waited, which turned into Celery being brought into the drama of the last few years.

Gail only gave her a short version of the Perik drama. Attacked, drugged, kidnapped, nearly died, saved. It surprised Oliver, who admitted much later that he'd never heard Gail voluntarily mention it at all since she left the hospital. Celery took it in stride and said she knew Gail was the right person to help Oliver. A hug had happened, much to Gail's obvious annoyance.

Two years in and Gail hated hugs still. She hated someone else initiating physical contact. This wasn't new, though, promised Oliver. She'd been like that from the day he met her. After the hug, Celery asked to give the house a cleansing ceremony. That was when Holly balked internally. It was stupid and ridiculous, but she rolled her eyes and let Gail carry on talking about it, regardless of Holly's feelings.

When Celery looked over, though, Holly got a bit of a shock. "Your wife has a lot of negative energy."

"Holly?" Gail looked dumbfounded.

"Me?" Holly felt dumbfounded.

Wisely, Oliver said nothing at all.

Celery nodded. "Energy flows. Gail has been slowly cleansing herself since I've known her, taking her insecurities and washing them away. But you, Holly, you still hold on to fear and doubt. You worry about Gail, you second guess your choices. So your energy swarms around you both. Why did you run?"

Holly felt like she'd been slapped and turned to Gail. "What did you tell her!?"

Holding up her hands, Gail shook her head rapidly. "Nothing! What would I tell her?" Then to Celery, Gail asked, "Oliver?"

"Not me, darlin'," he promised. "Celery, honey, you might want to explain that one." The man was far too patient. Holly crossed her arms, fuming, and Gail looked torn between backing away and holding her hand.

If this bothered Celery, it didn't show. "You tried to run from Toronto. From failure. And not just Gail. Before that."

How the hell does anyone know those things? Especially someone who barely knew her at all! "That's not anything about this," she muttered.

"You let your family run."

No. Absolutely not, no. That was not up for discussion and there was no possible way Celery knew
anything. She was just cold reading, nothing more.

"What the actual fuck!?!" Holly snapped and stood up. "Smudge the damn house, I don't care!" She stomped up the stairs and slammed the bedroom door.

Everyone had secrets. Everyone had parts they didn't want to share. She was still learning things about Gail, secrets or pasts left forgotten, and it was okay that way. You didn't dump everything out in the open to everyone. But she did not want to talk about that with Celery or Oliver. She wasn't sure she wanted to talk about it with Gail, for that matter. Holly fell onto the bed, her body pounding with fear and anger and frustration.

There was a voice at the door, "You coming out? The bourbon and scissors are out here." Gail. Of course.

"I thought you were smudging the house," grumbled Holly.

"No. Not ... Can I come in, Holly?"

"It's your house too."

The door opened. "They went home," explained Gail and she sat on the side of the bed. "Celery said she was sorry."

"I'm sure." Holly knew she sounded bitter.

Not touching her, Gail spoke. "It's funny how I always think I'm the one who runs. But ... I don't. Not away at least. I push people away so that it'll hurt less. Chris, Nick. You." Gail fidgeted and Holly looked over to see her wife playing with her ring. "I'm not pushing you, Holly."

Sighing, Holly covered her face. "I know." She screwed up her face, well aware that Gail couldn't see it. "It would have been a hell of a lot easier to run away than look at you." Gail made a confused sound. "That's what I was thinking. When you told me I was the best thing that ever happened to you, I thought if I just went away and was me somewhere else, it'd be easier. I'm not as strong as you, honey."

A hand touched her leg. "Holly." The tone was familiar. Fond and frustrated, almost chastising. Holly remembered the tone well. She'd used it the day Gail came back from the hospital, swearing no one was looking for her shoulder to cry on.

"I was supposed to move to Vancouver, with my parents. I chickened out, stayed here. Because... I wanted to get away from them. Be me without them. Not have to see the, every day and explain what I wanted to be." She took her hands off her face. "I love them, I do. But it's easier to run away."

Looking thoughtful, Gail just nodded, not saying a thing. Holly reached down and covered the hand on her leg. "I second guess myself a lot," Holly noted. "Not professionally, personally. I got burned, a lot, before you. And... How can you be friends with Nick and Chris? It's ... I don't understand that. Not friends like that. You worked with him after you broke up. You're still family, even after everything."

"Because of everything," Gail pointed out. "It's why I was still your friend when we broke up."

Holly snorted. "Honey, I love you but we were never friends. We were always headed here."

Shrugging, Gail did not argue. "You don't have to tell me what you're running from, Holly. It'd be
nice if you didn't shout at Oliver, I kind of like him, but you don't have to tell me, or anyone else, everything."

They looked at each other and Holly sighed, tugging Gail's arm. "Come here." They shifted on the bed so they could lie side by side. "I want to run on both legs. I'm just afraid of the consequences. Is it a zero-sum game? Can we only be happy as an us if we become inspector and chief? Could we be happy here? What about a family?" She sighed, "I just don't know." The silence following her word vomit hung in the air.

"Nobody knows, Holly," Gail said after a while. They lay on their backs for a while, feet dangling off the end of the bed. "Are you happy now?"

"Yes," she said without hesitating. Holly turned her head to look at Gail and asked, "Are you?"

There was a brief pause and Gail snort-laughed. "Yes, but it's very odd." Part of that conversation had been said before. Happy was a strange place to be.

While Gail didn't ask, Holly felt the question hanging in the air. Why didn't she go to Vancouver.

"You know how Lisa and Rachel don't really get why I do what I do?" Gail nodded. "My parents get it less."

That surprised Gail, apparently. "They seemed pretty okay with it."

"Yeah, there was a … They didn't pay for part of med school, not after I told them I was going into pathology." Holly sighed. "They're over it now, but yeah, that did not go over really well."

Gail made a surprised sound. "You knew you wanted that before they moved to Vancouver." The way Gail didn't phrase things as questions was always a little disconcerting. She just knew things, or deduced them, and didn't ask. Of course, Gail once told her that you never asked unless you really didn't know, it made you sound unprepared.

"I found a dead body when I was a kid." Glancing, Holly was not surprised to see the nonchalant expression on her wife's face. For Gail, that was clearly pretty much normal. "I forget where we were… It wasn't home, we were in Calgary for some reason, but I can't remember anything except being outside, alone. And I just looked at the body. I wondered what had happened. How did all the parts that go into making us work just … stop."

"Did you call the police?"

"Dad did, after he found me just looking at the guy." Holly moved her arms, folding them under the back of her head. "But I just wanted to know, I wanted to understand why things did that, why they broke, and how they could find out after the fact."

Rolling to her side, Gail propped her head up with a hand. "How old were you?"

"Eight. I thought I just wanted to go into medicine, fix people and save lives, but I kept thinking about that dead guy for years. So… Forensic pathology."

"Huh … So when did you want to be a fire engine again?" Holly looked up at her wife, confounded, so Gail went on. "I mean, if I get this right, you wanted to be a fire engine, then you saw a dead body and wanted to a doctor, but your parents freaked out when you said pathology, because clearly you're into icky dead things and they screwed up?"

When it was put that way, it was pretty sensible. "Yeah."
"And Rachel and BitchTits just think you're normal weird, but you... you totally scared girls off with the smell." Gail smiled brightly, her honest and open smile. "I get it. You figure it's easier to run off and pretend it didn't happen. That makes sense."

Holly frowned, "Are you sure? You just lost me."

Leaning down, Gail kissed her cheek. "It does. All that weird shit that happens when we're kids decides how we're going to deal with shit when we're older, and we don't always know how to process it to get what we want and where we want."

If that was what Gail took from it, that wasn't so scary. "I don't like the part where I don't know what the end is," Holly sighed. "I don't know which way to go half the time."

"Well. The movie was wrong."

"Huh?"

"The only winning move is to keep playing."

Holly blinked a few times and realized her wife had just paraphrased *War Games* at her. She snickered. "Why am I the nerd?" The laughter bubbled up inappropriately, but there it was.

"Because," Gail said loftily. "You speak Elvish."

Weddings still sucked, though Gail had to admit that this wedding was far less normal. For her. First of all it was outside, which was novel for Gail. Second, half the people wore jeans. Third, it was a handfasting. And that was truly an odd thing. It was taking a normal wedding, which was stupid to start with, and made it even more fake and stupid.

"I'm just saying that if people wear jeans, it's lame," she muttered to Traci.

They were both waiting on their respective partners, carpooling after a last-second case popped up. "I've seen the pictures, you wore jeans when you married Holly."

"That was a marriage, not a wedding."

Traci gave Gail a look. "Why didn't you have a wedding?"

"Don't start, Nash," she sighed, and slouched in her seat. "I put on nice clothes. Ollie didn't tell me this was hippie central." Traci said nothing, not even pointing out that it was a handfasting, not a wedding, and the civil ceremony had been done three days before. "I hate weddings," Gail added, knowing she was being surly and petulant.

"Technically it's a handfasting." There it was.

Gail grimaced. "Same idea. Everyone's all happy and perky and fake. Fake fake fake. They spend a day in pretend fairy land." She waved a hand at the crowd.

Two hands landed on her shoulders. "I know, it's awful."

It was hard not to smile and Gail reached up to cover one of Holly's hands with her own. "You two are a match made in grumpy-ville," Traci smirked. "How did you keep her out of trouble at the last wedding you went to?"

"Frank and Noelle's? We got drunk and hid in a coat closet." Holly squeezed Gail's shoulders. "Sit
While Gail did sit up, she grumbled. "Can we ditch?" She wasn't serious. This was Oliver and as much as she hated being there, she'd stay for him. They all settled in to the chairs for the oddest wedding Gail had ever seen. It started with a pretty fruit and nutty preamble, complete with remembering to to turn off cellphones, and what the hell a handfasting meant anyway.

Then the guests were welcomed and the officiant (a woman who called herself a reverend, with a shock of white, curly, hair), droned on about various things Gail ignored until she heard her talk about unconditional love, and how the ideal was wrong. That it was the case of all relationships to see the truth. That was interesting and Gail started to pay attention.

"In a marriage, we speak not of perfection, but of expecting and accepting imperfection and human frailty. We must say to each other the truth: I know I will anger you, that I will hurt you and you me. But know in your heart as I do in mine that there is love here. There is affection and friendship, and this is stronger than any pain caused. I know nothing is caused by malice or pettiness, as I trust we are together for a reason. I will never throw this away. I know and trust we will live together in love and joy and harmony."

Glancing at Holly, Gail laced her fingers through the other woman's. Holly glanced back, apparently surprised at the timing of the moment of affection. "At our worst," the reverend went on, "we will fight. And at our best we will fight with, for, and beside each other. We will fight for the greater good without fear of abandonment. For the desire to be together for a lifetime is indeed something well worthy of fighting for." The reverend smiled broadly. "And these, dear friends, are the promises that you have been invited to bear witness to this day."

It shouldn't have impacted her, but for the first time Gail heard words at a wedding that made sense. Not the gods and goddesses and earth blessings bits, that was stupid. The realistic viewpoint was interesting though. They'd fight but they were worth fighting for. It was a love she could understand and abide by, because it was a promise she would be able to keep.

After the ceremony concluded (it involved an actual broom jump, which kind of ruined the pretty interesting truth thing) and dancing, she and Holly found themselves standing to the side watching a very peculiar dance. "Are they ever untying their hands?" Gail found it highly amusing to watch Oliver and Celery dancing with their hands, literally, tied together.

"It's funny how things work out. It's never how you expect," sighed Holly. "It's never what you think it'll be going in."

Gail chuckled. "Can you know? Isn't that the fun part of life?"

With a tired smile, Holly spun her ring around. "That's funny, to hear from you. You never struck me as someone who likes change."

"I like mystery," Gail noted. "That's why the getting dressed part is fun." She reached over and took Holly's left hand, running her thumb on the ring. "I didn't expect this either." Sometimes she wondered if Holly had wanted a big wedding and why she had dragged her feet telling her parents. For Gail, not telling people was for fun. She had a perverse sense of humor.

While Holly shared her demented brand of funny, right now the other woman was looking edgy. "The things we want at twenty and thirty and forty are so different," she sighed.

Gail thought about that. At twenty she wanted to get laid. At thirty, she wanted her career and her wife. "You're not that old, Holly." Her wife wrinkled her nose.
"I'll be 40 and you'll be 33," Holly sighed. "It feels further and further apart sometimes. Like we're going different places."

Woah. What? "Hey, what's going on? I think I'm having a different conversation here." She kept hold of Holly's hand, gently rubbing the back of her hand with her thumb.

Holly stared at their hands. "I was just thinking. Oliver and Celery. They're so different and they come at things totally differently. How did they get here?" She turned and looked at the dancing, a little sadly.

Remembering what Oliver told her, Gail smiled. "Sometimes you fall for people you don't expect, Holly. You know... life changes and sometimes you just fall for someone and it changes everything. But life changes, and it's totally fine so long as you're happy." She squeezed Holly's hand. They were happy, right?

"I just wanted to have fun," sighed Holly, and Gail was sure they were still not having the same conversation. But the words rang a bell Gail had very much tried to ignore. "Maybe I was still trying..." Holly stopped. "I just don't get why it has to be so complicated. This should be simple."

Gail frowned, "Of course it's complicated. Life's complicated."

"That's not what I'm trying to say. I didn't want this ever," Holly's hands waved, gesturing at herself and Gail.

Her stomach fell. Now? Now after almost three years and a marriage that wasn't even her idea originally, her wife didn't want this? Didn't want them? The emphasis on 'want' was seriously throwing her off. "That... You don't want this? Us?" Gail swallowed, her mouth and throat dry.

Holly hesitated. "I didn't. Gail, I didn't want to have a complicated relationship. I didn't want to fall in love with someone who... God, Gail, I do love you. I love you so damn much and it scares the shit out of me sometimes, because I did not want this, ever. I wanted something easy, something fun. That's why Lisa said that. Because I did for years. Because anything else was terrifying. I wanted easy love. I wanted easy everything. That's why I just go with what other people want. It's easy."

Stepping closer, Holly reached for Gail's hands. "I kept telling myself to fall in love with someone happy, and then you can just be happy. But I didn't. I fell for the breathtaking beauty of pain."

Wincing, Gail let Holly hold her hands, trying to figure out what she was supposed to say to that. Holly squeezed her hands, "Why do you think I never lived with anyone before you?"

Okay. She remembered Holly mentioning before that she'd never lived with a girlfriend (or had anyone over to her place except Gail). Gail held on to that for a moment; it was promising. "I'm really giving you a Parlay here, Holly, 'cause I have no idea where this is going."

Her wife nodded. "You changed me. You made me invest in an imperfect life." One hand let go, reaching to touch Gail's face. "You made me think I was an idiot for letting you go and even stupider for thinking about leaving, because love is complicated. It's hard. I look at my parents and I see an easy love, and I... I didn't think about how they got there. How hard it was and what you have to give up to have it."

Taking a deep breath, Gail asked, "You didn't want us?" Because try as she might, she was stuck there. Stuck on that confession, those words that hit her so hard.

"Not the way you did," admitted Holly. "Giving up my freedom, letting someone in this much, I thought it meant giving up myself and who I was and that terrified me. It's why I ran."
"And... Now?"

She watched Holly swallow, nervous and scared. "It makes me better. You make me better. I wouldn't, I couldn't be here without you." Holly then whispered. "I love you, I love the me I am with you."

Gail exhaled. It didn't really explain everything, but unpacking what was in your head wasn't easy. If anyone knew that, she did. Holly watched Gail's face, scared, chewing her lip, and Gail nodded. Okay. "I know what we need to do," she decided. "Wait here."

With a squeeze of Holly's hands, Gail slipped back into the party and stole a bottle of champagne and two flutes. "What are you doing?" Holly looked confused.

"Hold this." She handed the bottle to her wife and took her other hand. There was only one thing to do right now, and it required champagne and some place quiet. Oliver's wedding was far less fancy than Frank and Noelle's. There was no coat closet needed on this warm weather day and it had to be outdoors. But. Behind one of the tents was a quiet and dark corner, hidden by bio-degradable boxes. Gail snagged a tablecloth off a pile as they passed, tossed it on the ground, and grinned. Perfect.

When Gail pushed aside a box and sat down against it, Holly stifled a laugh. "I'm still not borrowing your clothes, Peck." She sat down beside Gail and popped the bottle open.

"I'll have you know I own both fleece and backpacks, Stewart," smiled Gail, holding out the glasses. They sipped the champagne and both made faces, spitting it out. "Oh my god, this is horrible! What is this crap? Did they stomp on it with dirty feet?"

Holly held up the bottle, eying it suspiciously. "While I appreciate the reconstruction of our first kiss..."

"Yeah, no." Gail put her glass on top of a crate and turned to face Holly. "I'm not making emergency situations to get out of trees, not with you."

"I'm not running away. I'm not running from myself."

"Okay," agreed Gail. "I..." She stopped and looked and her hands for a moment. "I thought we were easy. Compared to everything else." They had been so easy compared to the constant battles with Nick, or the draining complacency of Chris. In the last year, she'd started to believe that she hadn't be the problem after all, or at least not the only problem in her past relationships.

"Easy doesn't describe it for me, honey," sighed Holly. "Everything about this is hard. I didn't plan to fall in love."

Gail laughed softly, "Oh and I did?" She could see the fear for what it was now, however. Reaching over, Gail cupped Holly's face. "I have it on good authority you don't have to know everything right now." She leaned in and rested her forehead against Holly's.

"I should have told you before," whispered Holly, her hands covering Gail's.

"No," Gail said firmly. "We both came into this with a past, Holly. We've both loved people before, we've had our hearts broken, and it worked out now. We wouldn't be the us we fell for without it." She kissed Holly softly, "Tell me whatever whenever you're ready."

Holly squeezed her eyes closed and nodded a little. "Thank you."

They settled against the boxes, Gail wrapping an arm around Holly's shoulder. Without resistance,
her wife pressed against her side and took her left hand, toying with Gail's ring. Closing her eyes, Gail rested her cheek against Holly's head. "This is nicer than the last wedding we hid at."

"Really?" Holly laughed. "Weird fight and all?"

Why did the stupid witch have to be right? They would fight. They would disagree. They would have moments where they made each other angry. And that was okay, because they weren't doing it to hurt each other. You couldn't say that of some of Gail's past relationships. She'd very much tried to hurt Nick, just to get a reaction. Gail wouldn't be telling anyone she got something useful out of the pagan ceremony though. She could keep that for herself. "This time, if you kiss me, I won't be confused about what it means or how I feel about it."

Moving away slightly, Holly smiled. "You're much too good to me." And she kissed Gail, almost the same way she had that first time.

"I think the line is 'you're insane', Holly." But she leaned in for a second kiss.

That was how Izzy found them, making out behind the tent, which was definitely a better way to end a wedding than they had last time.

The warm afternoon on the lake was spoiled by the sound of screaming children. Holly winced as she heard Sophie and Winnie shriek at Leo. The trio had been absolutely unholy the last two days, up all hours and causing no end of headaches with their insane games. The worst part was it was her own idea. Holly had suggested they invite people up for Victoria Day, since it had been unseasonably warm. Steve and Traci brought Leo, Oliver and Celery brought his youngest, and Sophie... Was always an exception.

Holly did adore the girl, but she realized quickly why Gail had been so loathe to allow people up. There was a severe case of cognitive dissonance, having all the people around places where she and Gail had sexscapades. She missed that. This trip, they'd had to suffice with being polite and entertaining guests. Not that there hadn't been some sex, but it had been quiet and in the master bedroom.

A bottle of pills rattled by her head and Holly looked up to see Traci holding Aleve. "Gail said you probably had a headache by now," she smiled.

"I love those kids, but it's like a grenade sometimes," whinged Holly, taking the bottle gratefully.

"It's worse when they're all girls." Sitting in the lounger beside Holly, Traci adjusted her hat. "You two are staying till Tuesday?"

Under the pretense of cleaning, they were, but Gail admitted there was a cleaning company that was set to come by later in the week. It was one of the benefits of having a cottage all paid for. It made Holly feel like one of the Crawley's from Downton Abbey and Gail had just shrugged. Seeing as it was really the only extravagance Gail allowed herself besides guns and shoes, Holly wasn't going to tell her to stint herself.

Besides. It meant they could spend Monday, after the others left, enjoying themselves.

When she compared it to the camping trip, Holly found it was much more fun to spend the nights with children and parents than the others. She did like Gail's rookie class, but much like the kids, more than three at a time was a lot to take in and Andy would have brought Sam along. They did get invited along again, but Gail had said no way and no how was she spending a grubby weekend with boys again. At the cottage, bathtime before bed was a requirement, even for children on the cusp of
teenhood. Especially for those children.

The frightening normalcy of life and the quiet of the cabin was a juxtaposition Holly felt comfortable with. And after dinner and s'mores (because Gail would never forget that) and stories by the fire pit, the children were cleaned and tucked in. The adults, having not spent their day running and screaming, took to the various Adirondack lounges and couches to watch the sky and fire and embrace the quiet.

"Thank you," said Celery, breaking the silence at last. "Oliver's cabin isn't near a lake."

"I also heard it runs off a generator," teased Gail, settled in Holly's arms.

Oliver snorted, one arm wrapped around Celery's waist, "It's a manly cabin."

Sprawled on the couch, Steve's head rested in Traci's lap. "You can keep it, Oliver. Mom may be crazy, but God help me this cottage is wonderful. I'm glad you got the keys, Garbage Pail."

Holly gently ran her fingers through Gail's hair. "Me too. I feel like a grownup. Cottage country on the weekends."

With her normal, morbid, humor, Gail chimed in, "Cutting people up on the weekdays." Cheekily, Gail let her fingertips caress Holly's knee. It was very distracting.

"This is a nice place. It's a good place," Celery smiled. "I knew you were nice."

Feeling Gail about to make some Gail-esque reply, Holly kissed her shoulder, shushing her.

"She has a rep to maintain," Traci explained. "Ice Queen of Fifteen. When she gets drunk, she's cuddly."

Oliver smiled, "Don't poke the bear, Nash." He sipped his beer and asked, "Gail, how's it going with your partner?"

"John?" Gail shifted against Holly and shrugged. "Good. He's like the least annoying parts of Nick and Steve. Not as awesome as you, though. You were the best partner."

The confession seemed to catch everyone by surprise, except Holly (who had heard it before) and Celery. Steve picked his head up. "Did my baby sister say nice things?"

Miffed, Gail pointed out, "I can be nice."

"Can," agreed Steve. "I blame Holly on the fact that you are."

Gail's hand stilled and she sat up, leaving the warmth of Holly. Uh oh. "Traci, scoot." When the other woman didn't, Gail shrugged and tossed the water in her cup at both of them.

Yelping, Traci shoved Steve out of the way. "Gail!"

"I warned you," she laughed and scrambled to her feet, taking off down the pier. Steve was a few steps behind her and Holly covered her mouth to smother the laughter. She watched Gail duck under her brother's arm and shove him into the water only to have his flailing hand grab her shirt to pull her in after.

The concerned father in Oliver frowned. "Are they going to drown each other?"

Holly shook her head. "Probably not." She handed Traci a towel. "They have this rule how teasing
is okay but they don't hurt each other." Standing up, Holly spied the two pale forms swimming further out. Put that down as another solo sport Gail was good at. The woman would not drown.

"I think they're racing," opined Celery. She was right, it seemed, as the Pecks reached some spot, an invisible marker known only to frequent visitors, and turned around, rushing back to shore. From their position, it was impossible to see who won but that didn't seem to be on anyone's mind as the siblings clambered out of the water, dripping wet and laughing.

"Towel, towel, towel," pleaded Gail, teeth chattering, as she ran back up the pier. "God that was cold!"

Looping a big towel around Gail's shoulders, Holly kissed her lightly. "You're insane." Gail shuddered in the towel and grabbed Holly for a wet, cold, hug. The yelping was kept to a minimum by Gail kissing her.

The next morning, the other couples departed. Oliver and Celery took Sophie with them, much to the girl's annoyance. But she and the other kids had school and that was that. Finally alone, they actually did clean up the cottage first. Laundry and dishes and garbage were sorted before Gail went to town to make a trash run while Holly collapsed on the outdoor couch, soaking up sun.

It would be nice if life was always as simple as it was up at the cottage. You got up, you ate, you read, you played, you rested. The rest of life was far more complicated and hard. You never got to spend as much time with the people you loved as you might want, you had to work on cases you didn't always enjoy, and things were messy.

They had both, at some point or another, said things in the heat of the moment that they regretted and didn't really mean. Tazing eyes and derogatory comments about jobs aside, it was time to stop being so impulsive about everything in her personal life. If you take the time to build things up the right way, slowly and carefully, you ended up in a pretty nice place.

"Hey," announced Gail, bounding up the side stairs. "There was a guy selling a bear skin rug in town!"

Holly eyed her wife. "You didn't…"

"I did not." Laughing, Gail leaned over the back of the outdoor couch. "This wasn't terrible. Thanks for making me invite people."

"Thanks for deciding we have to stay an extra day," grinned Holly. "Want to join me here?"

Gail looked up at the sun. "My mortal enemy is out in force. Want to make out under a tree instead?"

Life was all about making choices, changing perceptions, and making compromises, wasn't it?
Parking Violations

Chapter Summary

Part Seven: Body Shop Blues

Hello again! The Sixth Arc ended on a nice, hopeful, upward feeling. I looked at the idea of this for a while and thought about where I'd want to send these characters. Gail's father is still out there, being a homophobe. Steve and Traci might need to get serious. Does anyone actually care about Andy and Sam, or Dov and Chloe? I care about Chloe, actually.

It's been another half year, our girls celebrated their anniversary off camera. They've been married a year and change. Its winter again. This is the last major time jump. There have been minor cases and some things that you'll be told happened. We shall begin with some karma payback for our Peck.

Chapter 61: Parking Violations

The door slammed and Gail winced. So did Chloe who opened her mouth to apologize, but Gail held her hand up and waited. When there was no complaint from upstairs, she exhaled. "Holly's working on an article and wants to kill the editor."

Chloe pressed the fingers of one hand to her forehead, as if the situation gave her a migraine. "If she kills Dov, I'll fix her editor."

That was new. "Trouble in Dork Kingdom?" She got out two glasses and poured ice tea.

"He's mad I'm doing this." Chloe put her bag down and sat at the island. "He didn't pass the sergeant's exam, so when my app got short listed..." She waved one hand. "God! Men are so infuriating!"

"Yeah, can't help you there, Princess." Smiling a little, Chloe took the glass. "How did he fail? Shit, if I wasted all that nice to the review board..." She knew Dov was considering the white shirt, and Oliver needed an understudy. After talking to Ollie, she'd agreed to go to the board and talk him up. That surprised Chloe. "You spoke up for him?"

"Course I did, God, I'm not a total bitch." Gail pushed over a thumb drive. "You still want to do this?"

"Yes!" Chloe reached over and picked up the little drive. "Just because he's being an idiot about my future doesn't mean I have to be one too." She looked wistfully at Gail. "You and Holly are so perfect, though."

Snorting, Gail shook her head. "We can be absolute bitches to each other, Chloe."

And they certainly had been over the last two and a half years. They'd run into a relationship without really thinking about what it all meant and they'd ruined it by not thinking at all. When everything seemed lost, they managed to step back into something new and better and that was working out.
now. Still, they had fights and arguments and moments where Gail considered making an emergency. Moments where Holly clearly thought about bolting and starting over. They didn't though. Gail didn't blow things up and Holly didn't run, and that really made the difference. They stayed and fought and worked it out.

"I mean she supports you. And you're being all nice to her while she works, even if it bugs you. I bet you'll even make sure she eats."

Oh. "Yeah, well." Gail shrugged. Of course she did those things. "She did it for me when I was studying for the detective exam, which is what you're supposed to be doing." Gail gestured at the thumb drive.

"Why are you being nice to me?"

"I'm a masochist," Gail said brightly. Chloe scowled. "Do you know Rosati? She's in homicide over in 27 with Wes. Anyway, when I wanted to do this, she helped me out. I needed someone I wasn't related to, y'know? And it was her or Callaghan, and I might try to staple his earlobes to his nutsack if I spend too much time with him."

Chloe looked interested. "So you're paying it forward?"

"Oh hell no. Jo made me babysit. A lot. You're going to owe me big, Princess." Grinning ear to ear, Gail added, "I'm going to whip your ass into shape Peck style. You're going to pass that practical exam and be a bad ass."

"That sounds ... Horrifying," giggled Chloe, but her eyes were bright. Gail filed away a mental note to yell at Dov about being a better boyfriend later. She spent an couple hours testing Chloe on process and procedure before giving her a ride to the station and picking up some of Holly's favorite brain food.

Her wife was still upstairs, so Gail left the food on the kitchen table before going up and poking her head in. She spent a moment just watching Holly read and write. There was a line, a crease between her eyebrows that grew as she frowned. Holly was deep into the words on her screen, irritated at everything. When her glasses slipped down her nose, Holly made an adorably grumpy sound and pushed them back up with the knuckle of her forefinger. Gail couldn't help but exhale a breathy laugh.

"Still working," snapped Holly, at her frustrated end.

"It's after nine." Gail's words took a moment to sink in with Holly and she watched the dark head slowly look up at the wall. The brain was engaging with the rest of the world and Gail smiled fondly. "I got you dinner, if you're hungry." Gail went back down to make up the dinner plates.

A few minutes later, Holly made her way to the kitchen, her hair sloppily tied in a messy bun. "How the hell is it 9pm?"

"When the big hand is on the 12-"

Holly swatted her arm but smiled sheepishly. "Did I hear a door slam earlier, or did I hallucinate?"

"That was Dov being a dick. He didn't make sergeant." Gail slid one plate over to Holly and sat on a stool with her own.

"Oh." Holly looked perplexed, her brain still clearly in the world of her work. "Uh, that's not good. What happened?" She squinted a little.
"Dunno, I have to ask Ollie." Gail grinned at Holly. "Hey, wife?" With a fork in her mouth, Holly looked adorably quizzical. "How done are you? Because you're seriously brain fried."

A blush went over Holly's face, coloring her dusky skin. "I think I should stop for the night," sighed Holly, poking at the food.

"I think the food goes on the fork and into your mouth," grinned Gail. It was just too cute, the absent minded doctor. It also took some serious coaxing to get Holly to eat, shower, and get into the bed. She was asleep by the time Gail was cleaned up and changed for bed, which was expected.

The morning didn't change much, though it took far less effort to remind Holly about mundane things like their morning run in the cold winter morning. Running was something Gail still did grudgingly, but now that she wasn't on patrol there was more of a need for regular exercise. And sadly it meant multiple showers almost every day, since sweaty and nasty after a run didn't work well with their jobs. And being gross after work didn't work well for their love life.

Speaking of jobs, Gail's called as she was headed for the shower after Holly. It was dispatch. "Peck, I'm at home."

"Sorry for the early call, Detective, but there's been a break in at a car dealership."

"Are they at least nice cars?" Dispatch laughed and gave her the location which Gail barely paid attention to, save to memorize. "Holly, I need first shower. I got a case."

Standing barefoot in her bra and shorts, Holly looked amused. "I'll make you some coffee."

This married life stuff had perks sometimes and Gail stole a quick kiss before rushing through her shower. She hit the downstairs running, clipping her gun and badge into place. "Lunch is probably off, but I'll call if we find anything fun for forensics."

There was one more kiss, this one lingering and regretful at its end, and Gail headed downtown to the upscale BMW lot... Across the street from Fifteen.

"These guys have brass balls," John told her, holding out a cup of coffee. It was the good Christmas blend from the place Holly loved. He was sucking up.

He lived further that Gail did from the station and she eyed the coffee trying to deduce how John got here first. "How's Rachel?"

"Just fine," muttered John. Bingo. Compared to everyone else in Fifteen, the slow burn to get this far had been a topic of amused conversation for Gail and Holly. They did both support the relationship, but Holly wanted to get out and push them a little faster.

Seriously, they were still awkward and shy about staying over. Yes, Rachel had a very busy job and was out of town sometimes. Similarly John had weird hours. But Gail pointed out multiple times that she and Holly were busy and still made time to make time. She suspected John was still stuck on the last time his relationship had moved fast, his fiancé became a missing person. And Rachel, Holly explained, had always been very slow to commit, but always very dedicated.

Not messing with one's personal life at work did not mean one didn't give ones friends absolute hell for having one though, and lunch with John would be fun. "What did they take?" Gail gave John a break, for now, and walked into the crime scene, holding the coffee Holly had made as well as John's offering, which was probably a 'please don't hurt me at this hour of the morning' request.

A tired looking Chloe was kneeling, looking under a desk. "Keys."
"Keys? As in house or car?"

"Car. They took the transponder keys for 20 cars." Chloe got up and yawned, "Sorry, it's the end of my shift. The manager only found out when he came in to open up. The alarm wasn't tripped, the security cameras have nothing but static."

Absently, Gail held out the fresh coffee to Chloe and walked around the kiosk with the keys, looking up at the security cameras. "There are enough blind spots anyway. If you look down..." She stood in the door and looked down, pointing with one arm up and over her head. "Can't see my face there, and it I do this..." She moved her coffee to touch her bangs. "Can't see me on the other side."

Once she was 'inside' Gail walked a direct path, pointing at each camera in turn, demonstrating how she could get inside and over to the security desk with minimal risk. That had been as Peck game growing up, avoid all the cameras walking through a building. Her mother used to monitor her process in Fifteen, back when she'd been the Division Inspector. More than once, Gail scared the hell out of people, showing up like a ghost.

John snorted. "So as long as you don't trip the alarm, you're golden."

"Not that hard," sighed Gail. "Half the time these things are just for show anyway." She walked back over to the security keypad and groaned loudly. "Seriously? They never cleaned it." The fingerprint smudges were on only 4 keys, making it relatively easy to crack.

"I can't tell if she's insulting us or the criminals," John muttered to Chloe.

"No one can," chirped Chloe. "Thats the beauty of Peck."

"They only took the keys?" She frowned and stared at the high end cars. Stolen keys, video was static. Gail walked back over to the security setup and squatted. It was early but she'd become more and more of a morning person since living with Holly. Having someone into morning sex did make you appreciate the AM hours a bit more.

That also meant her brain was firing pretty fast for the hour and she wondered how someone would turn the video into static. She also wondered why the desk was dirty and why the underside was a mess. It was like people neglected to tidy the cables as long as they were hidden. Holly had teased Gail's organization of her video game consoles once, but admitted it made it easier to clean.

Gail squinted and pulled out her flashlight. "John," she said softly. The man appeared at her side in seconds. They both looked at the strange, small, box clipped into the wires.

"Yeah, that," he agreed. "That is weird."

Standing up, Gail looked over at forensics. "Anyone an electronic hobbyist?" One hand went up. "You, here, now."

The young man hustled over and took John's place to look. "It's a Raspberry Pi, a mini computer. They take a single board-"

Gail cut him off, "Eh, do I need to know to understand what it's doing?"

"No- no. No, ma'am," the nerd swallowed. "Probably. I don't know what it does, but I can have tech forensics. Um. I mean..."

He looked back at his boss and then Gail. Gail remembered she was in charge and nodded. "Make it so," she told him.
When she rejoined John and Chloe, they were smirking. "He's trying to figure out if you're one of them or just screwing with him," John remarked.

"I'm a Peck, the answer is always both."

The forensics team had asked Holly not to let her wife attack them in the morning, which was her only really indication that Gail had a semi important case. Everyone was scrambling around, talking about cars that weren't stolen. Since no one gave Holly information, there being no DNA yet to run nor a body to investigate, she texted her wife and got the same reply. B&E at a car dealership, no cars stolen.

Sometimes criminals were very, very odd, thought Holly.

It did mean that lunch was off the table, sadly. This happened fairly often and Holly was inured to the part of her life where she kissed her wife goodbye and didn't see or hear from her for hours. Gail, like Holly, could get remarkably tangled up in work. But Gail always defied expectations and lunch delivery showed up at noon with a note not to spend all night working on the paper. Holly smiled at the note, remembering the brief period of time where she worried Gail was a project girlfriend. While she was, it was a mutual project.

With silence in the house that night, Holly made the breakthrough in her paper and actually managed to finish it up by the time Anne called.

"Hi! Need me to pick someone up?"

Over the year, Gail and Holly had served as an interim care home for three girls, in addition to volunteering locally. It was something Holly had wanted more than Gail, weirdly enough. Her wife still made it clear she would like to have their own children on a permanent basis, not the halfway home for wayward orphans, but of course putting Gail in a room with a child was nearly always an instant recipe for friendship. The moment the child, any child, showed up, Gail was attentive and compassionate in a way she rarely was with adults.

The three children had been different levels of difficult to have in their home. The first had been fourteen and kicked out for being transgendered. She (he) had stayed for two nights before Gail and Anne found the right placement which would allow him to transition and pass as a boy. They certainly could have, but it was clear the teen was going to need less busy parents with less demanding jobs.

With the realization of how their complicated jobs impacted fostering, Gail and Holly talked to Oliver about how he handled kids and a job. In turn, Oliver hauled Noelle and Frank over to chat, since he felt they were more successful at that. It was going to come at a career cost, having both parents with a full time job, to have children. Finally Gail discussed it with her boss, as Butler had a son and a daughter and a wife who was in the Crowne Attorney's office. His advice helped when they had a second foster-child. Maya, a seven year old, picked up by Dov and Chris in the middle of a case. She had stayed for weeks and Gail had started to make noises about a more permanent status just when the grandparents in Manitoba finally showed up. That one had been depressing and made both women rethink the situation.

The last girl, an angry eight year old, had been there only half a night before Holly diagnosed her 'common cold' as an upper respiratory infection from EV-D68 and rushed her to the ER. By the time she was able to leave, Anne had decided to place the girl in a different home for a multitude of reasons.
One thing Holly had drastically underestimated was exactly how much effort it was in caring for a kid. They were two adults, they could fit in these things, or at least that was the assumption. Even Gail was sheepish to admit that it sucked up far more time than she'd expected. It was exhausting and draining and so damn rewarding. Even though they hadn't become a permanent home for any, they managed to keep in touch with the children. It was weird how much that made it all worthwhile.

"I just wanted to let you know that the recertification went through," explained the social worker.

"Was there a doubt?" Holly smiled and glanced at the spare room.

Anne laughed, "Only that they'd like it if you had a permanent room for anyone. How are you holding up? I know Maya was hard ..."

They still got emails and photos from Maya, as well as Alexianne, which went a long way to making Holly feel like they were doing a good thing. "Gail wanted to make it permanent," Holly noted. They'd told Anne that before. In fact, that was how they'd found out that Maya's grandparents had surfaced. They'd been out in the boonies for some weird retreat without cell phones and were actually pretty nice people. It was stark contrast to their daughter who had been arrested for child endangerment.

"I know," sighed Anne. "That's the hardest part, letting them go. I'm just lucky I still get to see some of mine."

"That reminds me, Sophie has a basketball game on Sunday. She's starting."

The news about Mo'Ne Davis had inspired Sophie to learn baseball. She played last summer on Leo's team as a fantastic pitcher/catcher combo. Winnie, Oliver's youngest, had been upset to lose Sophie from her soccer team. The dynamics of the ten year olds was enough to give Holly a headache. That said, the action had turned into Sophie becoming a sports freak, and she and Winnie now played on the same basketball team at school which made up for the baseball vs soccer thing.

"If I can come, I'd love to see her," promised Anne. "Frank said he'd video tape it for me."

They chatted a little more about the status of various children, mostly ones Holly had met, about how maybe they should consider adopting from foster care, what changes that would make to what they'd done, and then about their personal lives. Anne had become a friend over time. Not close like Rachel and Lisa, but still a friend to talk to about other things. Anne, having no time for a relationship, lived vicariously through Gail and Holly's and Holly couldn't begrudge that.

The garage door went up and Holly glanced at the time. Only eight. "Please tell me you have an idea about food," bitched Gail as she stomped in.

"Hang on," Holly said to the phone before she covered the mouthpiece. "Order in? Mexican?"

"Done." Gail glanced at Holly and her phone, signing a question. *Who is on the phone?*

Slowly, Holly spelled out Anne's name and Gail nodded. "Sorry, Gail just got home. Sunday, then if you can?" Anne laughed and agreed before hanging up.

Holly watched Gail punch in an order on her phone and had a brief grin about the joys of living in the future. "What's Sunday?"

Of all the things Gail's steel trap mind remembered, sports was not one of them. "Sophie's first game as starting shooting guard." Gail looked blank. "The basketball game. Think your case will keep you busy?"
"Unlikely," grumbled Gail, tossing her phone into the kitchen island. "Did you know there was a type of handheld computer called a Raspberry Pi?"

"I did." Holly collected two glasses of water. "Is that related to why the tech department asked me to not let you attack them in the morning?"

Gail rolled her eyes. "We found one hooked into the security desk. It was recording everything and sending it to a blah blah remote IP blah blah can't trace it something or another." She tugged her jacket off. "They stole keys, Holly. Just keys. No prints, nothing. It's really annoying."

"Maybe it was a test run?"

"That's what John thinks," she complained. "I'm going to shower."

Holly smirked, "Before Mexican food?" She watched Gail pause on the landing. Uh huh. The blond stomped back down, surly. "You didn't even kiss me hello," she teased.

Obliging, Gail pulled Holly into a hug as well. "What did Anne want?"

"Nothing, except that they'd like it if we had another room." Making a noise, Gail rested her head on Holly's shoulder. "We could move to suburbia."

"Absolutely not," growled Gail, and it was not the good growl. "I don't care about the big open yards. I will kill someone if I move back out there."

After the Peck divorce was official, Gail had gone out to her parents' home to collect items from her past. It was nothing major, only a handful of boxes, but Holly went with just to see the house where Gail grew up. It was nothing like Gail. The stonework was beautiful, the size was amazing, and the yard immaculate. Clearly Gail hated it, as her mood had plummeted into the depths of bitter anger rather quickly.

Most interesting were the Peck siblings' bedrooms. Both were boring and both were still decorated as the kids had left them. Steve had made an attempt at cool, covering the off-white walls with posters of sports players and musicians. Gail had not. Her room looked like a princess' abode, with stuffed animals and frilly curtains.

Naturally Holly asked if Gail had decorated it herself. The scoffing laugh was Gail's only reply. They crated up the animals and everything girly into a box labeled 'Donations.' The items they kept were some books, a few sweaters, photos, and the jewelry. Five small boxes in their car. Ten large ones left in the middle of the room, waiting for pickup.

They'd talked a little about it at the time, how it felt and how it hurt. Gail freely admitted she was uneasy about the whole thing. She didn't trust her mother's explanation, which Holly understood. But whom could she talk to about it? The only other people who could corroborate would be Bill and Steve. That made Holly uncomfortable, knowing some of the story from Steve, and she told Gail what she knew.

Her wife grew contemplative and finally decided that it didn't help either way. What did help was talking to Gail's therapist, together, about the situation and about the claims. Gail's new therapist, her old had moved to Alberta, specialized in PTSD in LEOs which had been extremely beneficial.

Talking about her upbringing gave the therapist an understanding as to why Gail had no support growing up and why Perik was so hard to get past. It made Gail feel normal. So did reading about other people raised at a distance, and how there was a reason for it, but that she should have had one family member to rely on.
It made Holly feel like she'd had the most mundane, simple, perfect childhood. Even when her own parents had moved west, and Holly had gone through a similar process, it felt less painful then than it did at Gail's. Less final. Her parents were moving as a unit, taking their journey ever onward. Gail's parents were not. They were at an end of their story together, the dissolution of family ties with their children coinciding with the collapse of their marriage.

The thought made her squeeze Gail closer.

"Hey, hey, what's up?" Gail frowned and cupped Holly's face with one hand.

"Sorry," sighed Holly, rubbing her cheek against Gail's hand. "Not the suburbs. Right."

Gail frowned more but did not press. "We could build," she suggested. "Here I mean, we're all paid off." That made Holly smile. They, together, had paid off her townhouse. Their townhouse. Their two-story, two tiny-bedrooms with an itsy den and a small deck and a tiny yard, home.

The moment Holly saw it, she'd fallen in love.

"And lose the yard?" She liked the yard. It was tiny, but sitting in it in summer with Gail and a beer was wonderful. Not as lovely as the cottage by the lake, but few things were.

Gail felt thoughtful. There was a way she held herself when thinking a deeper thought that Holly had learned to recognize. "Thompson is moving," she said slowly.

"Who?"

With a look that screamed 'you idiot,' but in a fond way, Gail sighed. "Thompson, Lawrence. The totally gay guy who lives in the skinny unit next door? The guy you never see because he's always at his boyfriend's?"

It never ceased to amaze Holly that Gail actually knew all their neighbors. Since Holly had bought the home on the end, next to a stand alone house, she had infinitely more privacy than anyone else. Which meant she never met her neighbors. The only time she remembered having more than a two word conversation was the time Gail left a squad car parked outside for three hours and they worried something had happened. Holly had struggled to explain it was a booty call without actually saying that.

"Oh, that Thompson," she mumbled. Nope. No idea.

Gail kissed her softly. "He was thinking about renting, but... If we bought it, we could expand."

"Gail, we just paid off this place."

"We could have an ensuite bathroom," continued Gail. "And a deck off the bedroom. Sit out there and read." She lifted her eyebrows suggestively.

The idea of the bathroom was actually damn appealing. "How much?"

"Less than half of this place. Hell, it's closer to a third." Doing the math, Holly winced. "Yes, I know, it means we keep your car another couple years. But that's okay, isn't it?"

"What, exactly, do you plan to do with the extra room?"

"Kitchen," smiled Gail. "Turn the downstairs into the office. Two guest rooms upstairs and we move the master over. Also the garage. All the sports crap goes there. Trick your mom into coming over
and making the garden a thing."

Clearly Gail had thought about this a lot. "And whom are you putting in the two guest rooms?"

Gail chewed her lip. "A child?"

Hm. Holly studied Gail's nervous expression. "A foster child?"

"A permanent ward?"

Holly frowned, "Didn't you say to never pose it as a question?"

"Well. I'm not sure how that will go over, is all," sighed Gail. "It would make the budget tight."

Closing her eyes, Holly leaned forward until their foreheads touched. "I don't want the expense of one to exclude the other, honey."

Softly, Gail's thumb brushed Holly's lips. "But yes?"

"But yes," agreed Holly. "Provided you're willing to move if that works out better, economically."

Moving her hand to the small of Holly's back, Gail pulled her closer. "Just not the suburbs, please?"

And then there were lips on her neck. Holly's eyes squeezed tighter.

"Yes," she sighed, more to the kissing than the request, but definitely to both. As Gail's kisses grew more pressing, Holly scooted to the edge of her stool and hooked one leg around her wife, holding them in place. It was too easy to get quickly wrapped up in kissing Gail, she'd learned that years ago. Gail could kiss amazingly well, knowing just where to touch and hold and caress as she did so.

Holly was positively panting when the doorbell rang and Gail sighed. There was another kiss and Gail went to tip the delivery boy for their dinner. Thank god the delivery boy couldn't see Holly all hot and bothered. She had to get a glass of water to cool down.

They ate in relative silence until Holly sighed. "This is good. Good dinner choice, honey."

"Can't get delivery like this in the burbs."

Holly rolled her eyes. "Horse, dead." She caught the smirk on Gail's lips and shook her head. "After we figure out if we're moving or expanding."

"Deal," smiled Gail and she reached over to steal part of Holly's fajita.
Having mastered the rules of softball and baseball, Gail had been mildly affronted to learn that Little League had different rules. They had rules about pitching and sliding and stealing and basically dumbed down all the stuff that had taken her months to comprehend. But Sophie and Leo and Winnie (seriously, Oliver, who named a kid Winifred these days?) had all joined the same team that summer, and she'd been obligated to attend every game possible. Sophie and Leo were an amazing pitcher/catcher combo, even Gail had to admit to that.

Only a few months later, it all changed. Then she'd had to learn about basketball, only to find out that girls had a different sized ball because their hands were, generally, smaller. That was cheating in Gail's mind and she'd said so to Traci who shrugged. All that meant there she was, watching stupid basketball because a ten year old she liked (almost eleven now!) was playing.

Plus the team colors were stupid. Baby blue. Who the hell wore baby blue?

When she'd expressed that much to Holly, her wife replied with "The Kansas City Royals." Privately Gail felt they should wear Royal blue, but learned not to comment too much on professional baseball teams. The last time she had, Holly had droned on for what felt like hours. Incredibly it had the ability to kill any passion Gail felt.

Stupid sports.

Watching her wife cheer like a fool, Gail smiled and remembered the other reason she was there. It was hard not to share some of the delight. Holly was beautiful and silly and still made Gail crazy happy to be around.

"Hey, the game's over there," whispered Traci.

Gail sighed and turned her eyes back to to the court. "Sophie's not even on the court." The baby blue wearing mini-human she rooted for was on the bench having just been subbed out.

"Winnie's got the ball, you could be a little excited. Or excited about something other than your wife."

Her eyes wandered back to Holly. Holly was at the floor seats with Steve and Oliver, shouting encouragements and taking photos. Leo was on the boys' team, but was keeping score for his best friends, so everyone came. "You ever going to marry my brother?"

Traci sighed. "I don't think he's going to ask."

"He wants to. He's just... Jerry, you know? And kids." And their parents. God help them, Gail was grateful she'd eloped before she learned about the divorce.

Her friend nodded, eying the man at the railing. "I love Steve."

"God knows why," joked Gail and Traci smirked. "You know you're on my list of people I don't hate."

"There's a list?"

"Sure." Gail sipped her water. "Couple lists. You're on the one with Steve and Holly and Oliver." People she'd willingly break every rule for. When Traci didn't reply, Gail glanced over and was
confused to see a smile and near tears.

Without a word, Traci threw her arms around Gail and squeezed her. This was not how she communicated, not with anyone except Holly, and Holly was special. Unless someone was really hurt, Gail did not hug. Awkwardly patting Traci's back, Gail relaxed only when let go.

"You really don't like hugs," smiled Traci. "Except for Holly."

Gail sighed and squirmed. "No. I mean except for kids."

"And Oliver."

"Who is basically a kid." She and Traci smirked.

But Traci agreed to change the topic. "Fine. How's your case going?"

Gail grimaced. "It's not. Stolen keys. The dealers had the cars reprogrammed and we've been checking for other similar thefts but nothing so far. I'm almost tempted to start checking other Territories."

Traci winced. "Maybe they're stealing them to reverse engineer the transponders? Didn't you say they were high tech thieves?"

"Tech is running that already. Not much you can do with them. They're the passive circuit. Something something don't care." She sighed and leaned back, propping her elbows on the bench behind her. "So I'm just trying to stare at my wife's ass and not think about it."

"My boyfriend's butt is pretty nice," remarked Traci.

"Ew, that's my brother you're talking about." They both snickered. "You know, you should ask him."

Looking confused for a moment, Traci shook her head. "I know you're all about non-traditional marriages, but I think my mother would shoot me if I eloped."

"I meant ask him to marry you. If he says no, I'll pepper-spray him."

"Gail Peck, I think you like me more than your brother."

"That's a real low bar there, Nash."

After the game, they treated the kids to hot dogs and ice cream. At home, Gail had every intention to math out living expenses and determine what would be easier and less expensive. She got through the living expenses and put it into a spreadsheet when Holly walked into the office with her shirt off, looking for a book to read after her shower.

Whether or not Holly intended to distract her (she swore not), it certainly had that effect. Gail followed her wife out and shelved any work on the house hunt for the night. Sometimes Gail wondered why she'd ever dated men in the first place. There was something about women, or maybe just Holly, that was so amazing. The soft skin and gentle curves were awe inspiring. This was why people moved mountains and fought wars, just to see beauty like Holly.

If asked to pinpoint the source of Holly's beauty, the part that had drawn Gail to her, there was no way Gail could answer. No matter how many times she thought about it, no matter how often she asked herself why Holly, there was no obvious answer. It wasn't something she'd been willing to, or
able to, define. If she'd been born deaf, dumb, or blind, Gail felt like she'd had been drawn to Holly. It wasn't about her gender, it was a moment, that moment in interrogation - no it was before that, before the Penny, before the coat room kiss. It was that first day she spent with Holly, in the lab, that was when it felt different.

But love ... Maybe it was the time she'd stayed over, in the night after the stupid drain cleaner burn, when she'd had a nightmare and Holly came to her. No questions, no expectations, just a friend. Under all the fear and terror and embarrassment, Holly was there. That was the moment Gail knew it was all different and her heart felt like it split open. Her guts splattered over the walls and yet Holly was still there. For her.

It was easy to get lost in Holly's arms and forget everything else. The connection she'd craved with everyone else but never gotten was here. This was someone who would fight for her, call her on her bullshit, inspire her to greater things, and still clearly love her. Holly gave her everything, even if they were still learning about each other. How could Gail not surrender all she was and all she had to this wonderful woman?

"What're you thinking?" Holly's voice was distant, almost floaty, as if very little grounded her to the earth in this moment.

Gail ran her hand across her wife's stomach, "That you're beautiful." She kissed Holly's upper arm. "That I love you. That I'm glad you asked me to marry you."

"Those are nice thoughts."

Smiling, Gail leaned in to kiss Holly's shoulder and then neck. "What are you thinking?"

Almost absently, Holly replied, "A house with a bigger yard."

Gail smothered her laugh in Holly's shoulder.

Two weeks passed before there was a break in the car case. It wasn't quite what Gail had expected when she found out that two of the cars with stolen keys had been, well, also stolen.

"Those are the most patient car thieves ever," she griped, looking at the owners' cluttered garage.

People had so much crap in their lives. There were few things Gail ever felt like thanking her mother for, but one was minimalism. Not having all the physical items to bog her down was freeing, even if it meant arguing with Holly about keeping things. In Gail's mind, it was a use it or lose it world. Except for shoes and dresses.

Actually, she always found time to wear both the shoes and dresses. And the slinky nighttime stuff. And use all her guns at least once a month. Holly had not been pleased when Gail pointed all that out, since it meant she lost the argument. The fact that Gail actually did remember things like that was revealed to the others at the Penny, when Holly goaded her about how many times she'd used each gun. That argument had started at the station, continued down the street, and by the time they'd gotten to the Penny, Gail gave up and listed each gun per month.

Andy, gobsmacked, asked if Gail had a spreadsheet. When Holly teased that Gail kept it all in her head, Fifteen started to pester her about other stats she'd memorized, which included how many times Gail had driven the cruiser with the broken seat. Their favorite, hands down, was when Gail told them how many times Dov left the seat up and Chris didn't replace the toilet paper. Chloe found the information perfect and promised to keep track from now on. It was weird that no one teased her or thought she was weird for storing all that in her head. In fact, everyone took it as a matter of fact that
Gail had a database in her hand, given how much she remembered about the filing system at work.

"Earth to Peck," muttered John, snapping her back to reality. "Anything jump out at you?"

"Other than if I move to suburbia, I hope I'm a vegetable, and by the way he has horrible taste in sweaters? No."

John eyed her. "Sweaters?" Waving a hand at the standing sweater rack filled with shitty Christmas garb you wouldn't even wear for a tasteless sweater party, Gail wandered around the garage.

The car was lifted from the garage. Breaking into a garage was easy, though. Any loser with access to Google could figure out how to bust in within six seconds. Speaking of ... Gail looked up at the garage opener. "Ladder," she said in John's general direction.

Once someone had asked which one of them was the senior detective and they'd shrugged. John, technically, had been a cop and detective longer. He was a full detective and she was not. Gail had been at Fifteen longer, as well as in Major Crimes. Your mileage may vary, they joked. Seniority was simply a non issue for them. They were partners. When Gail needed a ladder, John got a ladder. When John needed someone to play a dead body or a killer to help him visualize, Gail obligingly posed for him (though not without commentary). It worked for them, just like splitting up and borrowing uniforms worked.

Gail climbed up the ladder and flicked her flashlight on. There it was. "So our garage door broke," she said to John. "Holly swore she could fix it, which I guess is some lesbian pride thing. But while she was trying to figure out what was wrong, I just wanted to park my damn car."

"Sounds like you two," agreed John, squinting up at where Gail was looking.

"I pulled this," she explained, tapping the emergency pull with her flashlight. "Yanked it down, opened the door, manual crap. But... Once she fixed it, I had to turn that off again."

"Oh so she did fix it?"

"Yep." Gail grinned down at John. "Know how hard you have to yank this over to pull the motor back on track?"

John grinned. "So they popped the emergency release to get in. Think we can get a print?"

Shrugging, Gail hopped down. "Hey, forensics. I need the garage pull here printed, and the door."

The forensic tech in charge of fingerprinting stared at her. "The ... Print the door? What part?"

"The whole thing," grinned Gail. "Both sides."

Eventually the lab was going to revolt at her requests, but not today.

Dinner as a triple date post New Years was amusing. Gail had invited John and Rachel, while Holly had invited Steve and Traci. For some reason, they'd forgotten to check with the other about whom they meant when they'd said 'double date' and after a moment where the two Pecks laughed at the restaurant, things were sorted out and a table was found.

Traci and Steve knew Rachel in passing, having met her at a party at Gail and Holly's over the summer. They had not known John was seeing her, and the talk during appetizers surrounded determining how they'd gotten together. Steve found it disturbing that his sister got them together and
told Holly it was her fault. After all, Gail did not help people move, she didn't help people get

"I hate seeing people throw away memories," Gail sighed as she poured more wine all around.

It was one of the startlingly deep thoughts Holly had grown used to hearing from her wife.
Whenever she thought she knew everything about the woman, Gail would peel back another layer,
reveal another tidbit of her past in a nearly cavalier way. Throwing away memories. The memory of
a ceramic tea kettle, for example, like the one they'd bought together. It was the first thing they'd
bought as a unit and when Leo's hockey puck had sent it flying into a million pieces, Gail dismissed
the incident with little more than a stern reminder to not play ball inside the house, and confiscated
his stick. But that night she'd been a little maudlin for reasons Gail had been unwilling or unable to
fully explain.

The statement made perfect sense to Holly when she placed it in her known context of Gail. She had
a massive mental file on her wife with all the behavioral quirks, things people would consider to be
strange, tucked away in the right place with the right categorization. She was a scientist, that was just
how her brain worked. On the other hand, Steve looked at his sister weirdly, as if the words were a
revelation and not an explanation.

Sensing the awkwardness, Holly reached over and put her hand on Gail's knee. Traci felt it too and
asked, "How's the car case going?"

"Good," smiled John. "Perfect actually. By which I mean no evidence and no motive and no
suspects." That got the four police officers tossing around theories both plausible and ludicrous for
the rest of the appetizers.

Rachel leaned towards Holly. "Is it always like this?"

"I spent two days at the cottage up north with them plus Oliver and Celery. I thought I might cry."

One of Gail's fingers poked her thigh. "Liar," she smiled. "Celery is a witch. She blessed the cottage
and the house."

"Holly let a witch into her house? Wait, you mean a Wiccan."

Traci shook her head. "Both. Celery has super powers, too. She can just appear at will."

Joining in, Steve added, "She made me a salve to win Traci back. It worked." Under her breath, Gail
muttered that regular bathing helped that more and Traci smacked her arm.

Rachel eyed John. "Are they serious?"

The laconic man nodded. "Afraid so, Rach. She offered to make me a charm."

That caught Rachel's attention and she asked, "For what?" Holly watched as Rachel perked up like a
hunting dog. "Jonathan..."

"Nothing," he muttered. "Oh look, entrees!"

Gail signed something faster than Holly could read and Steve grinned. "Me too!" He slapped John's
back and Gail cringed. "What? It worked!"

"I can't believe you believe that tripe, Steven," whinged Gail, leaning back so the waiter could put
down her dish.
"You got your house smudged," he countered and looked at her plate. "And you saw a psychic once. That one's mine." The siblings swapped plates, Gail hardly looking but Holly spotted tomatoes on the plate that was now Steve's. "You need to keep an open mind, sister," he continued on, as if nothing had happened with the plates.

The blonde was studying her plate in a way that was both very careful and totally lackadaisical, as if she wasn't paying attention to it at all. She was probably checking for tomato contamination. "I have a very open mind, Steven. I'm just saying, I can understand aromatherapy making you feel better but the idea that you putting on a salve made Traci go back to you is stupid. And yes, I told Celery that."

That was a conversation similar to the one that Gail and Holly had about the same subject. "She did," confirmed Holly. She also knew about the psychic and Gail admitted it was before she started seeing a therapist, who served the same purpose in a better way.

Traci grinned, "What'd Celery say?"

"Nothing, she just smiled. It's creepy, but she's smart." Everyone but Gail was staring at Holly after she said it. "What? I don't agree with her beliefs, but she's a smart person. Insightful."

Having decided her food was safe, Gail took a bite and explained, "Which is Holly for 'I hate soft sciences.' Is Wiccan a science?"

They talked about witches through dinner, which was a welcome respite from cases. Traci told John and Rachel the story about camping and how Steve and Gail arrested a drunk hunter. When Gail pointed out that she knew all the horrible stories about Rookie Traci, they ended up trading stories about how they'd been horrible rookies. Even Gail had her share of awkward moments in the academy and had once nearly failed a gun recertification. Steve said it was because theoretical and practical were different things. Gail said it was nerves.

As the waiter came to ask them about dessert (and got a solid 'yes' from Gail and Rachel), Gail's phone started pinging. She looked apologetically at Holly and pulled it out of her pocket to read. "I have to take this," she muttered, signing 'Lab' as she got up, walking over to a quieter part of the restaurant.

"That has to be annoying," Rachel said to Holly.

It was, but since Holly often had the same thing happen, she didn't complain. "At least it's not while we're at the opera again," sighed Holly. "I started to think date nights were cursed!"

Steve looked abashed. "I still cannot thank you enough, Holly. You saved my life."

While Holly demurred, Rachel eyed her friend. "You saved his life?"

Nodding, Steve told the story about being stabbed by a CI and Holly stitching him up in the guest room. He didn't even leave out the part about how the case was Gail's idea in the first place. "God knows what Gail would have done without Holly to sew me up," he remarked. "But she went and got the guy. Cause my baby sister's a bad ass."

Even John was interested. "I heard about how she cracked the confession in six hours. Broke the whole damn case. I didn't know she was that involved with the case." He shook his head. "It's like... She's deep. Tries to keep everyone away with that bitchy nature, but she's thoughtful and complicated. I don't envy you your parents, Steve."

Once in a while, Holly got to see that aspect of John that Gail called the super-perspective human cop. He read people well, a talent Gail did not have. She read kids, though. Looking a little smug,
Rachel beamed at Holly, clearly saying that her man was great.

Steve grunted, sounding just like his sister. Almost nine years apart and yet so similar, the Peck siblings clearly had grown up around each other and shared by the same experiences. "It's weird, but it's better now. Mom's getting over things. She's nice."

"I still want to punch her," Holly snapped, bitter. "She could have ruined my career."

"Don't hold back on my account," replied Steve. "Just be glad all the other Pecks are starting to side with Gail after Dad's outburst."

Dropping back into her seat, Gail chimed in, "Calling Uncle Al names did not help him at all. I'm surprised he still has a job."

"I can't believe Inspector Peck is a homophobe and a racist," Traci shook her head. "Who was on the phone?"

As one, Holly, Gail, and Steve replied, "The lab."

John tilted his head. "How did you two know that?"

"You need to learn sign language, John," sighed Gail. "Where's my creme brûlée?"

Seeming to accept this answer, John looked over towards the waiter. "About two minutes."

Rachel looked between Gail and John, "Why did the lab call you?"

"They're terrified of Gail," John shrugged. When Rachel looked at Holly, she nodded. "I don't mind."

The waiter arrived with dessert and Gail brightened. "Powder free nitril gloves, by the way," she said to John as the creme brûlée and espresso were placed before her.

Poor waiter. "That's what they found?" John watched the apple pie he was splitting with Rachel get placed down and smiled.

"Torn bit caught in the hinges," Gail confirmed.

"So they were robbed by, what, forensics? Doctors? Dentists?"

"Computer techs," suggested Holly, splitting the cheesecake with Traci. Only Steve avoided dessert. As far as she knew, Gail was the only Peck with a serious sweet tooth.

Tapping her nose and pointing at Holly, Gail smiled. "Bingo. They also found a USB cable with the same smudgy prints. So working theory, they did something computer smart to jack the car, which suggests our berry pie guys."

Holly coughed, "Berry pie?"

"Raspberry Pi, berry pie... Come on, Holly, the case is slow!" Gail rolled her eyes as Traci and Steve laughed. John had clearly heard the joke before and did not rise to the bait. "Generic computer crap, just adding our losers are high tech," Gail rather fiercely broke the crust on her dessert and took a spoonful. Clearly that was much better as Gail's expression quickly became rhapsodic.

"She calls them losers a lot," Rachel noted. Everyone else at the table nodded in agreement. "Gail, I've heard you swear. You swear like the proverbial sailor."
But Gail cheerfully ignored the remarks, smiling beatifically as she swallowed her dessert. "You'll have to wait," smiled Holly. "She has her treat, you won't get anything out of her till she's done."

Under the table Gail kicked Holly's foot, belying the statement at least privately.

"It's Mom," explained Steve, sipping his coffee. "We couldn't swear at home, so we called people different things. Losers mostly."

"No swearing?" Holly blinked at Gail who nodded. Another random Peck trivia tidbit.

"Not Mom's idea. Grandpa Harold... Huh, you know none of us swear around the parents. Work is one thing, but home..." Steve looked confounded.

Gail swallowed her bite. "I swear at home."

Her brother smirked. "You're the black sheep, sister dear."

"At least my hair isn't carrot colored, brother mine." Knowing where the sibling arguments were going, Holly reached over for a bite of Gail's dessert. "Hey! Get your own!" Gail bared her teeth and Holly just smiled.

Laughing, Traci shook her head. "I keep thinking you'll grow up and then you don't."

For a second Gail looked very serious. "Growing up, I am as grown up as I'm getting, Traci. I'm a kick ass detective, I have an fantastic home, I'm married. I'm basically winning at life. You may envy me my awesome life. I am Champion of the Universe." She reached over and slapped Holly's hand with her spoon. "Now stop stealing my food!"

The truth about Major Crimes units was that 'Major' was a misnomer. It was more weird crimes that didn't fit anywhere else. They were, like Guns and Gangs, shoved under the auspice of Organized Crime, which again didn't mean what people felt it should mean. Holly liked to tease Gail about working robberies and swarming and thefts and all manner of 'normal' cases. Heck, she even worked homicides. Basically, it came down to this: if a case was sufficiently strange or outré, if it required specialists, it ended up on the third floor.

That was why Gail loved it. She missed the simple joy of patrol, the diversity of the losers out there, but she loved the work. No matter what she did, no matter what case she was handed, she got to learn new things and experience new levels of stupid out in the world. Killing a man because you wanted to marry his best friend whom you were certain was sleeping with his wife? At a nerd convention? Been there, done that.

But all the new, all the weird, all the strange cases that came here way was awesome. It was the thing she loved more than anything else about being a cop right now. And as a detective, she was getting to see more people do weirder things and learn how they did them weirdly from the lab and the techs. Holly kept asking her not to terrorize them, but Gail felt she got better answers if she did. And they called her instead of John most of the time, now.

When Gail got the call from a field tech about the accident, she listened carefully and asked one question. "Are you sure?"

"Yes- Yes, ma'am, it matches 100% perfectly totally sure. Do you want to meet us at the lab?"

"You bet your ass we do." Hanging up, Gail headed back up the stairs at a dead run. "John! We got a lead."
They took the time to clear their desks and headed across town to the big building. Most of the time if Gail was there it was to visit the morgue for professional or personal reasons, so going for a random case meant she would take a moment, later, to pop in on her wife. Right now, the wife would wait for the case. Thankfully, Holly understood that and respected it.

"Detectives," greeted a less hyper tech than the one on the phone. That young man was bouncing like a puppy on Pixie Stix. "Happy to say you're not here for nothing."

Gail beamed, "Gimmie the goods. We could use a break."

"In order, we have a car that skidded on black ice and crashed with a matching VIN, license plates that don't match the VIN, blood from the driver, one of those Pi things hooked up in the trunk by the spare tire, and a car that works with two keys."

John and Gail shared a 'what the fuck?' look. "Two keys?" John pulled out his notebook.

"What happened to the driver?" Gail pulled out her phone.

"And a Pi? Another Raspberry Pi?" John was getting excited, as much as he ever did.

"Where's the driver?" Gail wanted the damn driver.

"Two keys, the ones we had on file from the break in and the one we found in the car. Both worked. Yes, Raspberry Pi, connected to the car battery to charge. Tech forensics had it. Driver did a runner."

Gail frowned, "Why weren't we called to the scene!? We need that driver!"

The senior tech rolled his eyes. "By the time the police came, it was just an abandoned car."

"I want any videos from nearby."

Now he cut Gail off, "Detective, we didn't know if was even your car till we got it back here."

Damn it. She knew she was sulking, but it was their first break.

John cleared his throat, "We'll send patrol back out to interview any possible witnesses." Muttering a fine, Gail shoved her hands in her pants pockets. "So the keys? I thought that wasn't possible with the transponders. If the programmed circuit isn't right, nothing works."

"That's the theory," smiled the tech, happy to be back on the case topic. "Watch this." He tossed John and Gail each an evidence bag and leaned into the car, pressing the start button. "You're too far away, right? But... One of you come here." John shrugged and walked up, the car jumping to life.

"That key is the one we found in the car."

Gail looked at the key in her hand and waved John back. With the car off again, they repeated the process with Gail and her key. "Okay, so how?"

The tech sighed. "Well. There my brilliance eludes me. The proximity keys have a secure chip which the car reads."

Programming the keys was apparently the easier end. But what if that wasn't where you programmed it... Gail blinked. "How do you reprogram the cars? They had to tell the car about the new keys, so how do you do that?"

"Trade secrets. Reprogramming the keys, hell, that's easy. Google the car make and model. You can erase the computer, flash it, like a hardware update." The tech drummed his fingers on the wheel. "A
hardware patch to allow multiple keys? You'd have to know the system. They reset the car... I'm going to have to call them," he said firmly. "BMW. The theory is good. I like your theory, Peck."

John mouthed 'I like your theory' at Gail and smirked. "Is the trace lab running the blood?"

"Should be. If you want to check on that, it'll be a while before we can figure out a double key car. And that mini computer's being dissected, but it looks like a simple geolocation tracker that pings if it's in range."

Gail frowned, "Like a tracking device?"

"Kind of," nodded the tech. "It records locations and looks for specific ones. It's the receiver, though. You'd have to drive around and get a ping from it, instead of it sending pings, if that makes sense."


Thanking the tech, they went down to Holly's lab, where the tech there said the DNA from the blood was being processed, but didn't match anyone in the family thus far. They'd be running it through STaCKs and CODIS next of course. They were able to determine the bleeder was a woman, which was something.

Outside the lab, John flipped through his notes. "Okay, next up is canvassing. Lunch first?"

"Sure, give me five?" Gail gestured at Holly's office and got a smirk from John. "Meet you at the car." She stuck her head in the office, and watched her wife stare at the computer for a while. "Hey, Lunchbox," greeted Gail, and smiled at the surprised happiness on Holly's face.

"Hi, what are you up to?"

Gail stepped inside and closed the door. "They found one of the cars. It's a miracle car, works with old and new keys."

"That is a little creepy. I'm taking these keyless cars off my list." Holly pushed away from her desk and smiled. "If this was one of those soaps you like, we'd be making out."

Rolling her eyes, Gail walked over and kissed Holly lightly. "Grey's Anatomy is not a soap, it's a drama."

"A smutty drama with people sleeping with everyone else. Has it occurred to you that your division is kind of like Grey's Anatomy with cops?"

That was funny. "Okay, but I don't want you to lose a leg." When Holly looked blankly at her, she added, "Arizona? The cute blonde in pediatrics? Lost a leg— never mind. We're not a soap."

Holly snorted. "The Fifteen sex web is worse than the Lesbian sex web. If you were doing this right, you'd have slept with Chloe while we were broken up to fully cement —"

Gagging, Gail blurted, "No sleeping with Chloe!" She liked Chloe, she really did. They'd become friends in a weird way, closer than Andy though they didn't talk about things. It was just a weird situation where it was easier to relax and let her guard down with Chloe. Gail still wasn't used to that.

"And no making out at work. Again. ImpulseSex."

Now Holly rolled her eyes. "I never should have told you that."

"Lisa would have, at some point. By the way, how many girlfriends has she burned through?"
"Since you've known her? Seven." Holly shook her head. "She's …"

While her wife quested for a polite word, Gail offered a different one. "She's slutty. She likes sex, hates commitment, and as soon as people figure out she's vapid and shallow and classist, they bail. She needs a girlfriend who'll put up with her shit and get past that, y'know."

"And we're back to Chloe," joked Holly. There was a moment where they both pictured Lisa and Chloe dating and Gail snorted laughter out her nose. "Can we have lunch?"

"No, John's waiting on me. We need to do some canvassing and footwork."

"Lunch on the go," sighed Holly. "Please eat something remotely healthy." Promising to try to do so, Gail kissed her wife lightly one last time and went to meet John by the car.

Sadly Holly was right and they opted for lunch on the go, eating gyros in the car as they drove to the scene of the accident. Canvassing for witnesses was, generally, something best left for uniforms. Both John and Gail felt that blind canvassing was a waste of time, theirs and uniforms. For Gail, it stemmed from countless dinners, listening to her parents and Uncle Al (who back then was just an Inspector at Fifteen) talk about manpower and its limitations. She didn't know why John agreed but when she'd mentioned it to him once, he said that sounded right and went along with her.

John stood by the lamppost and stared at the street. "Store owners there have a clear shot. That's as good as it'll get. Unis got bystander statements." He frowned. "Why here?"

"Why here six days after stealing the car?" Gail had tried to wrap her head around that since the cars were lifted. A chop shop would make sense, but the car should have been turned and burned already. None of that made sense. Two keys, stolen cars on the road in town. The license plates were changed. They wanted to keep this car.

"Coming or going?"

"Going home. You get lazy when you're on the way home, when you think you're safe." John grunted his agreement. "So where's home? Residential or commercial?"

"Residential would attract too much attention," he mused, turning around. "Shopkeepers?" The boring part, but Gail nodded. Better to do it now than a week from now. "Think Oliver will give us a cruiser to just drive around and look for anything weird?" He pushed his hands in his pocket and they crossed the street to talk to the shop owners.

Gail smiled. "Probably. I want Price on it. She sees stuff."

Her partner eyed her curiously. "Heard she was going for detective." Gail nodded and John made a soft 'ah' sound. "Not a bad idea. She's not threatening, so maybe just being around would work. Pair her with … Diaz?"

"Gerald could do it too," mused Gail. Diaz would be better. Chris was non-threatening and cute. "I'll ask him. You're right, Price and Diaz."

And they walked into the first store.
When Holly got home late after three autopsies, she found her wife lying on the floor in their office with her legs on the couch. Gail's eyes were closed and her headphones were on, singing along with Pharell's "Happy."

Holly covered her mouth, smiling hard enough to hurt. There were many types of adorable Gail. There was adorable childish Gail who loved kids and playing with them. There was adorable cute and cuddly Gail who wrapped herself around Holly by fireplaces and reveled in being together. There was also adorable post-coital Gail who smiled so freely and gently it could make you cry.

Above all those, there was one adorable Gail that even Holly rarely saw. The absolutely goofy, silly, adorable Gail who sang to pop music and, sometimes, danced like a fool.

She loved that Gail. She loved all the various moods Gail had, even the ones where Gail was grumpy and bitchy. Not that Holly particularly liked that Gail, but she still loved her dearly. Getting to watch this Gail, this goofy Gail, was a treat. Her feet were wiggling in time with the music and Holly giggled. Gail couldn't hear her, which was probably for the best.

Breaking the spell, Holly sat down on the couch next to Gail's feet. The motion made Gail's eyes open but she didn't stop singing until the final "Hey, c'mon!" Then she pulled her earbud out. "When did you come in?"

"Second verse." Holly reached over to rub the soles of Gail's feet.

"You have seven hours to stop that," whimpered Gail. "How are your hands?"

Holly shrugged. "I wouldn't say no to a hand massage after dinner." The number of autopsies had done her in for any fine work with her hands.

Sitting up, Gail pulled her legs down and sat next to Holly, "Give. I can soak my feet. You'll go nuts if you have to soak your hands." And just like that, Gail took Holly's hands and dug her thumbs into the meaty part of Holly's.

Oh Jesus. Holly sighed and leaned into the couch. "Case going better?" Gail had spent two days interviewing witnesses and setting up a patrol schedule. Chloe and Chris split the shifts, each one taking time to patrol and look for anything suspicious that was related to the case.

"Nah. Lab figured out something cool, but it doesn't get us much closer. The thieves used the backup system." That sounded interesting, and Holly made an encouraging noise. "So. The car had a hard drive, and there's extra space on it for stuff. They used the space to put a second copy of the key code on there, and a program that could reprogram the main system to allow for both codes." Gail sighed and drew one of Holly's hands up to kiss her knuckles.

That was disturbing, Holly decided. "They can do that? Shouldn't there be security systems in place?"

"Will be soon. They're freaking out someone figured it out, and you're gonna have BMW techs all over the lab." She kissed Holly's palm and arched her eyebrows suggestively.

"Gail," sighed Holly.

Repeating the motion with Holly's other hand, Gail smirked. "Holly," she replied. "We're waiting on
the car techs to tell us exactly how it was implemented. I have money down on one of those portable hard drives being used to flash update."

The words were more technical than Gail normally used and Holly was intrigued enough to let Gail pull her closer into a loose hug. "The Raspberry Pis?" She sighed as Gail started to kiss the side of her neck. It was so hard to concentrate when she did that and it felt so nice.

Murmuring her yes into Holly’s neck, Gail paused. "This is the weirdest foreplay," she said abruptly, pulling away.

Holly laughed under her breath and leaned back into the couch. "It was a little weird. And I really want a shower first." She reached up to run her fingers through Gail's hair. It was back to its natural color, having not been dyed since the Christmas spent in Vancouver. This past Christmas they drove to the cottage, spending a week in perfect silence and peace. Okay, not silence. But it had just been the two of them.

The hair was also longish, for Gail at least, growing out enough to be tucked behind her ears. Holly did love it short, but she’d found that waking up to any of Gail's myriad hairstyles was pleasing. Sighing, Holly put aside thoughts of a shower for the moment and kissed Gail again.

"Okay, nerd. You smell. Go shower." Gail pulled away and helped Holly to her feet. "Did you eat before you came home or do I need to feed you?"

"We had a pizza." Holly yawned and stretched. "I really just want to be immobile and not thinking for a while."

Gail nodded. "I could use that too. Cases with nothing but dead ends are annoying. I'll make popcorn? You pick a show."

They ended watching some more backlogged episodes of Doctor Who. Gail had finally made it through Ten's seasons and had not enjoyed him all that much — too much flirting. They were slowly catching up with Eleven. Holly was, of course, up to date, but never minded re-watching TV with her wife. For whatever reason, Gail enjoyed Holly warning her to pay attention to a particular scene.

She ended up seeing a lot more of Gail for the next week, mostly in the lab, and hearing a lot more about her case than normal. It wasn't that Gail disliked talking about work, or that she couldn't, she just tended to get caught up in her own head and didn't communicate it well unless Holly asked leading questions.

As soon as the BMW techs showed up, Gail sat with them to try and understand what had happened to the car and Holly found it a little fascinating. It took two days to find out the thieves used the remote activation codes to activate two key-codes. They used a known back door to access the part of the hard drive where the codes for all keys that had ever been used to start the car were stored. Then they put in a bit of code so when the cars were reprogrammed for new keys they would reboot with all key codes as active and available.

The official techs explained they were working in a software patch to make sure the codes were unusable. Gail had suggested they try to just store the data outside the cars. It would be a while before that was pushed to all cars, and would be expensive for BMW, but they also knew they had they ability to patch the cars when they came in for new keys anyway.

None of that made Gail very happy, though, and she pointed out there had to be a small group of people who knew the systems well enough to both know where the data was store in the cars CPU, but also how to write the code to make it happen. Two warrants later, Gail and John had a list of
every single BMW tech in Canada who had access to that information and a list of every one who 
*used* to work for BMW and had the information.

Which was why Gail was grumpy.

The techs in Canada were easy to get a hold of. They worked for the company still and it was in 
BMW's best interest to get them to talk to the police. The techs who weren't working for them were 
the hard ones since BMW was international. Hours of coordination with multiple countries, days of 
meetings on phones at obscene hours in the morning, and weeks of interviews netted them a group of 
five people who could not be accounted for, and thus were suspects.

And then they had to wait.

Holly got to hear all about it at home and sometimes at work, since the lab techs were no happier 
about it than Gail. It wasn't a case for Holly to be involved in, since the only evidence for her was the 
blood. Gail had bitched that they needed a fingerprint for anything of value, since most car 
companies took prints but not DNA.

For Holly, she had her own case with Traci, solving a John Doe stabbing at a Toronto FC game. He 
was rooting for the other team, which Holly quipped was the likely motive. Traci found it amusing, 
but didn't take it too seriously. The man was stabbed with a meat fork, in the neck, and after making 
all the requisite vampire jokes possible, they printed the fork and matched it to the ones used at the 
hot dog place.

They had been to BMO Stadium before for fun. When the Women's World Cup U-20 games picked 
up in Canada, Gail prevailed with tickets for a match. Of course, none of the 2015 Women's World 
Cup matches were in Toronto, and they'd driven to Ottawa for a game. It was around that time that 
tazing oneself in the eye became funny, when Holly had leaned over to try and make a boredom 
joke. Gail had replied she'd rather taze herself than leave Holly alone at the game and they'd laughed. 
Time had passed since then and they'd changed together in ways Holly had never seen for herself.

"Head in the clouds, Doc?" Traci was amused as the techs loaded things up in the van.

Holly blushed, "Sorry. It looks straightforward. Do you want to be there for the autopsy?"

She was happy to count Traci as a friend, and happier still to consider her family. An only child with 
a surfeit of cousins, Holly was getting used to being Auntie Holly to Leo and wondered if Steve and 
Traci would have any of their own. Traci wouldn't harass her much at work for being distracted at 
least and never once gave her grief for still being so honeymoony with Gail. Teasing yes, but 
clearly as a friend.

The detective sighed, "Tomorrow yes, today no. I'm going to be stuck going over witness statements 
for hours today."

"And videos," noted Holly.

"That's why they invented unis, Dr. Stewart," Traci grinned. Often, Gail made the same joke.

Holly smirked. "I'll schedule the autopsy for tomorrow, unless you find something pressing."

"I doubt it, we don't even have a ticket stub or wallet." The detective looked around and sighed. "If 
this was America, they'd be talking about how we need better security and no more potential 
weapons in the stadium to protect our kids," she lamented.

"Don't forget the opposition who would clamor that the terrorists are taking away their hot dogs,"
Holly noted, and grinned. Americans were so weird.

Traci laughed. "You were almost one of them. Ever regret that?"

Holly paused by her car. "Sometimes," she admitted. "I think about the other me, the one who never got caught up in the Peck drama. Or about if I'd said no and tried to break through Gail's head a little harder. Or if I'd never gone out with her in the first place ... Lots of ors and options, Traci." Holly fingered the chain around her neck and smiled. "Gail says she wouldn't change anything, because it might make her smaller."

Thoughtful, Traci looked away. "That's a good explanation," she decided. "Not being smaller. I feel that way about Steve most of the time."


Traci blinked and then smiled at her, "Cryptic."

"Frustrating."

"Impulsive."

"Reckless."

"Pushy." Traci smiled and added, "Sucks doesn't it? We had to fall in love with them!"

Holly grinned, "It doesn't get any easier when you marry one."

As had been usual lately, Gail was already home when Holly returned. This time she had dinner in the oven and was typing furiously. The little logbook the cops used to take notes was open on the kitchen island and Gail kept glancing at it as she typed. "Second theft. And third," she announced to Holly, almost cheerful.

"More cars?"

"More keys. Mercedes and Porsche. High end cars, but I got to test drive one today." There was nothing Holly could think of that would make that sensible, and she smirked at Gail silently. After a little while, Gail looked up. "I said it would help us understand why they picked those cars."

Well damn it, that did sound sensible. "And?"

"They have USB ports," grinned Gail. "Every last one of 'em has a USB port. And they connect to the onboard computer, mostly to play music, but you could, if you were clever, plug in a little computer to talk to the big one."

Holly frowned. "My car has a USB port."

"For power. Most don't hook into the onboard computers unless you have a navigation system or something fancy." The amount of information Gail had absorbed recently about cars was phenomenal. It was also the result of obscenely hard work. There had been too few cuddling nights and afternoons due to that research. People could complain things were easy for Gail, but Holly saw the effort that went into it.

"Never thought I'd be glad for a boring car."

Snorting, Gail closed her laptop. "Your car is the least lesbian thing about you. It doesn't even have all-wheel-drive."
Every winter, Gail had teased her about that, too. How someone lived in Toronto, with all the sleet and snow, and did not have a car that could safely drive in it, was apparently insane to a Peck.

"I'll remember to put more lesbian stickers on it," smiled Holly. "What's dinner?"

The simple mundane aspects of their life together were some of the best moments.

The next break came from Chloe and Dov. Actually they were breaks, plural. Chloe, and her regular patrol around the area where the car accident had been, finally netted information. One of the stores, a computer tech store, was cited as being 'suspicious' by the little old ladies in the neighborhood. It just didn't do a lot of business.

So Chloe had done the logical thing and watched that shop as sneakily as possible. It had a bigger garage than it needed, it did terrible business, and it actually was suspicious. The next logical thing was to send people there undercover. Not Chloe, though, which annoyed the woman. Gail pulled her off patrol as well, which annoyed her more.

"Look, Price, I want them to forget about you. Six Division will watch the area, it's theirs anyway. We're letting plainclothes watch for now, but if I need someone to go inside, I want to use you, and for that, they have to forget you."

Chloe stared at her. "Me?"

"Driver was a woman, all the glove prints were small, all the footprints were small. What do you want to bet they're all women?" Gail rapped her knuckles on Chloe's body armor.

With Chloe settled, Gail hunted down her other big break. It just happened to be with the grumpier half of the dork kingdom. Epstein had been downright bitchy for almost a month, which had led to Chloe avoiding him. It had gotten bad enough that Chris had complained about things and that was telling.

Frankly there had been no plan to pull Dov in, but after a day of Gail and John going over the tech info from the car companies, John had hunted down someone who spoke cop and nerd. That meant Dov, who understood technology and would work well with Gail. Unwilling to get caught up in the fight, Gail suggested John go talk to him about it, while she debriefed Chloe on the plan.

She had not expected Dov to be that useful, that fast.

"Reprogramming the cars is easy," he explained. "Used to be harder, but with the USB ports and the whole wireless thing, kinda basic. Anyone with a kiddie script can mess with mom and dad's car, reset mileage, whole thing."

Gail blinked. "So why aren't used car dealerships salivating over this?" She could see them using the technology to make lemons look like the best thing ever.

"CAMVAP," explained Dov. "They help you hash out the legal issues, no lawyers. Its pretty easy to tell a car's been messed with, too. There are digital signatures." Dov droned on for a while about that.

John coughed. "So if I wanted to reprogram a car to work with just my key?"

"You'd start by cloning the car, which you can't do out of the box." And Dov pulled out a small box, the size of a credit card.

"Raspberry Pi," Gail said, cheerfully. When Dov held up a second box, a little larger, she frowned.
"Solid State Drive. This is 400 gigs. The Pi takes an SD card and officially that works up to 33 gigs. The magic here is this Pi has a USB connector so you can plug it into the car, dump the software onto it, and plug in the drive."

Gail scrunched her face up, trying to parse the explanation. "So the Pi thing puts a ... virus on the car, and tells it to copy everything to the next device that's plugged in?"

Nodding, Dov went on. "More complicated than that, but good enough. You can also use it as a bridge. Either way, that's how you get the copy of the drive, so you can just drop the original OS back on when you show up with your new key."

"Well hell," muttered John. "Why the dual key mess?"

"More upfront work," Gail decided. "If the car has my key and your key, then I just have to jump in and go. If I have to hack the car then and there, I'm in a time crunch."

John shook his head. "You've got to hack it sometime. Before, after. Time is time, so why waste it at the damn dealership?"

He had a point and Gail frowned. "Show off? Maybe they've been at this a while, and only started getting noticed now. They want to flaunt their smarts."

"So we should look for someone fired." John pointed at Gail, grinning. "Yes, right, I'm going to cross reference the names with people who were fired. And look for corresponding dates and names with the other companies."

Her partner kicked his chair around to his desk and Gail smiled. John had a bone and would wear it down until he had an answer. "Is he always like that?" Dov marveled a little.

"John? No, he's usually quiet. He has an idea." And just like that, Gail had one. "Are you still helping Oliver, monitoring all the vest and dash cams?"

Dov blinked. "Yeah, yeah I am. Why?"

"They robbed the dealership across the street from us," smiled Gail. "Let's go look at the videos from everyone coming and leaving the Division that night."

This was one of the times Gail felt her own night fly away on broken wings. She knew this would be a long haul and while she considered breaking it up into multiple checks, her brain was on. She and Dov made themselves comfortable in an AV room, with food and coffee, and burned through as many videos as possible.

By dinner time, they took a break. Thus far, Gail had only learned that most of the time, they didn't look at the dealership. As cars came and went, they got glimpses, but nothing useful. She did learn you could geolocate the videos easily, though, and that was fun. Lawyers would eat that shit up, being able to pinpoint where a crime took place.

"So. How're you and Holly," asked Dov as they waited for burgers.

"Good." Gail leaned back against the counter. "Miss me still?"

Dov smiled. "Sometimes. I was thinking, y'know, maybe Chloe and I could live together. But Chris..."

Ah. "Dov, you're not his mother. He's been sober almost three years. I think he's okay to live alone."
"I guess," sighed Dov. "It's … I don't want to be the next to break up the band."

"How's that?" She was pretty sure she knew, but it felt like something she should be certain of. "I'm pretty sure we all hang out still."

"You don't like it."

Gail snorted. "I never liked it. I tolerated it, for lack of anything else to do."

That made Dov smile. "You're not half as mean as you used to be."

"Maybe you're not half as annoying as you used to be." They were all still annoying, but not seeing them quite as often helped. "Don't move in with Chloe unless you're done being an ass." Dov spluttered and she went on, "Look, the reason me and Holly work is that … we let each other grow. You're stifling, and you're gonna lose her."

The food was brought to the counter and Gail paid. Dov kept giving her a weird look as they walked back to the station. She let him stew on that, silently, since that was her thing now. Silence netted her all the answers, and Gail was loving the feeling of superiority it gave her. They settled back to watching tapes and eating burgers.

Finally, when swapping disks, Dov asked, "How am I stifling her?"

"Being a dick and slamming the door because she wants to be a detective and you whiffed the white shirt exam isn't supportive." Gail wiped her hands off, thinking about things that didn't work. "This ... This is not working well. Can we isolate the cameras who have the most footage in the right timespan?"

Dov nodded, "Sure. Hang on." He typed into the computer and they watched things churn. "I really ... I wasn't mad at her."

"Took it out on her." Gail frowned, "Hey who was in cruiser 1518 that day?" She pointed at the screen and pulled out her laptop. That car had almost an hour of video, time stamped right, geolocated right. There was no reason the car should have ran the video that long, especially at the station. "Noelle and ... Guilford? Who the hell is that?" She tapped the information into her laptop and pulled up a rookie's name.

"Oh I remember this. He left the car on," laughed Dov. "Killed the battery right at the station."

Gail stared at him. "He left the car on?" She wasn't laughing and Dov slowly stopped, looking confused. "Dov, that video. Get it from the cloud or whatever. Now!" Muttering that Gail was bossy, Dov started the process of downloading the large file from the server. She ignored him and pulled out her phone to call Noelle.

"Gail? Is something wrong?" Noelle had a tone Gail had sorted out meant 'worried mom.'

"No- yes, but no. I'm working on a case. Listen, do you remember the day your rookie left the car on?"

Noelle's voice darkened. "Guilford. That idiot. It's almost as bad as Dov letting the car get stolen. Do you know that idiot thought he should leave it running so we could make a fast exit? From the station. I don't know what idiot cop shows-"

"Yeah, that's great. Noelle, when you parked, did you park or did he park?"
"He was driving... Gail, what are you asking?"

Gail pinched her nose. "You like to park on the left, facing the wall. Did he park where you do, or facing the other way?"

There was silence for a moment as Noelle thought. "He parked in the fourth slot, I think. Maybe fifth. Looking at the street. Why?"

"I'm hoping you guys caught a crime on your dash cam, Noelle. Thank you, tell Sophie we're still on for the hockey game!" Gail hung up and pointed at Dov, "Stay! Get the video and queue it up."

She dashed out of the room, ignoring Dov's questions, and hit the parking lot at a dead run. Standing at the fourth parking spot, Gail looked out. There was the BMW Dealership. She squinted and could see the back door, the one the thieves had jimmed to get in. All she needed was one face. One face to throw into the system and come up with an answer. Gail rushed back into the AV room and skidded into the chair as she texted John with her possible lead.

"You're excited," muttered Dov.

"Gimmie my video, Epstein."

He hit play and they watched, skipping ahead until two forms walked down the alley to the BMW back door. They were careful of every single camera. They were perfect. Except they didn't know about dumb Guilford. Gail grinned and slapped the desk.

"Holy shit," muttered Dov.

"Yes! Get me clean screen caps, Dov, and kick it to facial recognition-"

"Yeah I don't have that access," he pointed out, but took clean shots and sent them to Gail's laptop. "You can have the lab run them off any -"

"The lab may be my bitches, Epstein, but I don't need anything for this." She cheerfully dropped the faces in the database, prioritizing them with her name and marking them to check the list they had from BMW. Damn, it was good having power. That must be why her mother craved it so, the sheer joy of doing what needed to be done, right away. Daaaamn.

The computer beeped quickly. "No freaking way," muttered Dov.

"No, it's John telling me to let the computer run and go home before my wife yells at me." She replied that she was on her way and slapped the laptop closed. "Good work, Dov. We may have a lead."

At home, however, she had an already angry wife. Not angry at her, which was good considering it was almost eleven PM, but angry at her mother. "No, Mom! That isn't what I said!" Resisting the urge to sneak upstairs and avoid the confrontation, Gail waved hello and signed Lily's name. Holly ignored her. "Mom! We need a better kicker!"

Gail arched her eyebrows at the outburst. The what now? She went upstairs to put away her gun and laptop but when she came back down, Holly was still arguing about kickers and wide receivers. Gail frowned and came to look over Holly's shoulder at the spreadsheets. Fantasy fucking football. Her wife liked football. Not soccer, which she also liked, but the brutish and boring American football. They'd watched the Super Bowl every year they'd been together.

"Jesus," muttered Gail. "Lily," she said louder and at the phone. "It's eleven. Say goodnight and
finish tomorrow!"

That convinced her mother-in-law to hang up, though not until a few choice remarks about not submitting without Holly's okay were snapped. "She's doing it all wrong," bitched Holly, clearly irate at her mother.

"Do I want to know how long you were fighting with Lily about this?"

Holly stopped and looked at her laptop sternly. "No." It was downright adorable and Gail smiled, kissing Holly's forehead. The grumpy expression faded a little and Holly leaned against her. "Did you catch your bad guys or are you going out again?"

Since Holly seemed to be back in the real world, Gail smiled and rested her cheek against Holly's head. "Done for the night. John kicked me out before I made Dov run facial recognition all night."

"Doesn't that run itself?" Holly closed her laptop.

"It does. But I was on a roll. We got two faces."

"And did you eat?" When Gail nodded, Holly frowned, "Did you eat anything healthy?"

"God no," laughed Gail walking to the fridge. "We had greasy burgers and fries." She pulled out the last Green Machine smoothie and held it up. Her concession to health that night.

Holly smiled. "Good. I'm going to shower."

Watching Holly carry her laptop upstairs, Gail grinned. This slice of happiness was still novel, even after almost a year of getting to say 'wife' when she referred to Holly, it was strange. This wasn't supposed to be her life. Gail was the bad girlfriend, the heartbreaker who didn't get people and was never popular because of it. Gail was supposed to be the one who lived alone, bitchy and angry.

She was still bitchy, now and then, but not angry. Most of the time. She was happy.

Finishing her drink, Gail trotted up the stairs and found her wife sprawled facedown over the bed, arms out to the side, naked. It was impossible not to smile, though Gail wondered if her wife was sick as she hung up her blazer. "Feeling okay, baby?"

"Sticky," muttered Holly. "It was cold and wet outside and I got all humid."

Gail hadn't really noticed. Except for her sprint to the parking lot and their dinner run, she'd been inside most of the day. That was the weirdest part about being a detective. Being inside most of the time was not what you did as a patrol officer, but detectives, they stayed in more often. Either way, now that she wasn't wearing the cotton/poly blend hell that was her uniform, Gail found she was more tolerant of temperatures.

"If you want that to be your excuse for nudity, may you be humid every day," Gail joked and turned up the heater before going to shower. It would dry them out and keep them warm. Wet and cold and sticky sucked.

Holly had not moved by the time Gail got back, so she draped herself on the slim slice of mattress allowed. "Sorry," muttered the brunette, scooting to her side.

Following, Gail let her fingers trace Holly's back, dipping down the curve of her spine. "Don't be, the view is great." Holly exhaled a laugh but didn't move, allowing Gail to continue reveling in the soft skin and curves. "Yeah, I'm totally gay," she said as casually as possible.
There was a pause before Holly snicker-snorted her mirth. "God I hope so," she laughed, rolling to her side so her back was facing Gail.

Without need to cease her exploration, Gail's hand smoothed down to Holly's hip and back up to her shoulder. "Is it weird, not knowing things about yourself until you're in your twenties?"

"No," yawned Holly, her voice starting to get thick and sleepy. "Lots of people don't figure things out for years."

"Oh really?" Gail smiled and kissed Holly's shoulder lightly.

Holly made a soft mmmm noise and sighed happily. "S'funny like that," she replied. "Life. Plan and plan and then everything goes different."

Curling around Holly, Gail looped her arm across her wife's waist and snuggled her close. "Good different?"

"Very," confirmed Holly. "I'm tired."

Gail glanced at the clock and realized she should be as well. "Come on, night shirt." Muttering a rather pathetic no, Holly hunkered. "You'll wake up all flustered if you don't."

Once during a heat wave in summer Gail had announced she wasn't wearing anything to bed. Holly found the idea delightful and joined her, only to learn that sleeping in the buff gave her vivid sex dreams. While Gail found it amusing, Holly had been unable to actually rest and returned to sleeping in clothes. Most of the time. Even after they had sex, Gail would often wake up later to find Holly in at least a shirt.

And a shirt was all she managed to get Holly into that night. But once done, and once she wriggled under the quilt, Holly was sound asleep. Gail, who didn't sleep well in general, read for a while until she too managed to find some rest.

Normally, Holly was the distracted one. She was the one caught up by work and pulling extra research hours and writing long papers. She read manuals to learn new techniques and took the occasional class to perfect them. Other than Gail's regular visits to the firing range and infrequent ones to the gym for anything other than a run, she didn't really go in for more learning by choice. Languages was a weird exception, in that she just inhaled them and 'practiced' often... By which Holly meant Gail made sure to use her skills to annoy the hell out of other people whenever possible.

The one time Holly had seen Gail study had been for her detective application, and that was because of the exams. If it had just been filling in a form, that would be one thing. But there had been a form, then an exam, then a practical exam, and then another evaluation. There was also the period of time she was taking a tonne of classes at the academy, but that again was directly related to becoming a detective. The continuing education of Peck came and went in bursts.

This time, Holly watched Gail pour through notes and manuals to wrap her head around automotive hacking, and she dragged Chloe with her. The two were constantly bickering, over more than a few languages, about what each step in the process was. Sometimes they did it at Gail and Holly's, sometimes Holly found them in the garage at Fifteen when she came to pick up her wife. But they were reading and practicing and going over what sounded like cover stories.

And sometimes, once in a while, Jacob Blackstone was with them. Like he was today.

Holly still disliked him a great deal. Not because he slept with Gail, though. That had been her wife's
bad idea at the time and Holly hadn't even known Gail back then. No, she didn't like Blackstone because he was clearly someone who used other people like pawns. He was very good at playing people, something Holly was bad at but could see clearly. All it took was one emotionally manipulative girlfriend, after all.

She silently watched Blackstone, Chloe, Gail, and Oliver talk in Oliver's office. Gail was draped on the couch as if it was her right, while Chloe stood looking nervous. Holly couldn't help but admire the profile of her wife, as she waved a hand dismissively at Blackstone about something or another. The woman was just downright gorgeous. Her face was amazing and even with the more mellow and calm expression she tended towards today (versus the angry ice princess), Gail was aloof and striking. It was no wonder that Holly had fallen hard and fast for the face.

The whole package was totally worth it. Beauty, brains, and a distinct lack of brawn, Gail was immeasurable to anyone else Holly had ever met. Those walls that kept everyone out let her in, and she was cheerfully staying there. Forever.

"You're drooling," muttered Traci, appearing out of nowhere.

"Am not." But Holly wiped her face anyway, just to be sure.

Traci laughed. "It's cute, you know. It's almost like you're always looking at her for the first time."

With a dramatic sigh, Holly looked at her friend. "Well if she can stop being gorgeous for a while, maybe I will. But ... Seriously, Traci." It did occur to Holly that she never saw Traci looking at Steve quite the same way. She was never in clear admiration of his physical traits. There must be something else to him.

That said, Traci looked over to where a familiar ginger was seated in the detective bullpen, phone to his ear and eyes closed. A soft smile touched Traci's lips. "Can I steal you? They're going to be at it for a while."

Didn't that suck? "Sure, I'm Gail's ride home today anyway."

"Something wrong with her car?"

"She broke a window trying to show Chloe how to pop the lock," sighed Holly. That had been the end of 'at home criminal lessons' as Holly had put her foot down.

Traci laughed, "Gail can break into cars?"

"She said her cousins taught her. I'm not sure if that means it's a Peck Skill or just what blue blood kids do when they're bored."

That made Traci giggle more. "I'll ask Steve later... God and ask him not to teach Leo." She looked momentarily worried.

Holly grinned. "It may be too late. Gail was telling me she wanted to teach Sophie." They shared a look of tired incredulity. Pecks. "Do you need to steal me for work?"

"Oh! No, a personal question." Traci looked from Holly to Gail and then to Steve. "When you and Gail, um, got engaged, who asked whom?"

Their official engagement had been all of 30 hours and Holly was startled to realize Gail hadn't explained anything about it to anyone, not even her friends. She apparently just told them they'd gotten married and that was it. "I guess I did," mused Holly. "I ... We were arguing about how things
would be easier if we got married. I said I wanted to and she countered by setting an appointment with the court."

Traci stared. "That was it?"

"Afraid so. I don't think I ever said 'Gail, will you marry me?' Missed opportunity, I guess." Not that Holly cared much for ceremony and tradition anymore than Gail did. What mattered to her was the legal right to be there, no matter what happened. The frustration in Traci's exhale dropped a clue for Holly. "I don't think Steve has the same aversion to weddings," she began.

"No," agreed Traci. "He rambles in this weird, off topic, way any time I bring it up. How bad do you think their parents marriage was? I mean, neither of them looked really shocked to find out about the divorce."

"I gather it was a marriage of convenience." The actual term Gail used, and she swore it was a quote, was that the marriage was an arrangement. Practically a business one, to hear about it, and the children were investments. "Probably scares the hell out of them."

Traci eyed Steve. "How can they be so sweet and romantic and then do things like a background check or arrest your ex?"

As one, they provided the only possible answer. "Pecks."

Smiling, Holly squeezed Traci's arm. "Look, he won't say no." When Traci looked surprised, Holly pointed out the obvious. "Gail would shoot him. Or do something anatomically impossible to his reproductive parts."

"Oh, I wish she wouldn't. I'm fond of those."

Holly made a face. "To each her own." Traci was still giggling when Steve walked by and asked what was going on.

"Nothing!" They said it together and broke into outright laughter.

When they got home, Gail explained they needed Blackstone for running a long term undercover op and Gail was not going to be the one under cover. It was strange that Holly had a stronger aversion to Gail being undercover than Gail did. She hadn't even known Gail back when she'd been kidnapped. She barely even knew about the case, though she had been passingly familiar with Detective Barber. Jerry.

Undercover operations just made Holly remember the first time Gail spent the night and had the god awful nightmare. When Gail passed by her to get to the stairs, Holly reached over to grab her arm.

"Something wrong?" Gail looked confused but didn't resist when Holly pulled her into a tight hug.

"I just want to hold on to you." Holly pressed her forehead into Gail's shoulder. "I love you."

One of Gail's hands gently rubbed her lower back. "I know."

The mirthful laugh jumped out and Holly sighed. "Stop being Han Solo." The hand on her back paused and Gail chuckled.

"I love you too, and I know you know that." The other hand brushed Holly's hair away from her face. "Is this about whatever you and Traci were giggling about?"
"No, she's going to ask Steve to marry her, though."

"We'll see," smiled Gail. "I'm beating him at everything." Leaning against Gail, Holly thought about that. Gail had made up with Holly first, moved in with her first, gotten married first... fought their mother first.

Their strange sibling competition was hard to comprehend. Holly loosed her hold and leaned back to study her wife's face. She brought both hands up to cup Gail's face. "You're insane," she told the blonde firmly. "And beautiful. And I'm going to kiss you."

She could feel Gail smiling as their lips met and it was as it should be.
They made quite a pair, with Steve in his three-piece suit sans tie and Gail in her leather jacket, jeans, and boots. Somewhere, she knew her mother was cringing.

Sharing the same thought, Steve muttered, "Can't you dress nicer?"

"Can't you wear a tie?"

They grinned at each other, barring their teeth. Holly had told her once that it was creepy when they did that and she'd repeatedly failed to explain it was just how they worked. Steve and Gail had never been played against each other as children. Maybe it was the age gap or maybe it was just because they refused to play that particular game, but they always had each other's backs as they jibed and teased. The insults they slung at each other, Gail had been told, were not normal. They had always teased each other more like adults their entire life. Except the creepy grinning.

"Can't climb trees with ties," smiled Steve.

"Can't climb trees in those shoes."

"And you can in boots?"

"Better than you can barefoot." She grinned at Steve and shoved his shoulder before slouching in her seat. "All that intel is good, right? I'm not about to get my friend killed?" When Steve didn't reply, she looked up at him.

Her brother was perched on her desk, looking entirely lost. "Friend?"

"What? Chloe's my friend."

Steve turned and looked at John, sitting at his own desk and trying very hard to ignore them. "She has friends?"

"I'm her friend," John sighed, head down and typing furiously.

Turning back to Gail, Steve curled his lips into a strange smile. Gail recognized it as the one their father wore when surprised and happy. She signed for her brother to not be such a dick, and he laughed.

"Shit." He shook his head. "I promise this is good intel, I did it myself."

Gail nodded at him and propped her boots on her desk. "You know, the last time we worked together, you got stabbed. So I'm not as trusting as I might be about your ops." Her brother had the grace to wince.

"Is that why Blackstone's running the op?" John finally looked up from his computer. "And why do you hate him, Peck?" He paused for a moment and smirked, "My Peck, not other Peck."

It was nice to have her brother be the other Peck for a change. "Drama." She wasn't going to tell John she'd slept with Blackstone. "And Jacob's an asshole, but he's got more experience bringing people home alive. If it wasn't an all women gang, they wouldn't let us in at all."

Guns and Gangs currently had a dearth of women in Fifteen. They could have called in Rosati or maybe even Cruz, but instead Blackstone had decided that he'd use Double Peck and make do.
Sometimes Gail wasn't sure if she should be annoyed or not. Peck plus woman meant she got to be involved in the case still, which was okay by her.

They were all waiting on Blackstone and Chloe at the moment. She'd be undercover solo, but not alone. There just wasn't another woman they trusted enough to send with her and two might be suspicious. For the most part, Chloe would use her ingenuity to get information and they had a series of possible blind drops to help her pass on information. She'd infiltrate into the gang using one of Steve's CIs as her in and go from there.

It was going to be a long haul, though, and they all knew it. Chloe hadn't told Dov, or her parents, asking Gail to do it for her. It was a rare moment of cowardice. Apparently Dov hadn't apologized about the door thing yet. The idiot. Gail shook her head and looked over as the newly dyed Chloe walked in, wearing slightly scruffy jeans and a sweatshirt.

"So?" Chloe tilted her head at Gail, gesturing at herself. She looked annoyed and grumpy, like Gail on a mild day. It was cute. The hair was shorter and dyed darker, most of the red washed out.

"What's your story?"

"I had a partner who tried to turn on me, but I dodged doing time. I have a record now," grinned Chloe.

Blackstone frowned, "No smiling like that, Pierce."

Because she was Cleo Pierce. Similar enough, not too similar. Just enough to be sure she'd hear the name and know it was her. And Pierce was not that bubbly. Pierce was a bad ass. She stole cars, she lifted keys, she picked and bumped locks, and she knew security systems. Poor Chloe had her head filled with details, and she inhaled them. And now her hair was choppier, dyed a shitty black, and she looked angry.

"Bubbly is my cover," she informed Blackstone.

Biting back a laugh, Gail coughed. "You look fine. Just remember, everyone's a loser, you're better than they are, they aren't worthy of you, and kick ass. We'll be watching now you."

No hugs were exchanged. Chloe just nodded at Gail and left with Blackstone.

"Think she'll be okay?" John chewed his lip, looking worried.

"Yes," Gail said firmly. She had to believe it. "Come on, we've got other work to do."

They'd gone over the forensics reports from the Raspberry Pi as a tracker. It turned out the software was crazy complicated, having been set to pick up specific locations. The tiny wireless receiver was ripped off of a burner phone and actually used cell tower triangulation to determine positions and ping from there. Gail shuddered to think what would happen if the city had free wifi across the board. One day it would happen.

The little computer would text its location, when it was in one place for more than an hour, to another burner phone. So the criminals had used that to map its location and eventually steal the car. Way too much work for one car, Gail felt. It was almost as if they were showing off their brains, which implied this was an inside (or formerly inside) job. Revenge. John agreed.

But that sent them down a people hunt, which had thus far been fruitless. Finding people who were former employees and in Canada had been John's thing, and it was not going well. Gail had ended up learning more about technology than she'd ever wanted, understanding the reasons one might
want to go to that much work for the cars.

When she'd first heard the price of the cars, she thought they'd misplaced two zeros. Maybe even
three. It was just obscene how much things cost. And more importantly, the resale on the black
market for those cars was crazy high. Because the cars were so expensive, getting them out in good
shape was hard and selling them with good quality was rarer.

Looking at the list of keys stolen, Gail realized she could narrow down the potential thefts. She threw
out every car that wasn't selling for an obscene amount of money and every car that didn't have a
direct USB input to its brain. That brought the list to something manageable. Next she got John's list
of possible suspects and matched up cars with any systems they'd worked on. If the suspect didn't
know, or wasn't an expert, in one system, she ignored it.

Five possible cars. Two BMW, one Mercedes, a Porsche and a Ferrari.

Finally she pulled up a list of all those cars with stolen keys or sold from dealers with break-ins
recently and made list of people who owned cars likely to be stolen.

Damn, she was good.

Gail stretched her arms up over her head and heard a small pop from her lower back. That felt better.
She picked up her phone and blinked when she saw four texts from her wife. What the hell time was
it? Oh. Shit.

"Hey, John, do you have a date tonight?"

Her partner blinked. "Yeah, at eight." His eyes drifted across his screen. "Oh... Shit!" Grabbing his
phone, John stabbed at it while quickly shutting down the laptop and grabbing his coat.

Watching him bolt from the room, apologizing to Rachel, Gail dialed her wife. "Hey, I suck," she
said as soon as it picked up.

"Just for this, I'm picking date night." Holly didn't sound mad but she was annoyed. "At least tell me
you made headway on your case."

"I did, and I'm the goddamned Champion of the Universe." Gail eyed John's desk, picked up his
notebook and wandered to the door. As her partner galloped back from the elevator, she handed it
over to his thanks.

Holly laughed. "Isn't he supposed to be out with Rachel?"

"We got a little into our work," smiled Gail, packing up her things in a more decorous manner. "Can
I pick up anything on the way home?"

"Red wine? I'm making fish. And I promise to let the carryover heat finish it." Holly was always too
exact with cooking times and temperatures, rarely trusting carryover heat no matter how many times
Gail complained. Finally, in the last few months, Gail had won the war and they starting having meat
that wasn't too dried out.

There was a lot to do, as a part of an undercover op. When Gail was young, she thought you just let
the people undercover do what they wanted. As she got older, she learned about blind drops and
contacts and monitoring. Once she was a cop, the intricacies seemed to explode. Now the amount of
monitoring and supervising she was doing, and she wasn't even the lead on the case, was astounding.

As she left the building, she spotted Dov sitting at a computer, frowning.
Gail turned back and sat down next to him, saying nothing. Her classmate, her friend, didn't look at her. "How pissed were you at Nick?"

"We had a lot of other issues, Dov," sighed Gail. She'd been livid. Anger poured through her veins for weeks, but she'd been in a bad place to start with. From Perik to the shooting to Nick leaving, everything felt like one more stab in her gut. She'd only just started healing when she'd met Holly, and she'd nearly screwed that up too. "I had a lot of other issues," she added, feeling a surge of honesty.

Dov glanced at her now. "How long is she gone for?"

"Maybe a month or three. Depends how long things take." When Dov snorted, she sighed. "Honest, I don't know. If we're lucky, just a couple months."

"You're keeping an eye on her?"

"I am."

"Do you think ... Will she leave me when she makes detective?" Dov looked at her like a hurt puppy, terrified.

Gail had to think about that for a moment. "Dov, there is actually something really cool about Chloe and I'm only going to say this once, okay? She knows who she is. So you can either get on board with her or get the hell off, but you've got to love her for who she is now. Get it?"

He nodded, somewhat dumbfounded. "I think so, yeah."

"Good. Don't fuck it up. Man up, ask her to move in with you, be there for her, and be proud of her." Patting Dov's shoulder, Gail went home.

It was a few days before Chloe had any good news. Gail had slipped her the list of cars likely to be stolen, which let Chloe keep tabs on them and confirm the gang involved. That led to Chloe being brought in by Steve's CI to help boost one of the cars where the two key trick had been foiled. Now, after weeks, she was in with the gang for real and she knew where they were going to strike next.

When Gail got a phone call about a Mercedes however, it was totally unrelated to the case.

"Sorry, what?" She eyed her phone. Her cousin Ed, a Peck of course, was calling about an arrest for impaired operation of a motor vehicle. Who the hell did Gail know who'd be driving drunk at this hour and owned a Mercedes SUV?

"Crazy lady named Haskins. She says she knows you. At least I think she means you, she was talking about a bitchy blonde Peck."

She was the only blonde in the current crop of Pecks and Gail winced. "I don't know a... Wait, Lisa Haskins? Brown hair? Lopsided boobs?"

Her cousin grunted. "So says her ID. I try not to look at boobs when someone's about to puke."

"Doctor Lisa Haskins?"

"Oh yeah, she said she was a doctor. Her license plate is DR8008Z."

There was a collective pause and Gail and her cousin laughed. Dr. Boobz. She must have worked...
hard to get that past the censors. "Shit. Yeah I know her, she went to med school with Holly. Where are you?"

"I've got her at lockup. Want to pick her up?"

"Yeah, this will be fun." Gail sighed and told John she'd be right back.

By the time Gail got downstairs, Lisa was groaning on a bench, holding a bucket. Gail's cousin looked disgusted. "Who the hell gets drunk at one in the afternoon?"

"She probably had a martini lunch," shrugged Gail. "Hey, Lisa, how's it going?" This new adventure for Dr. BitchTits was going to be fun.

Opening her eyes, Lisa glared. "How many fucking Pecks are there? That dumb ass didn't know you."

Her cousin frowned. "She's all yours."

"Thanks," sighed Gail and her cousin stared. "What?"

"Steve said married life toned you down..."

"Suck an egg."

"There's the Gail I know," he laughed and left.

Lisa was still glaring. "Seriously?"

"About thirty of us. You want to explain this one?"

"Not really," muttered Lisa.

Gail shook her head and went to talk to the officer in booking. "Hey, Chris. She boot yet?"

"Nope," he smiled. "Holly's friend? Is that the one who called you names?" When she nodded, Chris lowered his voice, "We can keep her in the drunk tank overnight."

That was so tempting. "She surrendered her license?"

"Yeah, complaining about somebody named Carol the whole time."

Ah. That was probably the latest fling. "I'll take her off your hands then." Muttering about Gail's bravery, Chris drew the process out until Lisa finally puked into the bucket. He was really a sweetheart, which was why he and she never lasted. She needed someone with a little more bite.

"Okay, Lisa, come on. You can sleep it off in my office."

"I feel like shit," grumbled Lisa, following Gail to the elevator. "You have an office?"

"I have a conference room with a couch."

"Oh," Lisa quietly walked with Gail through the floor, looking around with a bleary expression. "Where are the others?" When multiple detectives looked up at her she elaborated. "The other Pecks."

General laughter filled the room, silenced by Gail's scowl. "Just me up here. My brother's downstairs and you met my cousin." Taking Lisa by the elbow, she marched her into the conference room and
let her fall on the couch. "Soon as I'm done, I'll drop you off at home." Lisa mumbled something and Gail rolled her eyes.

"Was that Lisa?" John looked highly amused as he walked in. "I thought I heard her dulcet tone of snark."

"Yep, can you ask Rachel if she can pick her up? Holly caught an arson this morning." With a grunt, John obliged and Gail went back to her review of the Mercedes dealers. Chloe had given Gail a short list for the next targets, but nothing was confirmed. The current idea was for Chloe to use some UV ink to mark the cars they actually messed with, since it was proving hard to find the silly tracking devices. They couldn't afford to strip every car down and the thieves were pretty clever.

Hopefully Chloe would be able to give them more information on that too. They'd only recovered the one car, which was proving not to be the typical location for the device. Also the idiots stole up to a dozen keys, and checking each car was time consuming. If the Pis sent out a signal versus requiring to receive first they could scan for that. Maybe they could anyway... They had the one device.

Gail picked up her phone, absently ignoring her wife's text for the moment, and called the lab with her idea. The tech seemed to think it could be reverse engineered to send a similar signal, but the odds were that it would still send its own ping out and that might be detectable by their loser car thieves. It was a risk worth taking decided Gail and she filed an official request for a new toy. At least this made the lab tech sound excited.

When she hung up, she went back to Holly's texts.

*Why did I have to find out you arrested Lisa from Rachel?*

*Whoops. "John, is Rachel coming?"

"Soon." He looked over at her and smirked. "You forgot to tell Holly? Doghouse!"

"Bite me." Her thumbs flew across the keys.

*I did not arrest her, Cousin Ed did. I just bailed her out.*

Holly's reply came right away. Apparently the arson wasn't too busy.

*I thought you and Captain Awesome were the only Pecks at 15.*

*Ed transferred. There's apparently a law that there has to be at least 1 Peck on patrol in each Division at all times.*

*A law?*

*Yeah, Ollie had to get him or pay a donut fine.*

Smiling at her own wit, Gail looked up as Rachel walked in. Oh thank god. John followed Gail's look and did a very suave maneuver where he stood up and smoothed his jacket and tie in one go. "Hi, Rachel," he said with a quiet smile.

Gail rolled her eyes and her phone pinged.

*You think you're smart, Gail Peck. You are very annoying.*

*You married me, dipstick. Rachel's here. Gonna fob Lisa off on her and go back to saving our cars*
from thieves and rustlers.

She gave Rachel and John a moment to be cute before clearing her throat. "I don't mean to be an asshole... No, wait, I do. Rachel, can you please take BitchTits home?" Having not heard the nickname, John did a double take.

"Only if you can recap what happened," sighed Rachel.

"Working theory? Carol dumped her at lunch. She got a little loaded and got pulled over for running a red. She already puked downstairs, so that's probably over." Rachel made a disgusted face and Gail shrugged. "I got her an early court date, but she blew a 0.06 ..." At least three days of a license suspension were in order.

Rachel's eyes widened. "Six?" At a 0.08 and up, you got the really fun laws. "Do I need to post bail?"

"No, I covered that. She can pay me back later. It's her first offense." Gail pushed her chair back and led Rachel to the small conference room where Lisa was currently sleeping. "Rise and shine, Lisa. Your ride's here."

Cracking an eye, Lisa winced. "How much trouble am I in?"

With a scowl, Rachel asked, "Legally, emotionally, or on the Misadventures of Dr. Slutty BitchTits scale?" That made Lisa wince more and reminded Gail why Rachel was her favorite of all of Holly's friends.

"Crap." Lisa robbed her face. "There are like a million Pecks in the city, and one of them arrested me, Rachel." She glanced at Gail, "Gail, you don't have any relatives who are judges?"

"Why no, Lisa," grinned Gail. "With the exception of Barry, who is the shame of our family and an accountant, and the three losers who are firemen, we are all cops. But... I think Rachel does." She turned to Rachel and in faux innocence asked, "Rachel, isn't your uncle a judge?"

It was clear how much this annoyed Lisa and Rachel smirked. "Why you're right! My uncle is a judge."

Gail was prepared to keep teasing when the phone in her pocket buzzed. That wasn't her phone, it was her burner, and she snatched at it. "John! We're on." Snapping her fingers, she pointed at his desk and the entire floor went silent. Even Rachel and Lisa seemed to get the importance of shutting the fuck up. Gail stuck a finger in her free ear as she answered in a growl, "Qualé?"

The familiar voice of Chloe piped across the line. "Hey, Abs, it's Cleo."

Making her voice gruffer and more like a six-pack-a-day smoker, Gail snarled, "Oh, you. What do you need?"

"Thanks, parceira," replied Chloe and Gail could hear her rolling her eyes.

Gail closed her eyes, calling up her persona Abigail in her head. "Best friend? You ditched me for fancier jobs, snob." There was a faint echo. She was on speaker. "You need a favor, I can tell."

"I can make it up to you, make it worth your while. You still know that Ferrari guy, right? Your ex?"

"Really? You want to go for the high end cars like that? You are so out of your league," laughed Gail. She took her finger out of her ear and sign-spelled Ferrari. John knew at least that much by
Chloe laughed. "I don't believe in leagues, Abigail. Come on, I'm just asking about the one thing. One favor."

"Cagar para? God knows I can do without your undying love and affection."

There were voices in the background. Gail strained to make out words but it was too fuzzy. "Got a new way to boost a Beemer."

"Well..."

"All I need is the switch."

"Fine. Meet me at the coffee shop where we busted Nico's balls tomorrow morning. But this Beemer trick better be legit."

Promising it was, Chloe went on to ask innocent, fake, questions about 'their' family. Intentionally dipping into Portuguese, Gail told her about how their friend was engaged and another was moving back home. While Gail could hold up a conversation, she was nowhere near as good as Chloe, who spun out colloquialisms and jokes like a native. At some point in their 'friendship,' Chloe had explained she was the first generation Canadian on her mother's side and had learned the language at her grandmother's knee. Said grandmother still lived with her parents. Three generations, one roof.

They hung up and Gail sighed. "What does she need about a Ferrari?" John sounded slightly worried.

"A switch," Gail ran a hand through her hair. "They're trying to bust in on a dealer, so they need the security system switch to get in safely. Faster, anyway I know what she's talking about. Call Blackstone, tell him I need a Ferrari boyfriend." John was already dialing when Gail turned to see a blearily impressed looking Lisa. "What?" She snapped at Lisa but it wasn't about her at all. Having to fake it was her least favorite thing about being undercover. Not being herself was always uncomfortable. Of course the one time she'd really been herself undercover had ended splendidly. At least she could keep her sarcastic internal monologues to herself now.

Lisa shook her head. "That was kind of cool."

Rachel nodded, "I thought it was all guns and donuts, but you just went from Gail to this other person and ... What do you do?"

An interesting question. Gail tried to think of how to explain it when Inspector Butler cleared his throat. "She does whatever I need. Spying on Russian human traffickers, hunting down college thefts, solving murders at conventions."

In the back, one of the other detectives chimed in, "And there was the drug thing with your brother and the ambulance scam."

John smiled, "Craigslist apartment scams in high end buildings."

"High end car thefts," added Butler. "Hello again, Dr. Lewis," he smiled at Rachel. "And this is...?"

"Dr. Lisa Haskins," Gail sighed, trying not to think about how many people knew what she did and thought it was cool. Right now, she knew Holly was going to be annoyed about her going undercover.
Smiling blearily, Lisa explained, "I got arrested. Did you know there are like a million Pecks in Toronto?" Turning to Gail, she asked "How come no one pulled Holly or me over when you guys broke up?"

Butler looked surprised. "You broke up?"

"Years ago, sir," Gail waved a hand. "Old news."

"It was my fault," interjected Lisa. "I was being BitchTits."

Giving her boss a resigned look, Gail did not want to explain that her nature of being a petty, vindictive, bitch had been squelched by her refusal to actually accept a breakup. What she did say was, "If Holly had moved, that might have happened."

When Lisa allowed that was fair, Rachel took hold of Lisa's arm, "I'm going to take her to my place. Thanks, Gail."

As they left the room, stifled laughter broke out. "She's a piece of work," noted Butler, highly amused.

"You have no idea," Gail and John grumbled as one.
Your Mileage May Vary

The wig was hilarious.

The wig washed away most of Holly's fear about Gail being anywhere near undercover work.

The wig was clearly not Gail's idea, too, based on the expression on her wife's face.

"Honey, you're right, the black is a terrible idea," she laughed, covering her mouth and trying not to. It didn't help that John, Inspector Butler, and pretty much everyone else up on the third floor were smirking.

"You're not funny," grumbled Gail, pulling out the bobby pins and yanking the wig off. "And why are you here?"

Oh her wife was in that kind of mood. "I had a meeting with Inspector Jarvis and thought we could get lunch?"

Grumpy Gail snarked, "Is that a question or an offer?"

Holly sighed. She knew Gail wasn't actually mad at her and wasn't really biting her, but clearly something had soured her mood. "Right, I'm going to get lunch." When Gail grunted a reply and opened her laptop, Holly knew that it would not be a lunch with her wife that day. Shaking her head, she went back downstairs.

On the main floor, Steve caught Holly's attention. "Tell me you didn't go upstairs." Holly arched her eyebrows and he winced. "Gail's pissed, it's my fault, I'm sorry."

The siblings were very similar, but Steve actually knew how to apologize and not take out his frustrations on whomever happened to be nearby. If you'd been the fuck up, not was a different story. "It's about the case?" He nodded. "Is…" Holly stopped and looked around the room. "Is everyone okay?"

"Yes, we just … I didn't have as much information as I thought I did, so we're going in a little blind." By 'we' he clearly meant Chloe.

"That's dangerous," Holly said, feeling like Captain Obvious.

Steve bobbled his head. "Gail's mad at me about it. It's her first deep cover op like this, so she's taking it a little personally." When Holly shot Steve a dry look, he sighed. "I know, I know."

"So it's not from the wig?" As soon as Holly said it, Steve's lips quirked into a barely smothered smirk. "Thanks for letting me know."

"Yeah, I'm really… You know she is a lot better about actually saying what she's feeling now, Holly."

While she knew Gail wasn't really mad at her, Holly wasn't really mad at Gail either. It was frustrating to deal with, no matter how understandable the issue was. "Cats in trees," she sighed to Steve, leaving him mystified.

A few hours later, a text from Gail popped up.

I'm being an asshat.
Steve was right. Gail really was getting better about it. Four years, and it wasn't like Holly hadn't dumped a mess of crap on Gail in the last year. She thumbed a reply.

*I'd rather you not bite my head off about it.*

*Didn't mean to.*

Holly hesitated, unsure what to reply with when Gail sent her a photo of herself with the black wig on. It was clearly from earlier that day as Gail was only good-naturedly flipping off the camera holder. Smiling, Holly replied to the photo.

*The hair is really bad.*

*Blackstone's idea. No one's seen me with black hair for almost a decade.*

A moment passed and Gail sent a follow up.

*I'm sorry.*

Was Steve there? Holly decided not to ask, but went with a gentle reminder instead.

*We can talk in your tree tonight.*

*Ugh, that was the stupidest metaphor ever. I regret telling you that.*

*I like your tree.*

*That's the worst pick up line ever, Stewart.*

Holly smiled. There was her wife. Putting her phone down, Holly pulled up the latest report to review and fell into the rabbit hole of work for the rest of her day. She ended up beating Gail home, which wasn't much of a surprise, though the delivery from her favorite Thai place was. Food apologies had been one of Gail's sulky ways to apologize for being a brat without having to use her words back when they started dating.

That was something Holly didn't care to revisit.

*Thank you for dinner. I was hoping to eat with a sexy blonde.*

The reply was almost half an hour later, which was both surprising and worrying.

*Sorry, I'm in a van with John.*

Clearly Gail's day had gone from bad to worse and Holly let her be. It was not her favorite part of Gail's job and she'd hoped it would have lessened now that Gail was a detective. All that had really changed was the types of jobs and who was in charge. There was still a number of nights Holly spent in their home alone because Gail was working. It came with the benefit of knowing Gail would be home eventually, which was much better then when they'd lived apart.

Clearly she was just too used to being with her wife, that these few days bothered her so much. Making the home alone, just herself, was too quiet and too lonely. She was accustomed to Gail's level of noise, the sounds of her wife working or reading in another room, the feel of her doing the same on the couch beside Holly.

"Holly Stewart," she scolded herself aloud. "Your wife is just working late. Stop being so childish."
Her voice echoed in the living room and Holly rolled her eyes at herself. Right. She cleaned up, left food ready for Gail to reheat when she got home, took a shower, and curled up in bed with the latest Game of Thrones book. The problem was she both fell asleep and woke up without Gail. Her wife didn't make it home at all that night, which made her start to worry. There was a message on her phone that they were still at the stakeout, but that was from four in the morning and here it was, six.

As Holly felt the mild panic start to grow, she tapped in a message asking where Gail was but did not press send. Being a police officer's wife was hard. You knew your spouse was stressed at work and didn't want to add to it. At the same time, you worried about them when they were incommunicado. People shot at Gail, they threw radios, they threw punches, and every manner of insanity could happen. It was somewhat worse for her when she knew Gail was working any sort of undercover operation, as it made Holly think about Perik.

Gail had pointed out that she'd never really be free of that particular horror. Even though he was dead, and even though they were reasonably sure he had no more apprentices out there, Gail was always going to carry scars from the 16 hour ordeal. It had broken her on some levels, in ways that would never really heal. They couldn't. The best Gail could do was manage how it made her act, which Holly certainly tried to help with. Rebuilding the emotional support structure most people got as children was tiring, but that gentle fragility that Holly saw behind Gail's bitchy exterior was part of why she loved her the way she did.

"You're surprisingly lost in thought for this early in the morning," joked Gail, startling Holly out of her worry and sending the phone flipping into the air.

They both watched it clatter to the floor. "You're home!"

Gail nodded, looking a little seedy in the same outfit she'd worn the day before. "Well spotted," she teased and picked up the phone. "We had to watch Chloe break into a Ferrari shop last night," she yawned. "They sent her with a bunch of no name losers, so we had to follow them to try and see if anyone was on our short list for pissy engineers."

"Any luck?" Holly blushed as she took her phone back and quickly wiped off her last message.

"Nope. The thieves aren't the same as the hackers. These guys were just picking up the cars the hackers jacked earlier. Dunno when they hacked these cars!" Gail wandered towards the shower, still talking so Holly followed. "Soon as we can figure out which cars they're stealing, we can get them 'sold' faster though."

The shower turned on and Holly started her normal morning routine, brushing teeth and hair, moisturizing and so on. "Will that help? Selling them faster, I mean."

"Sure," explained Gail. "We sell 'em to people who are in on the bust, set up discrete cameras, and maybe catch them in the act. I hope. They're smart, so they probably use muscle. Chloe's already working with a different group though, so I'm thinking they're sub-contracting out the work."

Holly pondered that for a moment. "Didn't you say that John thought these were disgruntled former engineers?" The 'yep' from the shower was annoyed. "I wonder if any were in management. Outsourcing the drudge work to lower cost laborers sounds like what my cousin Nell does."

The curtain rustled and Gail's head popped out, her soapy hair sticking up adorably. "Well there's a thought. Angry engineers led by a manager. Can you hand me my phone?" Holly did and smiled, watching Gail tap in a message before washing off the shampoo.

"Have you ever seen Office Space?"
"Nope!"

"Next movie night," Holly said firmly. "It's by the guys who did *King of the Hill,*" she added and Gail grunted her acceptance of the idea. "Are you going back to work?"

The water shut off and Gail sighed loudly. "Yes." She grabbed the towel and climbed out of the tub, looking a little drained.

"You need to sleep, honey."

"I want to sleep." Gail rubbed her face with the towel. "I think I hate running ops. I like straightforward police work, not this undercover shit."

Holly reached over and took the towel, rubbing Gail's head softly and drying her hair. "How about a nap," she coaxed gently, pulling Gail towards the bedroom. "Two hours."

Her wife balked and shook her head. "I really want to, baby, but I need to go back in. It's going to be a couple long days."

And she wasn't entirely wrong. It was a long week. While Gail did get home before ten that night, she pretty much face planted in bed after her shower. It was worse when her phone went off at five and Gail was out the door with an apology by half past. This cycle continued four more days, charging right through the weekend, and the longer it lasted, the less Gail spoke about the case.

On Wednesday, Holly came home and was surprised to find Gail's car in the garage. She hovered her hand over the hood of car, more surprised to find it cold. Gail was home and had been for a while. Normally she'd text Holly about that, but this time not only was there no text but the downstairs was totally dark and quiet. So was the bedroom.

In the office, curled up on the battered couch that was the first grown up furniture Holly had ever purchased, was Gail. She was still dressed for the day, belt and all, though she seemed to have locked away her gun.

"Poor baby," sighed Holly, reaching down to gently shake her wife's shoulder. "Hey, honey, wake up."

Groaning, Gail opened an eye. "Time?" She sounded like there was no energy at all in her body.

"A little after six. Why don't you shower and go to bed? Or come downstairs and I'll feed you something."

"I ate a ... Something. Food. Not hungry."

Oh yeah, Gail was not feeling well at all. As soon as Gail sat up, Holly pressed the back of her hands to Gail's cheeks and then forehead. There was a slightly higher temperature. "Yeah, you're sick, honey."

"I know," sighed Gail, waving a hand at the room. "Smoothie. I had a smoothie from the place." But she got up and shuffled through the shower and pajama process without much more to say.

It was probably just exhaustion, Holly thought, making a light dinner for herself when her phone pinged with a text from, of all people, John. Gail's partner rarely contacted her directly, preferring to use Rachel and Gail as intermediaries. He told Holly it wasn't because he didn't like her, but they just weren't that kind of friend for casual chatting. Of course, Rachel added John wasn't much for casual chatting anyway, being a pretty quiet and introspective person. The opposite of Gail.
Off the top of her head, Holly remembered Griggs was the grumpy older detective in Major Crimes, whom Gail had worked with before John was assigned to her. Or vice versa. Whatever. She told John to get some sleep and went upstairs to check on Gail. Her wife was snoring, her hair smooshed up against the pillow like a roster's crest. Gail bruised like hell but she rarely seemed to get sick. This was only the second time she'd had more than a mild cold, and like the last time she just wanted to sleep and be quiet. Which was good, because Gail told her that, as a rookie, she'd had WebMD induced hypochondria.

Also like last time, Gail was up on her feet come the morning, getting dressed before Holly's alarm went off. "You can take a sick day," yawned Holly, watching Gail pull on her jeans.

"Can't. Got a call about a break in at another Ferrari place." She sounded tired, but less drained. A little pained. Not eating dinner probably gave her a headache. "And I have to pick up John."

"He's not feeling well." When Gail looked up, perplexed, Holly explained, "He texted me last night and said to blame Griggs."

Shaking her head, Gail pulled on a button down shirt. "Well he did park the car there..."

The sentence made no sense. "Want to unpack that, honey?"

"John's car got totaled." Gail was dismissive about it, but Holly was abruptly fully awake. "Don't worry, no one was in it. Griggs parked it on the edge of the lot where John and I were working and some asshole jumped the curb and plowed into it."

"Jesus, Gail, you need to start with that." Holly covered her face with her hands.

The bed dipped and Holly felt Gail's hand on her stomach. "Sorry, I was getting there. Anyway, we had to wait for someone to pick us up, and it was cold out, so John has a head cold and I'm fucking tired. That's all."

Holly grumbled and took one hand away. "Is it bad my first thought was that you were in the car and I was pissed you didn't tell me?"

"Nah," smiled Gail. "I know I'm tired, but there's a lot to do. We're interviewing people and I need to have forensics check that the accident was a coincidence and not that Chloe's cover was blown."

"Can't you ask her?"

Gail's face tightened a little and she nodded. "Mmmm." That wasn't an answer, which made Holly worry about Chloe a little. No. No worries. Gail was going to make sure Chloe was safe. "Anyway, yes, I have to go to work."

With a chaste kiss to Holly's forehead, Gail tucked her shirt in and headed out, promising to eat more than a protein bar. Holly sighed and closed her eyes for a while. Her wife was a cop. Of course she had to go back out there and do things. Wasn't that the first real lesson she'd learned about being in love with Gail? She was a cop. It didn't matter to Gail if she was a patrol officer, a detective, or a white shirt. She got up every day and did what was needed to be done.

As much as it scared her sometimes, as much as it bothered her that her wife was headed off to work feeling poorly, it was a large part of why she kept loving Gail.

Reaching for her phone, Holly tapped in a quick message to Gail.
You're insane, but I love you.

The reply came promptly.

You love me because I'm insane.

Probably true, smiled Holly, and she got up for her day.

The technician droned on and on about how to use the ALS properly until Gail finally told him that he could use it if she could wear a pair of goggles. He blinked a few times and then shrugged. "I don't know what you expect to see..."

"Just do it," gritted Gail, biting her tongue on the snarkier reply. Behind her, John coughed discretely and picked up a pair of the glasses. "Shut up. Go turn off the lights," she snapped at her partner.

She could be mean to John in the same way she could be mean to Dov, and for that Gail would always like him. The best thing about Dov was he always took her snark and bitchiness as expected, normal, behavior. Chris tried to change her, Andy wanted to defuse her, Traci was alright but usually gave her a disapproving look, and Nick... Well she fought a lot with Nick. She'd always fought with Nick. Dov and John were different. They didn't tolerate her moods, they just went with it as if it was normal.

Really, not even Holly did that. Holly was somewhere between them and Traci, gently steering Gail away from outright meanness and into something socially acceptable. Gail glanced at her phone, checking for a text from Holly, and was mildly sad not to see one. They texted a lot, using it first as a way for Gail to express feelings and emotions when she hadn't been ready to say them aloud.

Boy, Gail realized she'd grown an awful lot.

The tech started to shine the ALS over the area and Gail frowned. "No, just the tires of the cars where their keys were stolen. Front right tire."

"Bossy," grumbled the tech, but he obliged. They swept the light over tires, one at a time, until the tech froze. "Son of a bitch... How did you know?" He whirled on Gail, accusatory.

"Chance favors the prepared mind," smirked Gail. "There may be another." There were, surprisingly, two more. The criminals were getting better.

With the lights on, Gail instructed the Ferrari guys to load up those cars and send them back to the forensics lab to be stripped down. Scratching his head, John asked, "What're we going to do about the thieves? They're going to notice this."

Gail grinned, "They're going to take all the cars back. It's a PR move, since they pride themselves on the quality of the cars. So they're going to just make sure we get those three." Pausing and looking at the tech printing the car, she added, "After we collect evidence."

Just in case one of the mechanics was involved, they had a lab tech and uniformed officer assigned to stick with each car all the way. Duncan, Noelle, and some new rookie Gail didn't know were currently assigned for transport duty. As much as Gail feared Duncan being there, she knew Noelle could handle anything. She was a great T.O. unlike Gail, who had survived but been miserable. Of course, the brunt of her time had been spent broken up from Holly, so her memory was jaded.

Speaking of Holly, she already had a text asking her to stop making the lab cry. Gail would have thought they'd like the field work, getting out and seeing new things. But perhaps the extra workload...
was the problem. Gail had a love/hate relationship with it herself, right now. She hated half of the case she had now, for example, and loved the other half. She loved tracking down the cars and making the short lists of potential victims and even trying to find out who might be the engineer behind it all. She hated being responsible, even partly, for Chloe's safety without any ability to actually ensure it. Out there, Chloe was on her own.

Gail knew how that felt when it was at its worst. Knowing that Chloe was on her own filled her with haunting fear. She'd talked to her therapist about it, but really she couldn't explain exactly why the normal reminders of how it wasn't all her responsibility and that her feelings were normal failed to help.

Back at the station, she told John she needed to think on the roof and walked outside. She did need to think, but she needed advice from someone she knew had been here, and dialed a familiar number. Maybe it was the slight fever she'd run that night which lent itself to an odd mental slackness, but she didn't want to call her mother for comfort so much as reassurance. Was that comfort for normal people? Gail sighed and press the call button.


"Oh, yeah, Mother. Holly's fine." Gail leaned on the railing of the small roof deck. No one else seemed to like it and it had become her favorite at-work thinking spot. It was sort of nice that her mother asked about Holly. She tried to think of her father asking and failed. She hadn't heard a thing from Bill Peck since the MOM award over a year ago.

"And you?" Elaine was hesitant. Would other people see that as Elaine being uncaring? That asking after Gail's well being was an afterthought? Gail knew it was because of the obvious: Gail was calling her mother, the odds were that she was just fine.

"I'm running, kind of, an undercover op." Her mother was silent for a moment and then made a 'Huh' noise. "Technically Blackstone's running it, but it's an all woman gang, so..."

Elaine understood. "There rather is a dearth of female detectives in general. You're the point contact." Her mother rarely asked a question about work. It was a relief on many levels.

Exhaling, Gail added, "Did you ever get over feeling worried about not being in control of it?"

"Hm. No. Not really. It was like when you had a rookie, only worse. Not quiet as bad as watching you two go out into the force, but a close second." A surprising revelation and Gail blinked, unsure of what to say. "My first was sending Shaw to monitor a group of fathers."

Gail tried to picture young Oliver, the first Oliver she'd known, undercover. "Oliver's a great cop," she said, defensively.

"Yes. Yes, he is now." They were silent a long moment, making Gail feel like the phone call was a mistake. "It's hardest when they're on their own, no active monitoring," Elaine sighed. "It makes you start to think you didn't give them enough information or prep them enough or are close enough. Are they a good enough actor..."

Relief washed over Gail like a gentle rain. This was a normal feeling. Other people worked like this too. "Yeah, exactly. It's harder than doing it yourself."

"Oh, that, is certainly true," muttered her mother, aggrieved. "Did you know that's how your father was shot? They broke his cover."
Four year-old Gail had not realized that. Actually that didn't seem right. Her father had been shot wearing his uniform. Gail had a clear memory of the bloody white shirt. "When was this?"

"Eons ago. Before we married."

Gail looked up at the clouds. So her father had been shot twice. Weird. "Who ran the op?"

"No one you know. Huff. He retired before you were in High School." Elaine exhaled loudly. "Are you asking me for advice?"

"More like a sounding board," muttered Gail. "I don't know ... You know more than anyone else I know about policing, and as weird as it sounds, I trust you not to tell anyone right now." Besides the fact her mother had no one to tell, she'd been remarkably good about keeping Gail's confidence lately.

The silence on the phone had a different flavor. "What happened to you," she told Gail slowly. "Kidnapping. You did nothing wrong. You, Barber, Frankie. You all did everything exactly right, the way you should have. And sometimes things like that go all wrong. They break and shatter and confuse us because they were right and then they weren't and suddenly it's all horrifically collapsing."

A hundred people had told Gail that before. A hundred people had said it wasn't her fault. They'd told her she'd not made a mistake. They'd insisted it was an accident. Multiple therapists, her friends, even Holly, all repeated the nauseating words that she had not been wrong. No one had been wrong. It had just happened.

Not a single person with the name Peck had said those words before. Not even her brother.

It felt very weird.

"How do I know I'm not screwing up now?"

"You won't know until it's over, but I trust you. You're brilliant, imaginative, clever ... Gail, the best thing here is that you care so deeply and are worried."

It was like a pod version of her mother. Useful advice and a weird comforting vibe was not something she remembered at all. "Caring means I'm doing it right?"

"It means you're paying attention to the right things. Trust your instinct." That made sense and Gail muttered a noise of understanding. "You'll be fine, Gail."

"Yeah. Yes." She sighed. "Thanks." The word felt awkward and almost uncomfortable, but at the same time it felt like something raw was finally starting to heal. Maybe she could be friends with her mother.
Frustrated, slightly sick, Gail was not fun. There was nothing else to be said about it, except perhaps that Holly was certain this Gail was her least favorite. After sulking for the better part of the weekend about not having enough information, Gail had found a thick book in Italian and was grouchily reading on the couch, wrapped in a blanket.

The cold that John had finally succumbed to on Thursday was doing its best to knock Gail on her ass even though she'd fought most of it off the week before. Round two was going to the cold. Holly knew that feeling under the weather wasn't why Gail was in a mood. For all her quirks, the blonde was pretty complacent when sick. She would eat, sleep, and generally be honest about her physical state. Emotional status was still a chancy subject for them, but Holly felt they were both making progress.

Last year had been a bit rough, with Holly's 'out of nowhere' panic and instinct to run kicking in. Gail had been patient and kind and comforting, showing that softness that Holly had been enraptured by early on. Love may not always be enough to solve all problems, she knew that, but they had rebuilt their relationship strong and soundly. They talked, they listened, and they trusted each other.

"Scoot over," she told her wife, holding out a mug.

Gail looked up, frowned, and scooted her legs up so Holly could sit on the other end of the couch. She held out a hand for the mug, diving back into her book without a word in reply. The title was *Il nome della rosa*, which even Holly could translate to *The Name of the Rose*. When Gail said nothing more, Holly cleared her throat.

"What?" The blonde did not look up. Holly felt lucky for getting an answer in English.

"Is that the same one as the movie with Christian Slater and Sean Connery?"

Bewildered, Gail looked up. "What?" This time the question was born of confusion. "Movie?" She eyed Holly, suspiciously.

Holly nodded, wriggling her feet under the blanket to rub them against Gail's legs. "Yeah, they're monks and they're like PIs who get brought in to solve murders."

After a long moment, Gail muttered a noise and nodded. "Yeah, I think so. Really? Sean Connery?" She looked at the book, as if that would explain it.

"I bet we can Netflix it."

Gail looked interested. "When I finish the book?" She sipped the tea and opened it up again. The book seemed to be a decent distraction to whatever was frustrating her wife, so Holly turned on a game on TV and leaned against the couch, feet and legs lightly tangled up mid couch.

When Gail's phone rang, Holly got the giggles as her wife absently answered in Italian. There was no eavesdropping as Gail went upstairs to their office, returning an hour later and picking up her book like nothing happened. "So?" Holly poked Gail's leg with her big toe.

"Car thieves and the computer programmers aren't the same group," grunted Gail. "They're the hired muscle."

"I was right about the sub contracting?"
"Yep." Gail stared at the book before tossing it on the coffee table. "I'm going to make something to eat."

The next day at lunch with Rachel, Holly mentioned Gail's general demeanor and Rachel looked surprised. "John's been just as grumpy. Is it always like this when a case doesn't go well?"

"I'm not sure," admitted Holly. "This is actually the first time." Every other case Gail had worked on had gone surprisingly well.

"This is probably good for them." Rachel swirled her ice tea. "Remember when we were working the ER rotation and couldn't figure out what was wrong with that woman? The pregnant one?"

There had been so many cases, but there was only one pregnant woman case that had stuck with them both. "The one I gave haldol too and freaked out?" Holly shuddered. The woman had been a schizophrenic who went off her meds in order to keep her baby. It had not ended well. All these years later and Holly still worried about the whole drama.

"It was like being on Greys Anatomy," shuddered Rachel. "Didn't she end up having an abortion?"

"She did."

Rachel shook her head. They'd spent hours trying to understand why the woman had slipped off into a world where it seemed like she had every pain or disease known to man. Once Holly had pumped her with haldol and she'd calmed, they found out she was pregnant. The shift supervisor had given her hell for not checking first, but Holly pointed out the woman's story changed every time and they were responsible for saving the mother first.

It was not surprising that she'd stuck by her forensic guns and left live-patient care as soon as possible.

"I'm just saying we learned a lot from failure and pain," Rachel explained.

Except... "At the cost of a life. Not sure how the karmic balance evens out there."

Rachel winced. "You're right. This is too depressing. How's life as a medical director?"

That was a better topic. "Going excellent. Except the bit where I fired someone." Rachel had not yet fallen into the trap of management, so they spent the rest of lunch discussing what all that was like.

First in her class at med school, Holly remembered having her pick of internships available after passing her boards. She also remembered the look on Lisa and Rachel's faces when she'd told them she was going into pathology. Never once had Holly regretted her decision. Even though she now did a lot more people management, Holly remained passionate about her work and devoted to the impact it had on the world.

And she loved putting together puzzles like what made a person stop working.

Finding people who shared that passion, however irreverently and seemingly distractedly, was what she never knew she'd dreamed of. It wasn't just that Rachel wanted to cure a disease, or Lisa was obsessed with the perfect breasts, or even that Gail and Steve didn't really know where they ended and the Peck began, it was everyone they brought into their lives.

The more Holly got to know people like Dov and Andy, who had both grown up with the darker natures of addiction in their lives and wanted to change things, she more she liked them. Chris and even Sam had their moments, both clearly beaten as children and dedicated to stopping it from
happening to others. But then you had Oliver, who was just and honest to god nice person who liked people and was brilliant at connecting with people to help them.

No one whom Gail had brought into their lives was someone Holly regretted knowing. That was pretty damn cool when you thought about it.

"What's next?" John's voice had finally lost the nasal quality gifted by his cold. The weird tone had irritated Gail, who was already snarky thanks to her own cold. Two weeks later, both were finally healthy and still frustrated. The fact that they kept loosing Chloe for days at a time wasn't helping.

The only break on the case had been Chloe moving from the car and key thieves to the hackers. There was a small overlap, usually sending one or two computer hackers over to infect the cars while the grunts stole the keys. Chloe even managed to track down the chop shops where the cars were sent.

In her black wig as Abby, Gail had met 'Cleo' for coffee and caught up on the important information in Portuguese. Chloe was 100% sure no one in her crew knew it, so they were able to easily set up drop points and communication lines. They knew they needed Chloe to get 'in' with the masterminds, and thus far she'd only managed to set eyes on the woman once. Based on the description, Gail got John to narrow down their suspects.

"Next would be to bust one chop shop," mused Gail, reviewing the case notes again.

It was possible that doing so would make the hacker thieves nervous, but it also could put the pressure on them and force them to make a mistake. That's what Gail was hoping for, frankly. That 'Cousin Cleo' would be able to dig into things before making a mistake out of panic on her end was paramount. They had to make the criminals break.

John tossed his phone onto the desk. "Okay, I think we should pick the last shop. What'd she say it was?"

"The one who did the Benz," sighed Gail, stretching her arms up above her head. "She said they'd take longer, too, their guys were klutzy."

One of the cool things about being in Major Crimes was the speed with which one could organize and execute a bust. Gail stayed behind to protect her cover as Chloe's contact, letting John take the on site point. They managed to collect two cars and six car thieves, all of whom were some of the lamest criminals Gail had ever met. Interrogation went easily, with Blackstone breaking them in moments and the idiots spilling their guts.

Gail was able to confirm they were the low end, but they actually had a contact with the hackers. She'd have to pass that on to Chloe to confirm, but Gail's suspicion was that they were talking to a low-end person. Hopefully Chloe could get in with that person, or perhaps take over the role.

When she met with Chloe two days later, they talked about that 'in the open.'

"If it's working out, you gotta think about your future, Cleo," said 'Cousin Abby,' trying to sound indifferent.

"I guess it is," sighed Cleo. "But you're right. I can't keep running around forever. I want something settled. You know?" They both looked over their coffees, thoughtfully.

Blackstone had hammered it into Gail's head that she was Abigail and to only think as Abigail. It was uncomfortable for her, being someone else. Gail had enough trouble just being herself. On the
other hand, Chloe even moved differently as Cleo. She had more swagger and spunk.

"Tu está matando cachorro a grito," noted Gail, holding up a hand and rubbing her thumb against her forefingers in the universal sign for money. The colloquialism could go one of two ways, depending on context, and Gail wanted Chloe to be sure she wasn’t talking about sex.

"Yeah, there's that too." Chloe tossed her shaggy hair out of her face. They'd determined before going under cover that talking about Chloe being broke was a sign that they need to speed things up. If Chloe was rich, they would slow down.

Also it meant if anyone actually did understand Portuguese, they'd think it was just two friends talking about money woes. "I say do it. Gotta be better than the other stuff, unless there's an X-9."

Chloe shook her head. No snitch, and no one thought she was the spy she was, which was good. "No, não os homi. But it was a near thing."

Scrunching her face up, Gail nodded. They'd cut the bust a little fine and nearly caught Chloe in it. With a memory of Andy's first bust blowing Swarek's cover, Gail'd kept the rookies under close watch. "Cê não dormir sobre seu louros," she noted and stood up. "Gotta go forward, right?"

"Out with the old," agreed Chloe with a smile. "Right! Tchau tchau," they hugged and Gail lifted a thumb drive from Chloe's pocket, dropping in a replacement. She'd tried teaching Chloe how to pick pockets and failed, though she was a fast learner on security systems. Probably all that nerdy dork vibe from Dov.

Getting back from their meet up, Gail took a subway and then a streetcar before spotting a super busy coffee shop and using their bathroom to quickly change into someone else. With a baseball cap pulled down, she took another streetcar before she was sure she wasn't followed and crossed UoT campus to pick up her car and head back to the station. It made her feel like a spy, she had to admit, and she somewhat missed her youth when she could stash things in a locker at a bus station.

Back at the station, Gail tossed the thumb drive to John. "Is it weird that a tiny bit of plastic and metal has more data storage space than the moon rockets?"

John eyed her. "That's pretty esoterically thoughtful, even for you."

"I can be esoteric," snapped Gail.

"I don't really believe you can spell esoteric."

"At least I graduated college, drop out." Giving John the same feral grin she threw at her brother, Gail recapped the meeting. "So if we can scare the bejesus out of the contact it'll open up a slot for Chloe."

John chewed a pen cap. "Think she knows enough about computers?"

What Gail knew was that Chloe had tried to fudge the videos to hide her kiss with her ex-husband, also she knew it had taken Dov a while to figure out how to recover the file. "She's pretty good," demurred Gail, not playing that hand.

For once, everything ran on rails. Spooking the contact had her run for the hills where the RCMP picked her up. Like clockwork, Chloe was tapped by the hackers to help them scrub the Pis before the cars were dumped on the chop shops, which led her to actually coordinating and leading a couple of car dealer break-ins. Of course, that came with the help of Gail and John, getting compliance from the dealers and the car companies.
John pushed the angles of the masterminds, thanks to Chloe's surreptitious photos from a non-smartphone, and picked out some likely suspects from Canada. The volume of female engineers was low enough that it was pretty easy to figure out. Five women, five companies, five hackers. The only trick was actually finding them.

It didn't help that a few days after being invited to meet one of the masterminds, Chloe went missing. Totally off the radar, there was no contact, no word, and no trace of the officer. Gail felt sick, unable to even allude to what was going on to her wife, she could only talk to her coworkers, and that wasn't helpful. To them, she was still a Peck and a Peck couldn't show weakness.

More often, she found herself picking up the phone to call her mother and discuss people wrangling and case management. How did you cope with sending people you knew and even liked into danger? And Elaine was actually helpful. She had advice and information and suggestions, but more than that she was a sounding board Gail sorely needed. Now, finally, they had a functional relationship. Elaine would always ask after Holly, sincerely even, professionally and privately. They were up to date on each other's lives, including Elaine's current position on the board at the Sherbourne Health Centre.

Her mother talked her off the ledge when she panicked about losing an entire person. She also gave advice about how best to spend her time waiting for Chloe to resume contact. Sound advice. If Chloe was off the radar, maybe it was just their radar. A few calls to border control had it picked up and they knew Cleo Price had gone with some girlfriends to the States, crossing the border towards New York.

Gail ended up taking three days with the RCMP down by the border, with her friend from the gay pride event Uncle Al had enlisted her for years back. Complete in a borrowed uniform, Gail was able to make contact with Chloe when she crossed back. John came with, also wearing the uniform, but only Gail ended up actually riding the horse. They searched the car, all the cars, that day. It had gotten boring, but the U.S. had been remarkably helpful, setting up a quiet BOLO on the car when they knew an officer was missing. The blue blood ran true across the border.

With a pair of glasses to make her look nerdy, Gail stuck her head in the car window. "Hi, ladies. Enjoy the States?" There were a chorus of yeses. "Sorry, but we're going to have to search your car today."

Everyone groaned, but they got out of the car and John checked it over. They couldn't leave any tracking device, they couldn't check for anything like a Pi, they couldn't seem like they had a single idea of anything computer related. They did have a good cover, that some kids had been smuggling drugs under the cover of just being woo girls and dude bros, headed to the States for a good time.

While John was clearing the car, Gail did the interviews. She made sure to keep a French twist to her words, dropping into the lingua fraca of half the country fairly regularly. The actual interviews were short. Why were you in the States? Have you anything to declare? Let me see your passport. When Cleo Price handed over her passport, a small USB drive was stuck to an inner page with spirit gum. Thank god.

Before leaving the border, Gail had the Mounties take photos of her in their uniform, including a couple shots with the horses. While she couldn't show Holly them right away, later on she knew her wife would drool over them. Maybe she'd print them up for Holly's birthday. Her wife was so transparent about what she had a fetish for sometimes.

There was a slight surprise when she got home. It had been the first time since moving in with Holly that Gail had been gone for a few days. When it had been Holly off at a conference, and that had happened a few times since, Gail had been all over her then girlfriend and now wife. Part of Gail had
wondered if it was just her who had an incessant need to physically reconnect with people after an unwelcome separation. She'd done it with Nick and Chris, though not sexually with the latter. She'd punched Nick, but that was the whole undercover shit.

It was with some slight trepidation that she came home, and great relief to find out her wife could barely keep her hands off of Gail from the moment she walked in the door. Any of Gail's plans to go over Chloe's notes were delayed thanks to that. Gail refused to feel guilty, since Chloe had told her there was no rush. God bless Portuguese. Holly kissed her as surprisingly passionately as she had the time she showed up at the station when they'd been broken up. They nearly didn't make it to the bedroom.

"Nice hickey," she told John the next morning as they met in the hallway.

"Nice turtleneck," he replied. They both smirked and Gail sent the files to their folder on the server. "You didn't even get to upload these last night."

Gail did not rise to the bait. "You didn't see any of their ringleaders in the car, did you?"

"Nope. I'll try running their faces against Steve's database, but I think the highest ranker there was our little agent. She works fast."

Fast? "John, this has been almost three months." He looked up at Gail in clear surprise. "Hell of a way to spend the winter." They'd dabbled on other cases in the time, but nothing as consuming as the car op.

Sharing her thoughts, John sighed. "What I wouldn't give for a nice, simple, murder."

Gail smirked and glanced at the photos from Chloe. "No kidding. With a straightforward motive like money or love or ..." She trailed off, staring at the photo of what looked like schematics. Squinting, Gail leaned forward.

"You can enhance the resolution," John noted, kicking his chair around to join her. "Mother fucker... Does that say Tesla?"

"Go big or go home," muttered Gail. "What the fuck were they smuggling?" She pulled up Chloe's case notes. That had been the hardest thing to get back and forth. Working for computer geniuses as criminals meant there was no laptop, so Chloe had taken to text messages with her cousin, irregularly, with summaries using as much slang as possible.

Half the time Gail wasn't sure she'd translated any of it right.

John picked up his phone, "I'll call them, see if any of our suspects worked there. That's got to be the hardest nut to crack. Elon Musk is no fool."

"Elon... That's his real name?"

"He's insanely brilliant," confirmed John.

As her partner called the company, Gail pondered motive. This was starting to look more and more like the perpetrators were showing off. They didn't have a goal like money or power but an emotional feel good of superiority. Elaine had been helpful explaining how those were different feelings. Most of her life, Gail reveled in the awesomeness of superiority while her mother held on to power too tightly. And much like Gail's superiority complex led to her taking advantage of others and using the, as stepping stones, these criminals were trying to flaunt their abilities.
That was an interesting concept. Of course the minions were throwaways. They didn't care about any of the chop shops or the people who picked up the cars. Actually they didn't even care about the cars. They cared about the computers. They cared about fooling security systems, showing the flaws, proving superiority.

Gail pulled up her list of suspects. It was great she'd figured out how to pick what car companies were being targeted and which people were likely to buy the cars. None of that mattered, and it was probably why this crime had gone on so long. She re-ran a search on car dealership break-ins. They'd done it before, but now she concentrated on male owned and/or managed business and advanced car systems. The list was small, but enough had been targeted for more than just the weird key theft.

"If I was showing off by nicking cars... Why would I jump the border before hitting Tesla," she muttered aloud.

She knew that you could hack a Prius, thanks to Dov showing her how people did that. Tesla was more secure, disabling updates to firmware (the software on the hardware, whatever the hell that meant) unless it had the right digital signature. A note from a tech read "A person with physical access could bypass any primary validity check simply by booting a different base firmware straight on the bootloader." That was that they'd done to the Mercedes and the Porsche. They must be able to do it to the Tesla as well.

After a few hours down a rabbit hole of something called REST API authentication, Gail determined that technology of this level wasn't her friend. She also knew that the API itself was fairly secure from an external assault and a hands-on method would be required. So. They knew the idiots hadn't cracked Tesla yet. The crap they smuggled over had to be some Tesla specific hardware, probably picked up from a contact in the States.

"I have two dealers," John said. "They're willing to let us stake them out."

Gail snorted. "I should hope so." She twirled a pencil between her fingers. "This one is closer to the other shops they were hitting."

"But wouldn't they change it up?"

"Only if they know we're on to them."

They both frowned. It was a toss up. Gail looked at the notes from Chloe. "No, they don't know we're on to them. They can't. Chloe's still in there, and she'd be the first out."

With a deep exhale, John nodded. "You know if they smuggled in tech we have to call CSIS." Gail made a face and John laughed.

In the end, they set up stakeouts at both locations and Chloe was spotted at one. That made it easy for them to wait for the moment and swoop in to arrest all of them, including Chloe. From their end, the arrests went perfectly. The backup security system caught them red-handed, the tech was indeed what Gail had spotted in their bags being 'smuggled' across the border.

The hackers were stunned and, after Gail's now well practiced interrogation skills were applied, spilled the uninteresting beans and named names. They kept Chloe locked up for a day, much to Gail's amusement, picking up more of the masterminds. Much to Gail's annoyance, when the FBI and CSIS swooped in to take over, the first thing the stupid Americans said was that they should have been called in earlier, as they would have arrested all of them.
Miraculously, Gail did not cause an international incident.
Chitty-Chitty Bang-Bang

It was impossible for Holly to actually like the fact that Gail was hanging out with her mother. And every time Holly thought about it, she felt bad for still being mad at Elaine Peck. But every time she mentioned it, Gail would say that Holly should be mad and didn't even suggest an alternative. It was simply alright by Gail that Holly was mad.

Holly's therapist suggested she just ask why Gail wasn't mad, why she was doing this at all with her mother. In so many ways, Holly feared the answer. Was this a sign of Gail growing away from her? Or was that just Holly's old insecurities cropping up. That Gail would change her mind and leave... Except when she had asked, the answer was confusing. Gail had said that if they did have a child, they should at least have an answer to why Grandma and Grandpa Peck never came around. Since Elaine was making an effort, maybe it would be alright to let her in.

"At least she's not the only one with issues," muttered Holly, pulling out the gloves and bats. Gail only played softball under duress, even though she was getting pretty good, which left it up to Holly to make sure their equipment was in shape. Reliably, Gail did clean the mitt. She wasn't the best at winter prep, in contrast to her gun care.

Speaking of guns... Holly checked the clock. Gail was supposed to be off at the range with Oliver and Noelle and some of the rookies, blowing off steam while waiting for 'something' to be resolved with the case. Something Gail wasn't allowed to talk about yet and actually was doing a good job not telling Holly about. Where Dov had had the shooting highest score in their rookie class, Gail was still the most consistent. She practiced so that the gun was a reflex action, a part of her every day life, and yet she'd never once shot anyone. Saved Chris from a stab wound, delivered a baby, gotten a kitten out of a tree, Gail had done every single stereotypical cop adventure. She even knew how to drive a motorcycle, courtesy of Nick. But she had never shot someone.

One day it would happen, Holly knew it. The odds were for it, given that Gail would be a cop forever. And Gail, her wonderfully bitchy and hard shelled Peck, would crumble for a while in agony. She was just too sensitive. Too many of Gail's friends would scoff at that notion and that drove Holly nuts. The closest ones, Oliver and Traci and even man-child Chris knew better. Chloe certainly spied the truth of Gail's insecurities. Not really knowing who she was meant to be. Not that that Holly knew any better, of course, but being with Gail made her more willing to experiment again.

Gail's ringtone cut through the early evening and Holly frowned. Lately those calls had ended up being an apology that Gail was going to be working late. "Come to the Penny, Chloe wants to see you," announced Gail, the instant the phone connected.

"Chloe? She's back?"

"She's back and a badass and totally getting pinned some stupid medal for being on site to bust an international car theft ring." Gail was all but singing.

The case was international? "Wait, do you get to meet the FBI?"

"Met, past tense. They rolled in this morning, all 'we have no sense of humor' bullshit. They're really dull. But they were all geared up to jump the border. I'll tell you all about it at the Penny?" Her wife had a wheedling tone.

It had become rare, the times Gail and Holly went to the Black Penny. Gail pretty much only went...
after a case was closed, or when there was a new crop of rookies, or if Oliver asked. She rarely suggested Holly come along, though she always said Holly was welcome. They just stopped doing the bar and drinking thing. But this sounded different.

"Okay, pick me up at the house?"

"One car coordination, yes ma'am."

They were not the last to show up. While the case had been Gail and John's, the queen of the night was Chloe. She sat in Dov's lap, hair looking darker and less red than Holly was used to seeing, with a fruity drink in hand. Dov looked more attentive than normal, but weirdly less possessive.

"Okay, what's up there?"

Gail collected two beers from the table, handing one to Holly and popping the cap off her own with her ring. That had been one of her favorite tricks to pick up. "I gave Dov a man to man talk about supporting your girlfriend's future," explained Gail, taking a long sip.

Ah. Holly smiled and leaned her shoulder into Gail's, smirking. "I see you remembered what I told you, Detective."

"Or maybe what I did, Medical Director of Toronto." Gail's toothy smile was sincere and she kissed Holly lightly. "I give good advice," she said firmly. Now was not the time to disagree, so Holly looped her arm through Gail's and dragged her over to Chloe.

Chloe beamed, "Doctor."

Impishly, Holly replied, "Doctor."

While Gail looked confused, Dov smirked. "Doctor."

Oliver joined in, highly amused, "Doctor!"

After they repeated it for another round, Gail frowned. "You're not doctors," Gail said, absolutely perplexed. When the others broke up laughing, it didn't help. "Is this some dorky movie?"

Nodding, Chloe explained, "Its from *Spies Like Us*. John Landis movie. You know, I thought being married to Holly would teach you stuff."

Gail snorted, "Improve my geek quotient? Fuck no." She reached over with the beer and tinked it to Chloe's glass. "How'd debriefing go?"

"Weird. Is it always that weird?"

"Generally," agreed Gail. "Never done one with the FBI though."

Holly coughed. "Speaking of. I was promised a story about the international crime ring?"

They took seats at the table and Gail began the story with admitting John was right. "Turned out his theory that it was someone who quit working for one of the major companies was right. Three of them, met up at some tech thing, started talking about how they could do better."

That sounded familiar. "Like TED?"

"Something like that, only women allowed," confirmed Gail.
While Holly knew about TEDWomen she'd not paid that much attention to it. Maybe she should consider speaking... Gail's toe poked her leg, bringing her mind back. "So they met, decided to be women proving they were smarter?"

Chloe nodded, "Originally. They just hacked into the cars for showing off. Who had the best hack of their systems, it was a joke. Then they found out how much you could make with the right cars and since they worked for the right car companies, they teamed up."

"Your criminals have weird motives," Holly told her wife.

"I've noticed this," agreed Gail. "But I kinda get this one. Treated like lesser beings, pushed around, they stand up. Sell the cars, make a few bucks."

"Make a lot of bucks," corrected Chloe. "Seriously, I could've been set for life. Matar cachorro a grito." Gail snorted a laugh. "They were making bank, Gail!"

"I know, I know," she laughed. "God, I'd love one of those for your new car, Holly." Gail had been pushing for Holly to get a better car, preferably one with all-wheel-drive and a rather expansive insurance package. Holly's return offer was that it be their car.

Holly rested her arm on the back of Gail's chair and was somewhat surprised that her wife leant into her. That happened a lot at movies or plays or events where Gail 'girled it up,' but rarely when she was in uniform or work clothes. It had never happened at the Penny. "Gail, speaking of this being John's idea... Where is he?"

"Hopefully at Rachel's by now," grinned Gail, cheekily. "He did not appreciate the Americans. Never saw anything get under his skin like that." Trying to picture an upset John was hard and Holly eyed her wife skeptically.

"He took the Tesla scheme hard," agreed Chloe, frowning.

Holly blinked. "Tesla? Like the sexy as hell electric Tesla? That was their plan?"

"Yup." Gail popped the P loudly. "Everyone else was happy to let Canada deal with intra-nation theft. Good ol' 'Murica has to be special." There was tease to her tone, similar to how Gail bagged on TwentySeven Division as being the home of mental defectives. The relationships cops had with other law enforcement groups was so confusing.

Leaning in, Chloe explained, "I smuggled tech across their border." She grinned, trying to look evil, but just became an adorable, tiny waif.

"That was when I lost her for five days," elaborated Gail.

"Oh that's why you freaked out." Holly grinned and kissed Gail's cheek. "She was worried about you Chloe."

Gail grumbled, "I was worried about blowing my first big undercover case."

"You totally freaked," teased Holly.

Narrowing her eyes, Gail spoke quietly. "Just for that, I'm not showing you photos of me in my Mountie uniform." Holly felt her face heat up. Oh. Wow.

Interestingly, Chloe didn't press the matter. "Thank you," she said to Gail.
Dov, who had been silent through the story, sighed. "You're really good at covert stuff, Chloe." They looked adorably at each other and kissed, prompting Gail to gag.

The rest of the night involved the retelling of the bust made with the RCMP, hauling everyone back to Fifteen only to have the FBI swoop in and pick up everyone at the station. The case was open and shut once they had the guys and the evidence, but now they had no guys and no case. Just a lot of paperwork and supposedly photos of John and Gail in uniform. The mental image of Gail in a Mountie uniform did things to Holly, though, making her blush. She couldn't wait to see those photos.

But there was a lot of cheering and drinking and people being happy. Gail, who didn't drink more than the one beer, graced the crowd with a couple karaoke songs before taking notice of Holly's flagging energy. It was effortless, the way Gail slipped out of the throngs of revelers and laced her hand in Holly's to take them home.

"I'm just too old to want to party all night," groaned Holly, handing Gail her coat to hang up as they came in from the garage.

"You are not old," sassed Gail. "And you'll only be eight years older than me for a few months. Stop harping that forty is the end of the world."

"Yeah? Well I feel old, watching you caper and sing karaoke with your friends. And I'm tired." Gail made a disappointed sound and Holly glanced over. The look from Gail sent Holly's blood pounding and suddenly she wasn't actually tired anymore. It was undisguised want in Gail's eyes, a clear suggestion that they could argue about age and being tired, but Gail had other ideas.

Right away, Holly forgot she was going to be forty years old in just a couple months. The back of Gail's hand, her knuckles, brushed Holly's cheek and her thumb followed the movement, tracing the bone structure. Gail smiled and crooked two fingers under Holly's chin, drawing her in for a slow, long, kiss. The woman simmered with sexual confidence and she somehow managed to endow Holly with the same feeling.

Seeing herself through Gail's eyes made her feel incredibly sexy.

It was all the little clues, like the way her pupils widened to let more light in. There was also the way Gail kept looking at her when she spent much of her time looking away from everyone else. Literally, Gail couldn't keep her eyes off Holly from a very early point in their relationship. Similarly she kept physically nearer to Holly than she did everyone else. But none of that made Holly feel tingly the way Gail did right then.

The eyes shining was just from the pupil dilation, Holly knew it, but when you added them to slow smile and the way Gail's soft lips felt, it set her on fire. God, Gail kissed well. "You," sighed Holly, her eyes closed.

"Yeah, I'm pretty awesome," Gail agreed. She kissed Holly again, pulling her into an easy closeness.

"Modest too." Holly reached up and covered Gail's hands with her own, keeping their bodies touching.

If she told Gail that those kisses, that touching, made her feel like a giddy teenager, would she understand? Did Gail know how amazing she really was? How she changed Holly just by being who she was? Holly couldn't think of the right words to say to express how she felt. There was no way to trust her voice when it came to telling Gail that she made Holly feel young and sexy and ... She sighed and leaned her forehead against Gail's, fingers tightening in Gail's hair to hold her still.
Gail didn't try to move away. "What's going on?"

"I love you," whispered Holly. That was a safe start.

Making a soft noise of agreement, Gail replied, "You make me kinda crazy." Her voice was quiet. "I love almost everything about you."

That was Gail. Holly smiled. "Almost?"

"I really hate the way you fold my shirts," her wife said gravely.

"I'll keep that in mind," was Holly's solemn reply. She opened her eyes to study Gail's face, leaning her head away for a better look. "You are beautiful and crazy and you make me..." Holly trailed off. "You make me feel special."

Gail blinked and looked surprised. "You are special. You should always feel that way." She wrapped her hands on Holly's waist, squeezing her. "You make me feel ... " Gail shook her head.

Words were overrated. Holly smiled and kissed the juncture of Gail's neck and collar. Her wife sighed and titled her head back, allowing more access. The blonde hair was the dark, dirty reddish color that Gail came by naturally, long enough to feather at the nape of her neck. Brushing the hair with her nose, Holly breathed in the smell of her wife's skin. Pheromones. They drove her more wild than the hair or the uniform.

Moving her hands, Holly unbuttoned Gail's shirt and pushed it open. You didn't have to say everything with words, you didn't have to process everything. They stumbled to the couch, Gail shrugging her shirt off somewhere in the process and Holly pausing to put her glasses on the coffee table. Gail quipped that Holly was getting serious, but stopped talking when Holly joined her on the couch.

"Holly," groaned the blonde, her head falling back against the couch.

"I know," replied Holly, smiling against Gail's collarbone.

And she did.

The moment she sat down, the moment her ass hit the seat, she knew what was wrong. In that moment, Gail Peck felt that she knew exactly how she was going to die.

Rewind.

The day had been good, in so far as a case ripped out of your hands could be good. Gail had been woken up by the CSIS calling to have her come in for an early morning meeting. She drove Holly to work first, in their current attempt to help save the planet. Home was closer to the lab and they'd worked out a route that saved gas and time if Gail drove them both. This normally wasn't a problem, but today with meetings all day and running out to the stupid Mercedes place for one more check on things they already knew, picking Holly up on the way home would be tricky.

Chris offered to help, bringing Holly to the station while Gail worked on the files as directed by CSIS and the FBI. The Americans had left already, which Gail felt was a blessing except for how they'd left nearly all the paperwork for her and John. The jerks. But finally at six she was free and just in time to think about food.

She had been laughing with Holly over their dinner plans, laughing at John over his complaint about
a restaurant he didn't like. John wasn't invited, after all. It was time to go home, time to relax. And then there was that moment when, as Gail sat in the driver's seat, she felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. Holly's hand was almost on the passenger door, telling John to just call Rachel, when Gail knew it was all so totally, terribly, wrong.

"Holly get away from the car," she snapped. When Holly only hesitated a moment, still reaching for the door, Gail raised her voice but did not shout. "John. Get her out of here now."

The tone, the timbre, made Holly step back. She stared at Gail, actually scared. Gail knew she'd never used that tone with Holly before. It was the one she learned at her grandfather's knee, the one that was harsh and unyielding, and Gail Antonia Peck would do as she was told. The voice of a superior. An order.

God bless John. He had Holly by the upper arms, hauling her back to the station without a question. He knew that voice. Hell, he'd probably heard it from her mother before, or some other white shirt. She could hear Holly arguing, demanding to know what was wrong, but the other police officers heard the tone in Gail's voice. She had never used that voice like that and it lit a fire in the officers. The ones who knew her best cleared the area and her wife was forcibly removed from the scene. Holly was going to kill her later. If there was a later. Swallowing, Gail waited until Oliver stepped outside with a vest on.

"Hey, Peck. What's going on?" He was calm, that beautiful and wonderful calm that Oliver wore like armor. That crown on his shoulder promising her she'd be alright. She took a moment to drink that in and let it settle her nerves.

"It clicked, Ollie," she replied softly. Any louder and her voice would shake. She knew her car. She drove it every day, she sat in it every day, and she knew the sounds it made when she did. And she knew the sounds it was never, ever, in the history of ever, supposed to make.

Nodding, he stepped closer. "I'm going to look under, okay?" She nodded back and watched him vanish from sight. "Something's hooked on there. Looks electronic. I'm taking a photo."

Shit. Why couldn't she have been wrong? Why did she have to be a good detective and cop? "It clicked, Oliver. It's pressure sensitive."

"Yeah, not touching." He popped back up. "There's a wire going in." He touched his radio and called in 10-100. Bomb threat. "Bomb dispersal's on the way, darling. Hold tight." Gail closed her eyes and nodded. Shit like this happened to Dov, it happened to McNally. It didn't happen to her. "Hey, it's going to be alright. I'm having Nick lock Steve and Holly in my office, okay?"

Gail nodded. "Oliver," she whispered. "I have never had to pee more in my life." He laughed and stayed with her until the bomb squad finally showed up.

It felt like hours before the the armored van pulled into the lot. Sue Tran had demanded to take charge, or so she said. "I owe you one, Peck," explained Sue as Oliver was sent inside.

For the life of her, Gail couldn't remember why. She nodded. "Sure you do." Everyone owed her something. Except then she remembered the case when she'd started as a detective. They'd needed an explosives expert and she'd asked for Sue. She'd asked for someone who could put a gun together faster than she could, who was calmer than she was, and hadn't Sue gotten promoted to lead after that? "Anyone figure out how the hell this got on my fucking car?"

Sue smiled. She was calm and she was ready. "They're going over the video now. It has a sensor. Limited range wifi. We picked up the signal and we're trying to track it now."
That was familiar and Gail fought through the panic to place the memory. "The carlosers," she told Sue. "They did that. Put Raspberry Pis in the security system to track things. When the cars they had keys for were in range, it set off an alert so they could find it. The pressure... Pressure plus location? No, location plus pressure. Blow up in a Division parking lot. Awesome PR."

"Damn, that brain doesn't stop." Sue sounded impressed. "Don't think I've ever seen you be that much a cop, Peck. Look. If I can get this out intact, we'll know. You just sit tight."

"Like I have any other choice," grumbled Gail, closing her eyes.

The bomb tech vanished from sight, just like Oliver had earlier. "Pressure for sure," confirmed Sue. "How did you figure all that out while just sitting there? That was incredible."

"Not a lot else to do right now except think." Gail loved to tease Holly and tell the doctor that her brain never turned off. The truth was neither did Gail's. Maybe that was why she never minded that obsessive aspect of her wife.

"Most people say their life flashes before their eyes." That would have been nice. Think about all the times with Holly... When Gail didn't answer, Sue went on. "So you're right. Wifi signal is a simple geolocation check and the trigger is a pressure sensitive one, so your sitting down activated it. Must have completed the circuit."

Wonderful. It could have been put in anywhere, including her home. "And getting up, Peck goes boom?"

"I'd like to avoid that," demurred Sue. "There's this very angry woman in an office in there who informed me if I don't bring you back in one piece, they won't find my body."

Gail laughed softly. "About my height? Sexy as hell brunette with librarian glasses?"

"That's the one, Dr. Stewart. Why does the forensic nerd want me dead?"

"Medical Director. And she's my wife."

There was a long moment of silence from Sue. "No shit? Man I haven't hung out with you guys for a million years. What happened with you and the army guy, Collins?"

Exhaling, Gail looked at the ceiling in her car. That was right. Sue had been around for her breakup with Chris. "Apparently I'm a terrible girlfriend. Or not girlfriend material."

"The angry wife in there who is freaked to hell you're not coming home with her begs to differ." Sue's head popped up. "Maybe you're just a bad girlfriend for men."

"Maybe you're just stalling for time to tell me how dead I am."

"Detectives," grumbled Sue. "We have a few problems. First of all, I'm not sure if I cut off the signal it won't blow. Second, I don't know if I can detach it with it blowing. Third... How fast can you run?"

Gail stared straight ahead and then slowly turned to look at Sue. "Your plan is to open the door and yank me out, praying you get me to cover before it blows?" Sue nodded and Gail felt like crying. "Shit. That's a stupid plan."

"Got anything better?"
No. She didn't. Nothing realistic at least. Gail squeezed her eyes closed tightly. "Just… tell me you've done this before."

"Sure," replied Sue brightly. "In training scenarios. And I saw it once."

Exhaling a laugh, Gail closed her eyes. "Oh? How well did that go?"

"I'm about 75% in training." Gail opened one eye to look at Sue and see she was joking. That actually helped and Gail rolled her eyes. "I'm going to give you a vest—"

"No, no, speed." Gail swallowed. "Speed. I want to fucking fly out of here."

Sue stared at her for a long moment. "You're not dying on my watch, Peck. I wouldn't want to inconvenience the wife. Or piss off Fifteen."

She watched the bomb techs set up protection screens and lay a mat on the ground. She listened to the plan a hundred times. They would pull her, she would push off, they'd slam the screens closed and everyone would be fine. Carefully reaching for her phone, she tapped in a message and held it out to a bomb tech. "Get out of range, press send. Do not read the message."

The man nodded and moved away. It wasn't much but it was all she could do. Gail carefully removed her gun, handing that to Sue. Sue handed her earplugs and she wedged one in, watching Sue's lips very carefully as she spoke. They cleared the area and locked the bomb panels around the car, protecting everyone as best they could. All the other cars were moved out of the lot.

"Okay, Peck, turn around and put your feet on the edge."

"Sue, I'm about to jump into your arms. You can call me Gail."

There was a ripple of laughter among the techs. "Damn you're fun now. You should transfer over."

"No, we can safely write adrenaline junkie off my career wishlist." She was sweating so much, the need to pee had vanished.

"Fair enough. After this, I'm buying you drinks. Okay, duck your head down and lean forward. Keep your ass in that seat."

"Stop perving on my ass, I'm married." Gail shoved the other ear plug in, making sure they were firmly in place, and extended her arms, feeling Sue's bare hands clasp her wrists. Mimicking the hold, Gail dug her fingers into Sue's wrists, certain she was leaving bruises and not caring. "I'm ready," she said loudly, eyes locked on Sue's mouth.

"Count of three. It's one, two, and we go on three." Nodding, Gail took a tighter hold of Sue's wrists. "One. Two. Three."

Gail kicked off with all her might, remembering the swimming lessons her parents forced on her. She felt Sue pull so hard, she swore her arms were going to rip out of her sockets. There was a click behind her and then a pause as if the world was folding in on itself.

And then she heard nothing at all.
Three things happened before Holly let herself panic. Three things that she'd remember for the rest of her life, no matter that she didn't want to ever have this moment burned into her brain.

The first thing that happened was the text on her phone from Gail, telling her she loved Holly no matter what. The second was the explosion that rocked the Division, rattling the windows and making everyone freeze. The last was watching the DAD mug on Oliver's desk, Gail's mug which Holly was supposed to be drinking tea from, fall off the desk and shatter on the ground, a mess of tea and ceramic shards.

Actually, it made Steve panic first. Bellowing his sister's name, he threw himself at Oliver's door and knocked it off the hinges. The glass shattered as it hit the floor, pebbled shards of safety glass flying through the air. Holly took advantage of his manic strength to follow in his wake. They didn't make it outside. Chris and Nick managed to restrain Steve like a defensive wall, while Oliver and Traci had Holly covered. Oliver's arms wrapped around her, holding her tight while Traci's hands gripped her shoulders.

The entire division was silent, listening to the car alarms and the tinkle of debris falling from the sky outside. The only sounds from inside was Steve's heavy breathing and Holly's heartbeat. No one else could hear the heartbeat, probably, but it deafened her. Finally the door opened and a dusty bomb tech, sans helmet, looked grim. Oh god no… "They're alive. They're with the EMTs now. Dr. Stewart…?"

Holly slumped against Oliver, her knees feeling weak. Oliver held her close like she was a child. "She's alive, okay? Gail's alive." He said that over and over, as if by repeating it she'd accept that it was true. Gail, was alive. Gail was alive.

It took all of Holly's brain power to nod and mutter an okay. She let go of Oliver and stood straight. Steve was crying openly, Traci now holding him tight and whispering something quietly. But they were alive. Gail was alive. "I want to see her," Holly said slowly, surprised to hear how calm her voice was. The tech gestured for her to come with him.

Outside looked horrible. It was, literally, a bomb zone. Already on the stretcher, Gail was wincing as the EMT checked her back. "Mother fucker, yes that hurts," snapped Gail and Holly felt her blood pressure drop back to normal, her heart calmed. That was her wife, of course. Angry and grumpy who had been inconvenienced. "Did you have to land on me, Sue? You still owe me."

"Shut up," grumbled the woman on the other stretcher, sitting up with the help of an EMT. "You're not the one with a concussion."

Gail snarled, "You landed on me in full gear!" Then she hissed. "Son of a bitch that hurts!"

Feeling calmer, Holly let herself be led over to the ambulance. "Hey," she breathed, looking at her dirty, grumpy wife. "You made a new friend."

"Hey," smiled Gail. There was no blood on her at all, just dust and grime. "That's Sue Tran. She's a bad ass." The EMT helped Gail lie back on the stretcher. "Except for the part where I think she broke my ribs," she added with a hiss, shifting on the stretcher.

Holly's doctor reflexes kicked in, "Gail Peck, stay still." And Gail froze. "You are going to stay perfectly still until the doctor says you can move, and they're taking you to a hospital."
There was stifled laughter and Holly didn't care. She glanced at their car, Gail's car, or what was left of it and sighed before sitting down in the back of the ambulance, next to her wife. "It's insured," muttered Gail, following Holly with her eyes.

"Not for car bombs." Holly wiped her face. It was wet. Either tears or sweat, she wasn't sure. "Your brother broke Oliver's door."

Gail sighed. "Can you tell him I'm okay?" Holly nodded but didn't move. "Except for the part where stupid Sue broke my ribs…"

Reaching over, Holly brushed the hair away from Gail's face. "So I heard," she smiled. Gail took her hand and squeezed it.

The complaints continued as the ambulance took them to the hospital and Gail was diagnosed with three badly cracked ribs (broken, cracked, Gail failed to see the difference) but no concussion. She was bruised to hell and back though and in serious pain. Once the painkillers kicked in Gail did not sing or act drunk or see things. This time she slept almost right away, a true sign of her exhaustion. The tension from sitting in that car must have been insane.

Holly didn't once think about going home and sat in the room, terrified Gail would have a nightmare. Having a flashback here would be horrible for Gail, who still was embarrassed when she had them around Holly. After an hour, Steve came in to tell her they swept the house and everything was fine, but their neighbors were freaked out. He stayed, watching Gail sleep for a while, before confessing the last time he'd been that scared was Perik. They had told him only after his op was over that she'd nearly died. He felt guilty for not being there for Gail when he needed someone.

Eventually Steve left, only to be replaced by Traci and then Oliver. Both Lisa and Rachel checked in (mostly to see how Holly was holding up), as well as some med school friends who heard she was there. They all wanted to make sure Gail actually was okay, and to update Holly on Sue's status (a part of the car had hit Sue's head, as she'd protected Gail with her body). Finally around ten PM, Holly was alone in the room with her sleeping wife. Taking Gail's hand, Holly sighed. "I know what you'd say. We have way too many friends." She smiled and ran her thumb over the back of Gail's hand and watched the blond sleep until she too fell into a light doze.

"She looks so young when she's asleep."

Of the various people Holly expected to stop by, Elaine Peck with a bag of take-out food was not one. "Uh. Hi?" She sat up, startled awake and not really clear on what happened or when it was. What she did remember was Gail telling her about being in the hospital after Perik and her parents never once visiting.

The mother of her wife pulled the bedside table over and started unpacking the food. "I'm sure you didn't eat. The last time I was in your shoes, I didn't. Gail probably doesn't remember, she was barely four when her father was shot."

Holly blinked, certain she'd never felt quite so at sea in her life. "Oliver. Celery- His wife brought me a sandwich." Letting go of Gail's hand, Holly rubbed her face. "You're here to bring me food?"

"And check on my daughter. I was going to wait until you went home, to spare us the awkwardness, but I see that isn't happening." Elaine gave Holly a thoughtful look. "You can go home, you know, Dr. Stewart. There's a nice man-child in uniform who thinks I don't know his name is Chris standing out there. And when he goes home, someone else will step in."

Man-child was a good description for Chris, as long as you meant giant child in a man's body and
not the infantile kind of man... Gail called him the same thing. "It's not about her being alone,"
sighed Holly, getting her brain into gear. Gail always complained that Holly just woke up, ready to
go. That worked if she'd actually slept.

Elaine frowned, "Dr. Stewart—"

Interrupting her mother, Gail spoke up from her bed, "Holly." She sounded weary and barely awake.

Immediately Holly was wide awake, "I'm here, honey."

"Not you, baby. Mother. Call her Holly." Gail slowly opened her eyes. "This is weird, by the way. 
Am I dreaming?"

Holly smiled and caressed Gail's face. "No, you're awake. Sue's fine. They're waking her up every 
hour." Gail sighed and nodded.

Turning her head, Gail studied her mother curiously. "Not to be rude, Mother, but why are you 
here?"

Chagrined, Elaine looked at the food. "Do you still like Kung Pao chicken?"

"Yeah," winced Gail, trying to sit up and hissing in pain.

Holly swatted her hands. "Stop it, the bed can sit up." She pressed the button to raise it and caught a 
smile on Elaine Peck's face.

"Thanks," sighed Gail. "And thanks for not punching my mom."

"Oh you were serious?" Elaine looked surprised and a little concerned.

"Mother," grimaced Gail.

Holly brushed the hair away from Gail's face and hesitated. She wanted to kiss her wife, remind 
them both that they were alive. But there was Elaine. "I don't know what to call you," she finally 
said to her mother-in-law.

The red-haired woman pressed her lips together. "Frigid bitch is fairly common. Ice Queen." She 
moved like she wanted to sit down but was afraid to. "Or Elaine." Looking between the two women, 
Elaine sighed. "I'm glad you're alright, Gail. Holly, please try and get some sleep." And she turned 
around.

Crap. Holly glanced at Gail who tried to shrug and flinched. "Oh, for fucks sake, Elaine," snapped 
Holly, too tired and stressed to want to play games. "Sit down."

"She's very stern," muttered Elaine, taking the empty chair.

"I try not to piss her off." Gail smiled a little blearily.

"I'm still pissed off at you, Elaine," Holly pointed out, making a small plate for Gail. Both Pecks 
seemed to think that was just fine. "You're an over controlling sociopath." Under her breath, Gail 
muttered that she'd wondered which side of the family that came from. "But your daughter seems to 
think that we, you and I, should have some sort of relationship if Gail and I are going to be parents."

Elaine dropped her food in her lap.

Gail started laughing and crying at the same time, holding her side in mirthful agony. "Crap, I wish
"I'd recorded that," she said between gasps of pain.

"You're impossible, Gail," sighed Holly. Wheezing, Gail agreed and closed her eyes to slow down her breathing while Holly thumbed the drug release. She knew her wife wasn't going to admit to needing more just then, not in front of her own mother.

Carefully cleaning up the mess and saving the food, Elaine cleared her throat. "Adoption?" Her eyes flickered between Holly's eyes and her abdomen. Doubtful for a pregnancy in Holly, and clearly having given up on one for Gail.

Holly nodded. "Yes."

"A baby or a young child?"

"Probably child," replied Gail, exhaling loudly. "Can I have an egg roll, Holly?" Handing her wife an egg roll, Holly was surprised when Gail caught her wrist and pulled her in for a kiss. At Holly's protest, Gail sighed, "She's seen people kissing me before, nerf herder."

Indeed, Elaine looked nonplussed. So they kissed, Gail fondly and Holly awkwardly, before digging into dinner. They talked about simple things, not the serious ones. Elaine asked if they liked the cottage and Holly blushed, making Gail smirk but not laugh. Gail asked if her mother liked her new house. Holly was asked if she liked her position as Medical Director, and by the way, congratulations. Gail was asked if she thought she'd make full detective soon, but no rush. It was strange and awkward and became more so when they both realized Gail had dozed off.

Elaine peered at her daughter. "Is she really asleep? She does this strange thing where she pretends to sleep sometimes. Usually to avoid me."

Taking the food away, Holly gently caressed Gail's face. "No, she's out. I gave her another dose of painkillers while we were eating." Holly held up the self doser with a rueful smile.

"I'm surprised she's not singing."

"Her and Steve." They shared a strange, fond, look. "I love her. I know everyone seems to think she's closed off or aloof or weird, but I love her, Elaine. She's amazing. Smart. Funny... Gorgeous." Holly looked down at her wife and smiled.

Elaine didn't say anything for a while. "I'm very happy she found someone who understands her."

There were implications in the short sentence. Clearly Elaine did not feel she'd understood her daughter. But more than that, it was relief that there was someone who was there for Gail, in the good and the bad, and was willing to fight for her. The further Elaine got from Bill, the more like a normal mother she seemed. Holly couldn't see the woman who made her children hike for miles to a cottage, alone. She didn't see a woman who ended up ruining her career over an idea of success. No, Holly saw a mother trying to find a place in her child's life.

Holly sighed. She could let Elaine go, close the door on that for Gail, or she could try and coax another Peck out of a tree. There had been no sign of Bill since the MOM awards, but as Gail had mentioned, Elaine was trying. "So... Why does Chris think you don't know his name?"

Holly was good with cats in trees. She wasn't particularly fond of it with Elaine, but the woman was nice. The first time Holly talked to her, Elaine had been creepy and selfish. Now she was polite and carefully picking her words. She didn't give away much, but she seemed very interested in Holly and Gail's life, how they'd done with the foster kids, what they were thinking about for their future. But unlike Holly's parents, there was no baby pressure. She just didn't like the feeling left over from
Elaine screwing with her life.

She expressed that much to Gail as she helped her wife into a wheelchair the next afternoon. The doctors wanted her to stay an extra day or three, but Holly pushed to bring her home, pointing out that she herself would be there for at home care.

"I don't like it," muttered Holly.

"Which part?" Gail sounded remarkably calm. She still sounded like she was tanked a little on painkillers. There was a slight slur to her words.

"She hurt you, Gail," Holly snapped. Angry. "She hurt me, God, she nearly ruined my life. And... I don't like it. I don't like her, and I don't want her hand anywhere near any kid we may have."

Gail's voice was softer. "Okay."

"Okay what?"

"Okay, she won't."

There was a protracted silence, where the only noise was Holly shoving Gail's things into a bag. "That's it?"

"What do you want me to say, Holly? You don't want her to be around any kid we have, so okay. She won't be. I'll tell her we don't want her around. Done."

"I ... I wasn't expecting you to agree."

"I don't," sighed Gail. "But I get why you feel that way."

Another long pause. "Honey... Why are you just... How can you forgive her?"

"Because she's trying. Because, unlike Dad, she actually wants to know about me. Us. How I feel. It's... It's very weird, you have no idea how weird." Gail stopped for a moment. "She doesn't have an ulterior motive. She's just trying to be a mom. And I know she's not as awesome as Lily, but she's what I've got."

Holly snorted. "My mother is not perfect."

"No one is. Which is my point."

"She could have ruined our whole careers, Gail," snarled Holly. And then she looked at her wife. Gail had a wary expression. As if she knew something she wasn't saying. Something that would contradict what Holly had just said. "What am I missing, Gail?"

Perhaps sensing her exasperation, Gail cleared her throat. "I'm pretty sure my mother was told to do it." Holly stared and tried to figure out the best way to say that was preposterous. "Holly, my mother isn't the Peck."

Holly sighed and looked at Gail for a long moment. No. Elaine married into the Pecks, who were police royalty. Elaine had to become a Peck. And maybe there was a cost Holly just couldn't see right now but that Gail did. Finally she leaned in and kissed Gail gently. "You are very complicated, honey." Holly tried to let her voice show just how immensely fond of Gail she was.

"Crazy waters run deep, baby," Gail replied flippantly. "Look, I love you. I want to be with you. Have a family. With you. So ... If you don't want my mother around, I get it. I'll tell her."
So annoying. Holly growled a noise of supreme frustration. "Can I strike my comment from the record? At least until I can process your theory of Pecksanity?" She needed to really think about Gail's implication that someone was the power behind Elaine Peck's throne, and it was disturbing.

"Only if you'll take me home before my painkillers wear off."

And Holly laughed. "God forbid I deal with grumpy in pain Gail. Can you hold the bag?"

"Yeah. I think so." They sorted out the bag in Gail's lap and Holly unlocked the wheels, pushing her from the room. "Hey, thanks for getting me the other stuff."

"I wish you could keep taking the Oxy," lamented Holly.

"Sooooo not worth it." Gail's voice was still the higher tone of someone doped, but not as floaty as that time she'd been burnt. As they turned the hallway, Holly was surprised to see Elaine, though Gail arched her eyebrows and greeted her placidly with a simple "Hi, Mother."

"I see you're on your way home. May I ... May I walk with you to your car?"

"Sure, you can hold my bag," grinned Gail.

Elaine smiled and shook her head, but she took the bag. Swinging the small bag over her shoulder, Elaine noted, "You're supposed to stay three days for this."

Gail pointed behind her. "I have a doctor in the house."

Elaine sighed. "Since when have you hated hospitals?"

"Sick people are here, Mother," Gail pointed out.

"When your appendix was out, you loved being here."

"Ah, no, I loved being away from home." Gail reached back to touch Holly's hand on the handlebars.

Holly tsked, "Sit still. You're going to hurt your ribs again." Rolling her eyes, Gail straightened with a slight wince. Above Gail's head, Elaine and Holly shared a look of resignation. "She's always like this, isn't she?"

"No, usually her brother is more stupid about injuries. When he was shot, he insisted he could come home right away."

That surprised Holly. "Steve was shot?"

"Nailed his kidney, right under the vest," sighed Gail. "I was ... Seventeen?"

"Eighteen. Steve teased you for weeks because you weren't a match."

Holly's doctor training kicked in. "Her HLA antigens? It's not uncommon for siblings not to be an exact enough match-

From the chair, Gail groaned. "Please don't. I can't shut you up." Holly smiled and ran a hand through Gail's hair. "She will ramble, Mother. Please don't inspire her."

"I'll keep that in mind," smiled Elaine. "Are you sure she should go home so soon, Holly?"
"No," Holly admitted. She wanted Gail to spend a week in the hospital where she was safe and didn't have to negotiate stairs. Where a guard could keep her under watch. But the trade off was going to be horrendous. "Physical and mental healing come at different rates, however," she sighed.

Pursing her lips, Elaine seemed to understand. "Well. If she's anything like me, she's a lightweight on painkillers. Drink all I want, fine. Get me on an IV drip and I'm singing to the lamps."

Gail laughed and, immediately, winced, wrapping her arms around her ribs and cursing. "Crap, that hurts," she hissed. Holly saw tears sparkling her wife's eyes. "Holly, I will be your slave for life if you can avoid every pothole on the way home."

Her poor darling. "I'd do it anyway, honey." She helped Gail out of the chair and into the car, her car, buckling her wife in and letting her sit alone for a moment to catch her breath. "Broken ribs take a while," she said quietly to Elaine, popping the trunk.

"I recall," Elaine muttered, taking the wheelchair and aiming it back at the hospital. "Perp kicked me once, swung from a fire escape." She glanced at Gail with a frown. "I was going to ask if I could stop over, but she needs more pain killers, which she won't take I gather, and rest, which she won't get if I'm there. Does she still like Vietnamese food?"

Feeling out of her depth, Holly nodded and provided their favorite order information. As Elaine turned to go, she blurted, "She can't take the painkillers. The good ones. They make it ... She can't sleep on them."

Elaine nodded slowly. "She never slept well. Not even as a baby," sighed the mother of her wife. "I can only imagine her nightmares now." Elaine shook her head. "I'll have the food delivered. If ... If you think I'd be welcome, please let me know."

Agreeing to do so, Holly watched her mother in law walk away.

"Cats in trees," she muttered and got into the car, taking her wife home.

The doctor was adamant. Six weeks. Three more days before Gail could go to work, a week before anything beyond sitting, and at least a month before anything strenuous. Six weeks of healing. That included no sex. At this point it also included not making out, since you had to breathe to do that and breathing deeply hurt like a bitch. No work, no fooling around with the wife, and it hurt to sit up and lie down.

"Holly, I'm bored," she lamented from the easy chair.

They'd determined it was easier for Gail to get up on her own from the chair, which was about the only thing she was allowed to do for herself at the moment besides the bathroom. Her wife, with a full free range of movement, was camped out on the kitchen table with her laptop.

"Uh huh."

Working.

Gail was never more jealous in her life.

Exasperated, Gail carefully reached over to the side table to pick up her water. She tried not to hiss when the movement hurt, if only to stop Holly from fussing over her. It hurt like hell to breath, which was the worst part. Holly kept telling her to take more painkillers and relax, neither of which were things Gail enjoyed doing. Relaxation, maybe. Painkillers made it hard to wake up, which she didn't
The doorbell rang and Holly popped up. "Stay," she ordered Gail.

"What am I, a dog?"

"How's the patient?" That was her brother and Gail grimaced. Holly must have as well, based on Steve's reply. "Oh that bad?"

There was a laugh from the doorway. "She's bored. Go set it up, I'll get the rest." The door closed and Holly walked past Gail, kissing her briefly, and vanishing upstairs.

Giving her brother a petulant look, Gail pointed out, "I hate this. At least after Perik they wanted me to move around."

"You only bashed your head in," he teased, giving her a gentle one-armed hug. "How're you doing, really?" He vanished out of sight and came back with a box.

She knew her brother deserved a serious answer. Gail wanted, needed, information. "No, status first, Steven."

"You sound more and more like mom every day." At least he took Gail's glare seriously. "Chloe's under surveillance just in case. They managed to download a mess of info off the computer they slapped on your car, so they're pretty sure the bomb was attached when you were at the Mercedes dealership on Yonge. John's ripping them apart, looking for a mole but CSIS thinks it's the ones who got away, so they're pushing the FBI to press the ones you caught to flip on them."

Gail exhaled, "Good. Okay." Her brother waited, expectantly. "Right. Our Mother came to the hospital that night, which was weird. I think she and Holly chatted after my wife drugged me." Steve nodded, accepting this, and opened the box to pull out furniture parts. "You know I'm not helping you do that, right?"

"Wouldn't ask, sister. Hey, you're a lesbian, where's your toolkit?" He twirled a tiny hex wrench between his fingers.

"Hell if I know... Oh, wait, it's in the garage. It's on the left when you walk in."

Steve followed the directions, scowling when he came back in with a blue toolbox. "Blue? Bright blue?"

"It's Holly's, not mine," she muttered. "What are you making me?"

"A desk," he smiled and tossed her the directions.

Reflexively, Gail reached out and cringed. "Mother fu- damn it, that hurt." She wrapped one arm around her ribs, holding them as if that would help. "I hope Sue broke her arm."

Steve watched her for a moment. "You know how fucking lucky you are, right Gail?" He was serious and Gail blinked. "You don't have a concussion, you aren't deaf, you have all your limbs. If Tran hadn't flipped you mid-air, you'd be dead."

Gail sighed and nodded, not even joking about how Holly flipped her. "I know, I know." She did. She knew very well that they hadn't gotten the blast shield closed all the way, that Sue and three other bomb techs had protected her with their own bodies. "I owe them all drinks." How could you repay people for saving your life? She'd not really done a good job of it when she'd been kidnapped
"They did their job, Garbage Pail." Steve stood and kissed her forehead. "So what did Mom say?"

Holly answered from the stairs, "I told her we're talking about kids, seriously, and she dropped a plate of food in her lap." She was holding Gail's laptop. "That one laughed so hard she looked like she was going to pass out from pain which is why I drugged her." The laptop went into Gail's lap and Holly kissed her forehead before she sat by Steve. "You found my toolbox?"

"The brat told me where it was."

Watching her brother and her wife joke around as they put together the desk, Gail realized what they were doing. A desk on wheels so she didn't have to try and put her laptop or food down by leaning forward. Gail rubbed her face, trying to hide the smile.

"Don't look, but my dearest sister is having feelings."

"Bite me, Steven," muttered Gail.

Holly reached over and squeezed her knee. "Take a pain killer, honey." Without arguing, Gail picked up the pill bottle and popped one. It did hurt, worse than the burn. Fucking breathing hurt, and let's not talk about standing or sitting. Or moving. "I talked to Butler, he said you can work from home if it'll stop you from going insane."

Oh. "Thanks," mumbled Gail.

"Don't expect much more," smiled Holly. She stood up to kiss Gail softly. "Someone's coming over to babysit you. I have to go into the lab," Holly explained. "And I get to ride in a squad car, since they don't know who was the target-"

"We do," Steve remarked. "They were after super cop here. Given where your car was buggered, we had to call the FBI again. You would have loved it."

"Jarvis versus the FBI." Gail was a little sad she missed it. She was more sad when her armed babysitter was Nick. It would have made her feel safer to have Nick with Holly, but at least he understood what level of pain she was in and left her alone most of the day.

She hated being the support and research end of a case, but that was all she'd be good for so Gail knuckled down and looked up the employees of the Mercedes place. Between that and multiple calls with John to trade information, she forgot Nick was there until he coughed and held out a plate.

"What? You want a tip?"

"Holly texted me and asked me to make you a sandwich so you can take more painkillers." He put the plate on the keyboard. "You're out of tomatoes, by the way,"

Gail sighed and carefully moved the plate so she could close her laptop and use it as an extra tray. "Nick, you've known me for how long now? 11 years?"

He blinked, sitting on the couch. "Yeah?" There was a pause, a heartbeat, and he flinched. "Shit. Tomatoes. Right, I knew that."

Shaking her head, Gail took a bite of the sandwich. There was nothing in the house she couldn't eat. "That may be the epitome of why we never worked, Nick."
He laughed softly. "The tomatoes? You want to boil down our relationship to tomatoes?"

"And the whole thing where I keep forgetting the day your parents die. We know those things about each other, Nick. We know each other. And ... They don't stick. We don't care enough, or the right way." She waved a hand at the kitchen, "Holly stopped buying tomatoes on her own before I moved in. I never even suggested it."

Her ex-fiancé looked at his food sadly. "I was a real dick to you earlier. Last month. At the Penny." She said nothing and watched Nick closely. "I ... I think I have a problem."

Gail looked at Nick carefully and tried not to sigh. Years of knowing him made it easy to understand what he wasn't saying. "You're not an asshole," she pointed out.

"I know. But I get mad sometimes. About stupid things, like being jealous of you."

"Hey, I'm the one who cheated."

But for once, Nick didn't agree. "I cheated, emotionally, first. You're right. I fell in love and I should have told you. I should have told you I was leaving both times."

Pursing her lips, Gail thought about that. "Yeah," she agreed. "You should have. You could have at least texted me."

Nick nodded. "I didn't want to. So you know? It's stupid. I fall for women who break my heart. But maybe they do it because I expect it."

Words Traci had said years ago came to mind. "Everyone deserves to be happy, Nick. Even you." They shared a smile of understanding. She'd known Nick for far too long to bother lying or talking around things now. Anger was something she understood these days. "I know I'm a shitty person to talk to, but I know a really good therapist, Nick."

He nodded and ate his sandwich. "Does it help?"

Gail looked at her plate. "I spent most of a year not feeling anything," she admitted to him. "That whole time ..."

It surprised Nick. "You and me after Perik?" She nodded. "God. I wish I'd called you back," he sighed.

But he didn't. "After that, it took a long time to figure out my head, and... Jesus Nick, I'm trying to say ..."

"You get it," he said quietly. They looked at each other and knew. They knew. "Okay. I'd like to try that." It was a step in the right direction.

"Truth, how annoying has Gail been?"

Smiling, Holly shook her head at Dov. "Not very once she got her laptop." At five days, Gail was back at work and happy for it. Even if she was slow when walking, and even if getting out of bed was painful, Gail was happy to be moving.

The leftover crime ring had been cleared up, in no small part to Gail being the behind the scenes researcher, working her ass off, and John being her erudite footman. They really were a good team. It kept Holly's mind off of things as well. If Gail was well and healthy and working, she was alright.
Sure, she lay on the bed icing her ribs every night, and her torso still looked horrible, but she was just fine. Gail was even putting up with Holly picking her up every day, and having to work with Chloe, though that was soon to be at an end. According to Gail, Chloe would be Detective Price soon.

Dov shook his head. "You know I find it hard to believe, right?"

"Believe what you want," smiled Holly. "She's probably only driving Chloe crazy because she thinks it's fun."

The elevator dinged and both Dov and Holly looked over to see their ladies. Chloe was carrying Gail's laptop with an actual angry scowl on her face while Gail was cheerfully explaining how she'd pinpointed something in the case. "Oh thank god," Chloe blurted and all but threw the laptop at Holly.

She smiled and put the laptop down. "Long day?"

Chloe scowled, "Please take your wife off my hands."

Ignoring the outburst, Gail smiled and kissed Holly. "Give me five minutes. I need to talk to Oliver real fast."

Once Gail was out of earshot, Chloe groaned. "She's making me her personal errand girl! Like I had something to do with her car getting blown up." She fell into a chair and whinged, "I had to fetch lunch and drinks like a rookie. She is so lazy, I bet she's faking how bad it hurts."

An unexpected defender spoke up from across the desk. "She's not," Nick said firmly.

Covering her mouth, Holly let Nick handle it. "What?" Chloe looked flummoxed. She hadn't expected to hear from Nick either.

"Every single breath hurts. Reaching for anything pulls it, sleeping moves it, and any time you move it, it's agony." He put down his pen. "I had a buddy take a hit once, broke two ribs bad. He was down for weeks before he got back to desk duty. Gail broke three and she's up and moving in days. She's insane."

Holly shrugged. She wasn't going to explain that actual broken ribs tended to puncture things, and what most people called broken were really in place fractures. It was, as Gail would say, close enough. "She has a rather low capacity for boredom." And a low pain tolerance (or maybe she just liked complaining). But Gail pointed out that she'd be sitting at home or sitting at work, and at least here she could see people.

Chloe looked at Holly, guilty. "Is she, like, all black and blue?" When Holly nodded, the officer looked down.

"You know, it means she trusts you," Nick pointed out. "She's been giving you absolute shit all day, right? Making fun of you and pointing out everything you did wrong upstairs?"

With a nod, Chloe replied, "It's way worse than normal, too."

"Right, because she hurts and she's ... That's just what she does. But she's not shutting you out, so she trusts you."

Everyone turned to look at Holly. Bewildered, Holly asked "What?"

Holly saw the other Gail, who lived past the anger and walls. She barely knew the angry Gail
everyone else was familiar with. In fact, she'd only met that Gail once, on a very bad night with Holly's friends. Trust. Huh. Gail trusted her to be mean to her? She'd have to ask later.

"Why are you all staring at my wife?" Gail circled around the the ramp instead of taking the stairs.

"She's pretty," smiled Nick, covering for everyone. "Objectively."

Gail rolled her eyes. "Stop objectifying my wife, Collins," she ordered and kissed Holly's cheek. "Are you tired and should we stop for food?"

Not being tired, Holly offered to cook and they made their way to the car. She still felt weird getting into her car but it was slowly starting to get better. Especially since the CSIS and the FBI had taken over, with extreme apologies to everyone at Fifteen. Not the FBI, of course, Gail explained they were boring and annoying and pissed John off. CSIS she had liked.

After dinner, Gail was settled in the easy chair while Holly cleaned up. "How's your pain, honey?"

"Hmm. Come here when you're done."

Holly sighed, "That wasn't an answer." She tossed the towel onto the counter and walked over to the chair. "You okay?"


"I don't want to hurt you." Holly fidgeted and finally settled for sitting on Gail's lap and not leaning against her. Just that simple act took a weight off her shoulders, though. There was something so calming and relieving about sitting with Gail, touching her. Soothing. Gail's hands found her waist and she wore the toothy smile of a child. That smile melted Holly's heart.

"Hi," whispered Gail, and one hand gently cupped Holly's face, tugging it down closer. Of course there was a kiss. A very light and tender kiss that didn't press either of them. "There, was that so bad?" Gail's lips quirked into a grin.

"Shut up," muttered Holly and they kissed for a while longer. It was tame, even by Izzy's currently jaded standards of having survived her first real breakup with a boy and come to tell Gail about the details. Holly had found it charming and cute up until Gail took Izzy out for a walk and a serious talk about sex, since it turned out Izzy had never actually had sex with her child-molester boyfriend who hit her. That had been an insane story to hear from Oliver. Since Izzy had already made bad choices, Gail felt it was time to talk. There was, as Gail put it, the talk you got and the talk you wished you'd gotten so you didn't end up stupid and pregnant and making bad decisions, especially since Izzy didn't think a blowjob counted as sex. After that, Holly found her wife amazing and kind. And here they were, making out in a way teenagers would call dull.

Finally they stopped, by some silent and mutual agreement. Gail's eyes were closed and she had a beatific smile spread on her face. "It's about a six, seven. But I wanted to kiss you before I take the pills that knock me out."

Holly rested her forehead against Gail's. "Need my help in the shower?"

"No, I'm good." Their lips touched again and Holly got up to help Gail stand. "You know, just because we can't have sex doesn't mean you can't take care of things yourself."

Did she really just say that? Holly stared at her wife for a long moment, realizing that Gail was quite seriously telling her to masturbate. "I know that," she laughed. "But when am I home alone?"
"I don't mind if you do it while I'm home. God knows I would right now, if I could." Gail made a frustrated face.

"Really?" The concern she had wasn't that Gail would mind. No, there was another reason. And she knew Gail knew it too. There was no way Gail wouldn't want to join in and 'help out.' On the rare occasions Holly was in the mood and Gail wasn't, it had always ended with Gail changing her mind because Holly was, well, Holly. At first Gail was embarrassed, but that passed rather quickly.

Gail blushed slightly. "Yeah, okay, that wouldn't be, um, conducive to me and rest, yeah." With a dramatic sigh, Gail flinched and shook her head. "I hate this. Remind me never to break my ribs again."

In bed, hours later, Holly almost reflexively curled herself around Gail before she realized what had happened. The whole reason Gail wanted to kiss her and make out a little was for this. To remind Holly that she wasn't about to break or crumble at a touch, and it was okay to be themselves.

"I bet you think you're smart," she sighed, kissing Gail's shoulder and taking her spot as big spoon.

"Usually," replied Gail, her voice thick and bleary with sleep and pain killers. Nothing more was said, nor did it need to be. The point was taken.
Fuel Injection

Three miles was her limit, but damn it felt good.

"You okay?" Andy and Traci jogged in place, eying her suspiciously. Andy was the worrywart. "We can stop."

Gail waved a hand. "I'm done. You guys do another circuit if you want, I'm going to walk and cool off."

But they didn't. It was some secret, unspoken girl thing Gail had never understood. They just stopped and exhaled. "Not bad, though," Traci remarked. "Breathing okay?" Gail shot her a glare and Traci laughed.

Three miles in almost an hour. It was pathetic, but it was way better than not being able to walk six blocks without a stitch in her side. "Just tell Holly will you?"

"I promised, I'll do it," grinned Traci.

"That's the part I don't get," Andy sighed. "You could just go running with Holly."

Gail glanced at Traci who snickered. "I don't want to go running with Holly," sighed Gail, pushing her hair out of her face and cringing a little at the tightness in her ribs.

"She'll notice that," Traci pointed out.

"Yeah, I know." She touched her rib cage. "I hate this. You have no idea how much I hate this."

Suddenly, Andy snapped her fingers. "Oh! You haven't... Wait really? No sex since the accident?"

Traci smirked, "Don't do it, Peck."

"This is why you're a patrol officer, McNally," smirked Gail. Rolling her eyes, Traci muttered that she did it.

"You know, I actual like being patrol. Being out on the streets, in the nitty gritty of it. It's a good job, an honorable job." When neither Gail nor Traci made a comment, Andy grimaced. "Chloe, huh?"

Gail nodded and exhaled loudly. "Yeah, probably. But you and Nicky and Chris can keep each other company." She winced again. "And Dov at this rate."

Grumbling, Andy shoved her hands through her hair, untying her ponytail. "How come all the girls make detective?"

That was a good question, "Traci wanted the stable hours for Leo. Chloe and I are legacies. There's shit that's expected of us, no matter what we want. We just do our best to do it our own way." Gail stretched her arms over her head carefully. That was better.

"Has she always been like this and I missed it," Andy asked, sotto voice.

"She hides it under snark and bite and tequila," replied Traci, smirking.

"Tequila! Gail, you can come to the Penny again, we'll bring Sue, have a party."
Why didn't Andy ever grow up?

At home, she fell onto the couch and was still there when Holly came back from her end of day emergency meeting. "I'd ask how work was, but you apparently decided to ignore doctor's orders."

"Untrue. Dr. Grumpy gave me the okay to go running again."

Holly shook her head and hung up her coat. "By yourself?"

Gail smiled. "Andy and Traci were with me. Hey... How come I don't want to hang out at the Penny and get wasted anymore?"

Leaning over the couch back, Holly frowned. "Well. You could be remembering our fight there. Or maybe you realized that getting wasted was an avoidance technique that you didn't need anymore. Oooooor."

"Or?" Gail looked up at Holly, feeling a smile creep across her face. "I decided you were more fun?" She reached up and brushed her knuckles across Holly's chin. "Andy wants to have a Penny party. Tequila."

Her wife leaned in to the touch. "You feel up for it?"

"Sure. I'm sure we'll be bored though." Gail brushed her thumb along Holly's cheekbone and watched her eyes drift closed. "Friday night good?" Holly made an agreeable noise. "I ran three miles, Holly. And I didn't kill Andy."

One eye opened to regard Gail. "Which one is the accomplishment?"

"The three miles. Andy is just so you feel charitable." Gail grinned and let her thumb drift across Holly's lips.

"Honey," sighed her wife, but she said nothing more to the matter. Holly straightened up. "Thirsty?"

Frustrated. "No." She sat up and watched Holly walk into the kitchen.

This was, Gail knew, the first major injury she'd had since they'd moved in together. The normal bumps and bruises of being a police officer had been easily dealt with by comparison. Holly had even seemed like she accepted them as an annoying way of life. This almost felt like the retreat Holly had made after Gail stopped the stupid radio with her face.

"I'm not freaking out, Gail," Holly finally said. "I'm not having a panic attack that you're hurt."

"Okay." Gail lay back on the couch. "Everything okay at work, then?" Silence. Bingo. "Come here and tell me about it?"

She waited, patiently, and Holly finally walked back over. "Scoot in." Shoes off, Holly stretched out along side Gail and rested her face on her shoulder. "Tell me if it hurts?"

"Only if you tell me I smell too much," countered Gail.

"I have to fire one of the lab techs."

Okay, that officially sucked. Gail sighed and rubbed Holly's back. "Shit, no one I like, I hope."

The mirthless laugh that shook Holly was promising. "I hope not. One of the DNA techs messed up sequencing on the last sample we had for an assault case. The whole thing is screwed, thrown out of
court, and it's his fault."

Not one of Gail's cases. She'd intentionally avoided sex crimes and children when she'd started pushing for a detective rotation. "Can't you get a pass? First fuck-up reprimand?"

"Third." Holly's fingers toyed with the collar of Gail's shirt. "I know you're horny, honey, but..."

"Hey, I'm fine." She squeezed Holly closer, actually understanding how and why Holly would be in a mood for anything but sex right now. "I love you."

Now Gail was silent, gently rubbing her wife's back and letting her derive whatever comfort she needed from Gail just being there. "That's it?" Holly lifted her head up. "You're fine and you love me?"

Gail frowned. "Did I miss something important? I don't know what it's like to fire anyone."

"It sucks. You're just ... Honey, you've been trying like hell to get in my pants for the last week."

"Nine days," corrected Gail. She remembered exactly when the doctor cleared her for more strenuous activities. Gail had outright asked about sex and the nurse had laughed so abruptly, she dropped the icepack.

"Whatever. You're just going to drop it?"

Reaching up, Gail gently pulled Holly's head down to kiss. "Yep. Today." She stretched her arm to grip Holly's shoulder and ease her back down. "I promise you're not hurting me. I like having you rest on me."

Holly grumbled and stretched out again. "You bruise too easily, honey. And you do smell." Sitting up, Holly hauled Gail to her feet. "Shower please."

"Fine, but I'm making dinner."

She caught Holly's amused look as she went upstairs. "You're winning in this whole wife business."

Gail grinned and raised her fist high above her head. "Plus one, forever!"

The trick, the absolute biggest trick to an easy married life with Gail Peck was in not telling her she was right. Because she had a very annoying tendency to both be right and revel in her right-ness for quite a long time.

The Penny was fun, for a couple drinks, but as Gail had predicted, it got boring fast for her. Not for Andy, who was cheerfully blitzed. Not for Chloe, who was bouncing off walls telling everyone how she'd aced the detective's exam and was on the shortlist for the job. Not even Dov, who had apparently been threatened by Gail and was very supportive of his girlfriend.

Then there was Chris and Nick, whom Holly was pretty sure weren't drinking at all. Gail had done three shots of tequila, hardly enough to impact her mood or sobriety but enough to make Holly and her one beer the designated driver. Now they were both enjoying the non-alcoholic drinks, and Holly noticed the swizzle sticks in her drink matched Nick's.

Earlier in the night, Andy had tried to wheedle Nick into doing shots until Gail said he wasn't allowed to because he'd lost a bet. She knew that wasn't true, but Holly backed it up and trusted she'd find out why later. Gail spent much of the night surrounded by the bomb team who told and re-
told the story about how she was the only person who'd made that many jokes with her life on the line. Sue teased Dov about being scared, until Gail pointed out she'd been terrified too.

That just made them love Gail more. She was uncomfortable about the attention that came from being the bomb squads favorite person. They even asked if she could be assigned to more of their cases since she got them. Gail informed them they were insane adrenaline junkies and they cheered. She rolled her eyes, but let them have their day, even if it was almost two months late.

While they were surrounding Gail, Holly found herself sitting alone for a brief while. "So. You married Gail?" Sue Tran grinned at her, looking impressed.

"What? Oh, yes. A while ago now." It had been a while. Over a year. Holly smiled fondly at the thought. They were getting near two years. How weird was that?

Sue shook her head, "I missed the society page announcements."

This was not the first time someone had made a joke like that. It was strange to think of Gail, her goofy wife, as the subject of Toronto's high society. At the same time, when Mayor Ford had come by at an event shortly before he left office, he'd greeted Gail by her first name and the staff seemed to all be old friends. As much as Gail did old friends. Old people-who-knew-her-name perhaps. "We had a very small wedding."

"Gail said you eloped. I'm just... Seriously?"

"Sorry?" Holly sipped her drink. "Everyone acts like its so weird, but we were going out for over two years." The brevity had bothered some of them until Gail reminded Andy how long it took before she was engaged to Callaghan and then Fifteen dropped all complaints. Two years was an ice age compared to some of them.

"Oh no," laughed Sue. "Not that. And I always thought she was a lesbian. She kept saying I was too good for men." That was news and Holly hoped she'd be able to tease Gail later. "I meant the married. She hates weddings."

Holly sighed. "Well. Hence elopement, I guess. How did you know?"

"I used to date Dov." She pointed at the man in question. "When Gail was dating Chris. We drank the boys under the table one night. It was the first time I thought she didn't hate me... Maybe the only time. We talked about stuff, like boys, how serious we were, and I remember she said she'd never have another wedding after her fiancé ditched her at the altar. Can't blame her."

Currently Gail had Nick in a headlock, shouting for him to cry uncle. Her ribs were clearly feeling better. "They got over it."

"That is soooooo lesbian," laughed Sue. When Holly looked confused, she explained "Being good friends with your ex?"

Holly blinked and then chortled. "Oh my god." It was practically a lesbian cliche to remain good friends with people you slept with. Even if Gail and Nick's friendship was off-and-on. Holly abruptly realized it was in direct relation to how much Nick drank. Sober Nick was a friend. Drunk Nick was to be avoided. Plastered Nick got cleaned up.

Continuing the other train of thought, Sue went on, "And the short hair and the boots and leather jacket. Seriously, get her a motorcycle."

It was hard to fight back the giggles as all the stereotypes came to life in her wife's form. "I had one,
in college." That had been the first thing she sold when her parents (temporarily) cut her off.

That surprised Sue. "I like you. And your wife is pretty cool."

"I'm incredibly awesome," Gail corrected as she sat down with them. "Can we go now, or is it still rude?"

"Not waiting for the cake?" Sue grinned and downed her beer.

Gail narrowed her eyes. "Don't joke with me about cake, woman."

"As serious as I am about bombs." She smiled. "Do you like me now?"

Blinking, Gail shrugged. "I didn't not like you. I hate most people, and you were dating Dov when... It was shitty timing." Gail held up her beer bottle and Sue clinked her's against it. "You're a great cop, Sue."

Holly leaned over and stage whispered, "That's the biggest compliment you're going to get."

With a smirk, Sue nodded. "Coming from a Peck? I feel like I won the lottery."

There was indeed cake and after the cake Holly whispered that now it was okay to go home. They made their leave, Holly hugging, Gail grumbling, and found the outside air surprisingly cool for this time of year. "So, Nick?" Holly stretched her arms up.

"Nick is trying not to hide in the bottom of a bottle. Chris is helping him, in a weird NA way." Gail opened the car door and slid into the passenger's seat. Holly may have been the intended designated driver, but Gail's longing look at the wheel said she clearly wanted to drive. "God I want my car back."

"Your car is in pieces, honey," smiled Holly, buckling in. "What did insurance say?"

"Covered under the supplemental insurance, and I have to actually thank my mother for insisting I get that." Gail shook her head, "We're totally getting it on your next car too."

Holly did not argue. Any insurance package that covered acts of crime like that was one to keep. "Tonight was nice," she remarked and watched Gail out of the corner of her eye as she drove.

Less agreeable, Gail shrugged. "It was okay. Sue's cool, she was always way too cool for Dov."

That reminded Holly and she grinned. "Sue said she knew you were gay because you told her that."

Making a face of annoyance, her wife shook her head. "Nah, I just like Dov. He's stupid and funny and annoying and had a massive crush on me. But he's a good person and Sue was way too much woman for him. He needs a nerd. Sue and Nick, now that I could see."

"Matchmaker," teased Holly, amusedly.

"You know, we don't have to have sex tonight, wifey." At Gail's words, Holly turned in her seat and looked at the blonde. "See, we haven't had sex in seven weeks, which Lisa told me is bordering on Lesbian Bed Death, and I would like to avoid that. I propose we get home, screw like bunnies, and then do it again next Friday."

Clearing her throat, Holly asked, "Why next Friday? And when did you talk to Lisa about sex?"

Gail waved a hand. "I ran into her at the bakery you like. Not the fancy one I'm not allowed in, the
coffee shop one with the scones. And I'm offended and a little hurt right now." Mockingly, she mimicked Holly, "Why next Friday?"

Holly felt blank. What was Gail on about? She took her phone out at the stop light and checked her calendar, finding two notes for Friday. First, a planned date with Gail to see the roller derby and have a fancy dinner. Oddly incongruous, but very much something Gail would plan. She was actually amazing at planning dates that they'd both enjoy, and with the exceptions of sports, always willing to try something new culturally. Second note, a yearly reminder. Oh. Holly turned red. "I am a shitty wife," she muttered.

"See, now I'm totally demanding apology sex." Gail teased as Holly. "I can't believe you forgot our second marriage anniversary!"

And damn that too, Gail was right about the sex. Not that Holly really minded. While Gail liked to give names to types of sex based on mood, apology sex was just another way to describe something wonderful.

Way back when, years past now, Holly remembered worrying about having sex with Gail because she was a lesbian virgin. And she remembered the time, almost as long ago, that she'd been afraid to touch Gail because she'd been hurt at work. Seeing Gail hurt was hard. It was agony to spend weeks knowing her wife was in pain, and while Holly talked about all of that in therapy, there was something different and calming about having Gail there in her arms.

Cradling the blonde head against her shoulder, Holly smiled and closed her eyes. She could remember a lot of things about Gail but the moment she fell in love was a mystery. That snark and bite and attitude made her like Gail, but there was something more, something about the vulnerability and childish glee that made her love. There had never been a single second where she knew that she was in love until the moment where Gail told her how she felt in the hallway with the thumb. When Gail said Holly was the best thing that ever happened to her.

That was when Holly was able to put a name on the feelings. That was when she could define it as love and not just infatuation. That was when she realized how wrong Lisa had been, how wrong she herself had been that she was just having fun. There was nothing fun or light about what she felt with Gail. It was deep, complex, troublesome, and wonderful. Having the things you never knew you wanted all wrapped up in one person was amazing.

Holly sighed and kissed Gail's head. "Love you." She spoke quietly, in case Gail was asleep.


"You were right," admitted Holly.

She could feel the smile. Gail was grinning ear to ear. "Doesn't matter," remarked Gail, incongruously. Lifting her head Gail kissed Holly's collarbone. Holly was about to remark on the absurdity and unlikelyhood of Gail letting go of being right, when her wife spoke again. "I get to be here." There was another kiss, and another, working their path down more suggestively to the point where Holly's words were only small and encouraging.

Maybe it didn't matter who was right or wrong sometimes. Maybe it just mattered to be there with the right people.

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After lording it over Holly for the better part of the week that she'd forgotten their impending
anniversary, Gail was perplexed by the small box on the counter. It looked like a wedding ring case. Only larger and flatter. It was not something Gail recognized, and that bothered her.

"Holly," she called upstairs. "You left something on the counter and it has a bow."

The muffled curse from upstairs preceded her wife's appearance. "Shit." This time she swore more delicately. "You didn't see that. Why are you home?"

"I live here. I own half of here. My sexy wife is here. Where else would I be after work?" Watched Holly be flustered was always fun.

Scooting down the stairs and skidding into the kitchen, Holly was more than just flustered. "I mean now. Why are you home now at three?"

"Because the FBI and CSIS are freakishly efficient. Paperwork is done, case is closed, and the Mercedes guys keep trying to bribe me and say thanks."

Holly blinked. "Bribe?"

"Offered to buy me a car. Sucks too, it would have been one of the fancy parks itself dealios." Gail sighed. She had really liked the S series Intelligent Drive car too, but no way could she afford that. Also it wouldn't work well undercover or on stake outs. It might be a nice car for Holly, but they were putting off the new car for a while, even if Gail thought Holly needed a car with All-Wheel-Drive for winters. Her wife looked a little skittish and Gail narrowed her eyes. "What?"

"I know what a bribe is, Peck," snapped Holly, and she picked up the box. "It's empty. See?" She opened the box and held it out for Gail. It looked like a jewelry box. Like a bracelet or necklace would be inside, nestled on a bump of soft fabric.

Indeed, it was empty. "Blue," Gail said firmly. Holly looked bewildered so she went on. "Blue and teal look amazing against my skin. So does a rich red, like a burgundy, but I like blue stones in necklaces. No turquoise, though, and please not amber."

Holly scowled and snatched the box back. "It's not a necklace," she snapped. But then she paused and looked away, not saying another word.

"Fine, keep your secrets," smiled Gail. "You keep being weird, too. I like your weird."

Her wife looked guilty and she shoved the box into her pocket. "Do you have to work tomorrow?"

"I do, but I will be out by noon or Butler will have flat tires," Gail promised. She reached over and fixed Holly's collar. There were a lot of thoughts in her head at the moment, but she stayed silent.

Holly smiled, sheepishly, and kissed Gail. "How about I make dinner. You can go shower." Silent, Gail looked at the clock. Holly followed the look and frowned, confused. "Why are you home at 3?"

Gail shook her head and went upstairs, keeping her silence for a little longer. Holly would crack soon. She couldn't keep a secret, not from Gail.

Besides, Gail had bigger fish to fry. After their anniversary came a very important date. Holly's fortieth birthday party, the big 4-0, was around the corner and began the few months where Holly was eight years instead of seven years older than Gail. While Gail didn't think the math worked that way, there was normal math and there was emotional math and you didn't argue with your scientist wife when she busted out the math.

What she did know was that a large party would please neither of them, and was arranging a small
dinner with just a few people. Lisa, Rachel, Gail, Traci, and Holly. No spouses allowed, with the exception of Gail, and that had been BitchTits' suggestion off the bat. Six girls, go to a fancy dinner and a drag show, and then Gail and Holly could extend the celebration at home.

Sometimes BitchTits wasn't all bad.

While dinner was planned for the date, the actual demarcation of their marriage had been at half past noon. Gail breezed back home at ten till with the dry cleaning and little fanfare. Holly had stayed home, taking the day off, and greeted Gail from the stairs in skimpy lingerie and a lab coat. There were different ways to celebrate an anniversary and Gail certainly put up with Holly's feelings about women in uniform. To treat Gail's sexy librarian 'thing' was fun for her too.

Very few things made you feel as sexy as the look you created on other people's faces. When just standing in an archway made your wife stare slowly at your assets, you could forget that you were going to be forty pretty easily. Gail swallowed, her skin flushing a bright red as she admired Holly's body. Then she very, very carefully put her gun away before demonstrating exactly how much she liked the choice of attire.

They even managed to make it to the roller derby on time.

The anniversary date went off without a hitch and so did Holly's surprise at the end. She'd enlisted Steve and Traci to help, since they had keys to the townhouse, and promised to help with the wedding as repayment. Of course, Holly really wished the present she'd gotten Gail wouldn't have been noticed until Saturday morning, since after the derby and dinner there had been only one goal on either of their minds. They'd made out a little outside the car before going home, where the jig would be up.

All because Gail still didn't take taxis. No, Gail couldn't take a taxi. They tried once in the last year and actually made it to their dinner, only for Gail to have a full blown panic attack just looking at the taxi queue outside the restaurant afterwards. Holly ended up calling Oliver to ask for a ride, figuring that he would understand since Gail had been his support when he threw up outside the church where his ex-wife had gotten remarried. Gail had sat in the front of Oliver's car, white knuckled and shaking, and the night had ended poorly.

So no taxi meant that when Holly pulled her car into the garage, the surprise would be over. She planned for it, however. As she turned to the driveway, Holly asked Gail to open the glovebox.

"Hey, it's a bit late for rings." Gail smiled, turning the wrapped box over in her hands.

"Just open it, you loonie."

Gail eyed her thoughtfully, clearly realizing Holly wasn't going to open the garage until she did. "Fine, fine," she laughed and tore the paper like a child. "I know this box," Gail quipped before popping the box that had been empty a few days ago. "Holy shit..." Gail picked the car key up. "You bought me a car?"

"Before you get mad, the insurance payout bought the car, I just picked it out."

Staring at the key, Gail snapped her hand up to the remote and opened the garage door. "How- they said it'd be another month if I was lucky!"

"I may have mentioned a decorated police officer owned the car and I may have suggested they look up the name Peck." Smiling sheepishly, Holly pulled the car in along side.
Gail stepped out and walked around the new car, saying nothing. It had been hard to push the insurance company so fast. Had Holly not had the fire lit from actually forgetting her own anniversary, she never would have pushed the name Peck like that. It had been hilarious when they'd asked who exactly she was in relation to the retired Superintendent. The words 'daughter in law' had been surprisingly motivational.

Enough time went by in silence for the light in the garage to turn off. "Are... Are you mad, honey?" Holly bit her lip. She just was never sure how Gail would take these things.

"No," Gail shook her head and grinned. "I'm a bit- no, I'm totally shocked. Not mad. Not angry. Just... Not expected. That's a great car. It's perfect."

Both Steve and Traci called it the perfect car for a detective. Nothing flashy or fancy. The color was a deep blue, seats were black, and after a gentle reminder that the car was for a Detective Peck, it was the new Detective package made by Chevy (not the Ford, that was very important). The same car many departments in the States used. The same car Gail and Oliver had lusted over with Noelle, talking about the cars they wished Fifteen could get.

With a girlish grin of glee, Gail jumped into the driver's seat and started the car just to listen to the engine. "Oh god, Holly, we are so taking this on the training course."

"We?" Holly was surprised. "Honey, I don't think I could pass..." She absently closed the garage door, which turned the light back on.

"You can be the passenger, but seriously, this is the ... Have you even driven this? It's sex on wheels!" Gail looked like she wanted to hug the steering wheel.

Once Oliver had teased Gail about being into girly things and guns. Her love of things fancy warred with her love of weapons. And apparently cars. The way the woman played Mario Kart was like a demon. Holly wondered how her wife would be, driving this car on the police training course.

"As long as you're happy," laughed Holly.

Instead of hugging the steering wheel, Gail turned off the car and leapt out, sweeping Holly into a hug. "Best surprise in years, baby," she laughed and kissed Holly. They kissed again, this time until the light went off, and then for a little while more.

In the dark, they bumped their way around the cars and back into the townhouse. As Gail had predicted the week before, screwing like bunnies was a good description of what happened next. Holly forgot about Gail's ribs, or rather remembered and recognized they were just fine when Gail picked her up to move them onto the couch. They did make it to the bedroom, eventually, and Friday night blurred into Saturday morning. There were a couple naps in between but they were awake to see the sunrise that started their second year as a married couple.

They lay diagonally in the bed as the orange light filtered into the room, Gail's head on Holly's thighs, smiling while Holly toyed with the short hair. "I think I like roller derby," Gail yawned, her hand running up and down Holly's leg.

"Want to try it?" Holly didn't try to smother her smile, enjoying the feel of everything right now, even her legs. Especially her legs. Her legs weren't willing to move.

"Nah," decided Gail. "The only four wheels I'll race on are my cars." She closed her eyes. "You know I really don't care if you forget anniversaries or birthdays, Holly."

Holly did and turned a little to gaze down at her wife. "I know, honey." Reaching down, Holly
stroked Gail's face, her fingers softly tracing the blonde's cheekbones and lips. "It's one of your endearing traits."

Lips curling into a broader smile, Gail laughed. "I'm endearing?"

"Cute too." Holly smiled when Gail's fingers caught her own, drawing them in for a kiss. "I'm glad you said yes."

"Glad you didn't stand me up at the altar," countered Gail, kissing Holly's palm and inner wrist.

Wrists and hands were two of Holly's erogenous zones. That Gail had picked up on that right away was a delight to discover. Holly had been more scared about sex than Gail had, which was so very much Gail it was typical. Always, Gail had confidence that she would be able to do things outside of work. It had taken years for Gail to gain the confidence of perfection at the job, and Holly felt lucky to have watched it.

Sitting up, Holly curled awkwardly around Gail and kissed her again. "Only for a stakeout," she promised, getting a lazy laugh from her wife. "Tired, Detective Peck?"

Gail shifted her weight to pull Holly on top of her. "Not in the slightest, Doctor Stewart," came the murmured reply.

Happy anniversary.
She wasn’t the maid of honor, or even a bridesmaid. That sort of thing went to Andy, Noelle, Holly, and some of Traci’s cousins. Gail was on the groom's side, affectionately being called his groomsbian or his best lesbian by Steve, and she let him get away with it because Steve was getting married and trying not to shit his pants. Their mother had accepted Gail's position of best man with savoir-faire and been on her best behavior.

Their father did not attend. No one expected him too, not even Holly, so it wasn't a surprise to anyone. In fact very few Pecks came to the wedding. Then again, very few had been invited. The tension between the pro-Gail and pro-Elaine factions had been insane, and the fact that Gail and Eliane were actually talking again threw them off. Steve found it hilarious and invited the 'cool Pecks,' which included Cousin Ed from Fifteen, a detective from the big building, an inspector from 34 (helping clean that up, muttered Gail, remembering stupid Boyd and his coverups), and a handful of other Pecks who worked Patrol. Nine Pecks total out of the thirty-odd they knew worked in Toronto. Not counting Gail or Steve or Elaine. And the number of Pecks was starting to dwindle.

What it really meant was Gail was attending another wedding related event, and she didn't want to be there. She’d gone, briefly, to Andy and Sam's impromptu wedding party at the Penny only because Traci made her. The argument was that Andy would never stop being weird about the whole Nick thing if she didn't go, which Gail thought was bull since they were all over it, but went anyway and complained the entire time because she had to go to both the ceremony and the after party, and she didn't even like Swarek that much ... But they’d skipped out after an hour and no one had complained about that. Traci of course noticed, but said no one else did. Oliver's wedding (handfasting) was different, as was Steve's, so here they were.

"You are drop dead gorgeous," murmured Holly, putting her hand on the small of Gail's back. Her voice dipped into the suggestive, "There's a coat closet over there..."

"Depends on the champagne." Gail glanced over at the cake pops and good booze. Making out with Holly in a coat closet seemed like a lot more fun, though the food did look good. "But we have to be up there for a while."

Holly pouted. "Work work work. I wish everyone eloped." She kissed Gail lightly and went to go help Andy and Noelle with Traci. Not that there was anything really amiss.

This was a wedding that was going off without a hitch it seemed. No runaway brides like Noelle, no eloping like Gail, no weird wiccan junk like Oliver, no pregnancy panic like Andy (though thank god that was a false alarm but they went through with the wedding anyway, against everyone's advice, including Andy's mother's). This was just a simple wedding for two people who were in love. Traci still couldn't believe that Steve had actually managed to ask her to marry him. He hadn't even had a ring when he did it, it was so spur of the moment.

The throat that cleared behind her was a sound Gail memorized years ago. "Hello, Mother."

"Hello, Gail. I'm surprised you're in a dress." While her mother didn't sound condescending, it reminded Gail of all the times she used to get grief for how she looked or dressed.

"I like dresses," sighed Gail, suddenly wishing for a glass of champagne.
Elaine looked at her for a moment. "I meant... You look good. I'd gotten used to seeing you in those boots and jacket, is all."

"What? You thought I'd be turning butch? Mother, there's a difference between the frilly crap you bought me and not liking dressing up. I really like dressing elegantly." Especially since it had the ability to make Holly's jaw drop. When she'd seen Gail step out of the bedroom in the slinky dress, Holly's eyes had widened and her irises taken over. Once, only once, had she ever evoked that kind of reaction from Chris or Nick. It wasn't that they weren't impressed, it was that they didn't appreciate all the aspects and nuance that went into getting there.

With an amused and chagrined expression, Elaine smoothed her own dress and tilted her head towards where Holly and Andy stood. "Can we start the conversation over? Hello, Gail, you look marvelous. How are you?"

She smiled at her mother, amused. "Hello, Mother. I'm feeling better, thank you." She paused, "Yeah, this is just as weird, you know."

"It really is," sighed Elaine. "I'm terrible at real small talk. The fake part, that's always easier."

Gail blinked at her mother. Her mother was saying she didn't want to be fake right then. She didn't want to be fake with Gail. "I think I was a little high the last time we talked," Gail said slowly. She got the feeling she'd missed something.

And her mother smiled. "You were. You fell asleep and Holly was far more polite than you or I would have been under similar circumstances. She's a very impressive woman, Gail. Just reading about her on paper doesn't prepare you."

Gail knew they'd talked while she'd been asleep in the hospital, but Holly had only said it was educational. "I've read her papers," she remarked.

"Still no background check?" There was, maybe, a bit of self-deprecation in her mother's tone. Joking that she, herself, would have done so.

"If something horrible like a murder was there, she'd have told me. Or you would have." Her mother looked embarrassed, confirming Gail's suspicion, but nodded. "You're not giving Steve and Traci crap, are you?"

Exhaling, Elaine shook her head. "I'm not trying to give you crap. I'm just not sure what to talk about safely, dear." She paused and then asked, "Have you started the adoption process?"

"No, we were trying to decide if we should move to a bigger place first, and then I got blown up. Then we had to get a new car."

"Steve mentioned the car. I'm a little jealous." Elaine looked wistful. She probably wanted to drive it.

"Insurance came through." Gail chewed the inside of her cheek and blurted, "Thanks for making me get the extra coverage."

"It was a requirement before I was permitted to date your father."

That was perhaps the first tidbit her mother had ever given Gail about the bizarre relationship with the Pecks. Now was as good a time to ask as any. "I never figured out you and Dad. I mean, I get why you married him, a Peck, but ... why Dad?"

"You'd rather I married one of your uncles?" Her mother's tone was dry, much like Gail herself used
from time to time. "Believe it or not, your father could be very charming when he wanted to be so."

Once before, Gail had asked if her mother loved her father. The answer had felt similar to this. A deflected answer. "Charming... Yeah, I remember that." She remembered a conversation in a car, joking that seeing a therapist outside out town would make her mother look better. Her father replied nothing would make her mother look bad.

Elaine sighed. "I was... I had to work very hard to be accepted by your grandparents, Gail. I was the first one who married in who wasn't a legacy. There were a lot of expectations on me, on your brother and you to be Pecks. That by being my children, you were lesser Pecks."

Being a legacy was something Dov had joked about being easier than his life. As if the constant pressure was weightless and carried no more meaning than a simple 'well done' from a parent. But a legacy knew what came with the job, what risks and pains it caused your life. And legacy explained why her mother had screwed up the way she did. Elaine had been starved for affection and acceptance too. But. How much had they forced Elaine under their collective thumbs? Anyone who thought the Pecks didn't still have sway over policing, just because they weren't in any top slots at the moment, was a political fool.

"And now," wondered Gail. "Now that I've wandered off their path, are you accepted?"

Their eyes met, blue to blue, and Gail saw a surprising expression of pride. Elaine was happy about Gail's life. How weird. The way Gail and Steve could understand each other with a look was working with her mother as well. It didn't explain why Elaine sold Gail down the river, or why she tried to sacrifice Holly to get 'her way.' But it did mean that Elaine's way wasn't Elaine's after all.

"I decided I no longer care about it, Gail. I spent over 40 years wanting their approval, and I came to the realization they're, for the most part, assholes. And wrong."

If she'd been actively drinking, the liquid would have gone out her nose. Gail stared at her mother's frank comment. "I guess I'm just a new breed of Peck then," she said slowly.

Her mother smiled. "I am proud of you, sweetheart. You and Steve both. You're amazing people."

Gail tilted her head, "And police officers?"

"That to, but I'd be proud to be your mother if you were security guards or private detectives or accountants."

They were both silent for a moment and Gail asked, "What about firemen?"

Her mother laughed. "No, not firemen. Please, there are limits."

That was a bright note which Gail carried with her through the ceremony and the reception. There were no issues with the ceremony, no objections, and Chloe caught the bouquet. At Holly's insistence, they stayed for the dinner and dancing. Gail hadn't minded either and would have wanted to stick around for both, her misanthropy not withstanding.

After a few dances, including both of them taking a whirl with Steve, Traci, and Leo, Holly sat with an exhausted thump and pulled a shoe off. "You were right," she complained.

Gail grinned and stood behind her wife to gently rub her shoulders. "They're great looking shoes."

"I will listen to my wife on the subject of sexy and comfortable shoes."
"And weapons."

Holly laughed and tilted her head back. "And weapons. Come here."
Obligingly, Gail pulled a chair over to sit beside Holly, facing her. "I don't miss it."

"Miss...?" Gail wasn't quite sure what Holly meant.

"The whole big ceremony, people dancing. I'm not upset we didn't have this." She reached over and cupped Gail's cheek with one hand before kissing her. "It's overwhelming." They kissed again and Gail smiled, practically oozing into Holly's lap.

She ignored the dancing and the people celebrating, just enjoying sitting with Holly and kissing her. They weren't really even making out, not really. It was so comfortable to sit close to her, to touch her arms or waist, rest their foreheads together, that the rest of the world fell away. Nothing needed to be said. They just were.

At home was a different matter. At home was a place for hands to explore everywhere, for open mouth kisses to follow the paths of shirt buttons and hands to rather expertly unhook a bra.

One handed. Much to Holly's amusement, years of practice had netted yet another new skill. Gail could have kicked herself for the years wasted with men, none of whom had ever been so deliciously soft and curvy as Holly was. They're was a firmness to her, a solidity, that was welcoming and comforting and downright sexy. And the noises Holly made when Gail touched her was just inspiring.

While Gail's dress hadn't had an open back, Holly still spent a significant amount of time running her fingers along Gail's back. One of the wonderful things she'd learned about Holly was that her fingers were strong and dexterous. Doctors hands. They were gentle when they needed to be, sensitive and graceful. When Holly unzipped the dress, her hands lingered on the bare skin of Gail's back, lips on her neck, and Gail revised her favorite part of the date.

Getting undressed with Holly was way more fun.

The phone call was exciting. It was news she wanted to hear at the exact right time. "Yes! Yes absolutely." She grabbed her purse and texted Gail the second she was off the phone with the offer. It felt like things were looking up again. A new car, a surprisingly wonderful fortieth birthday party, a wedding where nothing weird happened, and now this. Holly bounced. Gail texted back, saying she should leave work early then, and Holly grinned.

When she got to the station, she saw Gail downstairs and was struck by a memory. Dimly, Holly remembered talking to Chloe about clothes. It had been ages ago, years ago, when Gail and Holly were in the awkward part of their relationship reboot. There was no sex at the time, and they had been rebuilding things, learning to communicate with more than just the physical aspect of things. But Holly remembered Chloe saying she didn't want to be a detective because she'd have to pick out what to wear.

Clearly Traci had some hand in things, as Chloe was note perfect in black slacks and a dark blue button down shirt. Next to Gail, with her dark jeans tucked into boots and her leather jacket over a snug black shirt, one would think Chloe was major crimes and Gail was undercover. Adding in Traci, representing homicide in her blazer, and Steve from guns and gangs in the suit, Holly got the giggles.

"What?" Oliver, her escort for the moment, looked confused.
"Charlie's Angels." She pointed at the group.

He followed her look and covered his mouth. "Nash is Jill Munroe."

"Gail's Sabrina Duncan," giggled Holly. "So Chloe has to be Kelly Garrett."

"Keystone Peck's Bosley." Oliver laughed, which caught everyone's attention. "Whoops."

Naturally Gail caught Holly's eyes and smirked, but instead of coming over she closed the blinds in the bullpen. "Do I want to know?"

Oliver shook his head. "I don't even know, and that's really annoying."

Holly sighed, trying not to smile. "How can you not know? Aren't you the staff sarge?" The way Gail explained it, Oliver was in charge of the patrol officers in the division and, nominally, the detectives.

"Eh, doesn't work like that." Oliver gripped his belt. "Jarvis pushes me around. Sometimes I wish the Pecks' father was still our inspector."

It was reflex, but Holly winced. She hadn't seen Bill since the award ceremony but his lack of presence was a gaping hole for both Steve and Gail. They had, as children, been closer to their father and even though they described him as being hard to please and gifted with a great look of disappointment, they did have their mother attempting to get back into their lives. Holly actually found Elaine to be weirdly likable in an intense way. Apparently she was toned down a lot since she'd been retired.

Bill, on the other hand, had not actually made an attempt to bridge the chasm between himself and his children. To have that happen with the parent you thought liked you more had to hurt. Of course neither one of the siblings said much of it, letting it be what it was in silent agony. It bothered Traci too, which she and Holly talked about when they needed to vent about the pain that was being married to a Peck.

Picking up on her lack of verbal response, Oliver apologized. He probably knew some of it. "I'm sure he's a fine Inspector," offered Holly.

They stood around awkwardly for a while, until the detective's came out of the bullpen and Gail signed that she needed to grab her things from upstairs. That was fine since it let Holly think about the real reason she'd come over.

"Hey, so when?" Gail had her gear on her shoulder and was smiling.

"Tomorrow. Did you look it up?"

"I did. It's... Bad."

Holly blinked, looping her arm through Gail's. "How bad is bad?"

"Bad. Ollie, thanks for the new mug."

The white shirted man looked between them, perplexed. "Sure thing. What the hell are you two talking about?"

"Girl stuff," grinned Gail. "See you tomorrow, Sgt. Shaw." They walked out to Oliver's confused wave. "We really need to coordinate the whole car thing better," Gail grumbled, seeing her's and
Holly's parked side by side.

Sadly true. Holly kissed her wife gently. They'd done so well with it for so long, only to slip back into old habits. Then again, their schedules didn't always match. "How about you go pick up dinner?" Another kiss. "I'll go clean the guest room."

Accepting that distribution of labor, Gail kissed her once more, far more suggestively, and they reconvened in the kitchen an hour later with dinner. Gail wasn't joking either, when she'd said it was bad. "Vivian Green. Triple homicide/suicide six months ago, and only one survivor," announced Gail as she walked in. "Father slipped on his meds, killed the mom and the older daughter. Shot them in their beds and then called 911 and used the rifle on himself."

Holly swallowed a suddenly dry throat. "How did she live?"

"She was at her very first sleepover party," sighed Gail. She put the takeout on the counter. "The dad just shot the bed without looking it seems. Vivian came home and found him dead in the kitchen. So I'm going to be real damn careful about her seeing my guns, baby. And I'm moving my FPS games to the office."

"Would those be triggers?"

"Hard to say. I mean, I can't get in a taxi but I was fine with Uber," sighed Gail, rubbing the back of her head and fluffing her hair up adorably. "Did Anne say how long she thought she'd need us?"

Chewing her lip, Holly shook her head. "She didn't. She just said it was turning out hard to find a good fit." Gail's eyebrows lifted with surprise. "Yeah, I know."

"Okay," exhaled Gail. "Sharing a room probably scares her right now, so a single kid home will help. And no crazy men here." Gail started to chew her lip and Holly reached over to take her hand. "Suddenly feels real daunting."

"That's how I felt the first time," smiled Holly.

The next day, Anne brought the girl over. Vivian was small for her age, only just six with wavy light brown hair and olive skin. She didn't look up at Gail or Holly until Anne said that Gail was a detective. Then Holly saw the closed expression on the child's face, the hazel eyes taking in Gail's easy smile suspiciously. Vivian looked over at Holly slowly, a glimmer of curiosity crossing her face before closing tightly, and Holly sighed. Children shouldn't have to look at the world like that.

That seemed to be as good as it was getting. Gail showed her the room, no longer with a foldout bed but a real twin bed. The couch had gone to Dov and Chloe, finally moving into their own place, which made the 'guest' room easier to convert into a kid's room, however temporary that may be. Anne stuck around for dinner, leaving only when Vivian started drooping in the way kids did when they didn't want to be tired.

It took some time for Vivian to thaw, which Holly expected. She didn't expect it to be almost two weeks before she started acting somewhat like a normal girl. There was a lack of smiles and laughter, which Gail and Holly's therapist both assured it was somewhat normal given the situation. Her parents and sister had died less than half a year ago, and she'd been bouncing between foster homes since then. Vivian was guarded and quiet and jaded and she really didn't like that Gail was around guns all day. Not that she said as much, but Holly noticed the look when they explained what they did for a living, and she wouldn't talk to Gail if she was armed. She just stared.

When it happened, and it did, it happened over dinner when Gail was goofing around cracking jokes
like normal. Holly had been making chicken and Gail was giving her grief about overcooking it, which wasn't even the case this time, finally winding her arms around Holly's waist to pull her close for a kiss and sing-song that Holly loved her. The whole incident made Vivian giggle, though she promptly covered her mouth and looked away.

"Hey," grinned Gail. "Kids always think I'm goofy," she told Holly, kissed her cheek and went to the fridge.

"You are goofy," smiled Holly, trying not to make anything of the giggles,

"I have a totally awesome reputation, I'll have you know," Gail rejoined, sticking her tongue out. That got another giggle. "We're not really grown up, Vivian, sorry. Juice, soda, water, beer..."

Vivian stared at Gail. "I'm six," she said, astounded.

"So ... You don't want to borrow the car?" And Vivian giggled again. "Too bad, my new car is totally sweet."

Holly realized where Gail was going with this. "Absolutely not! You are not taking a six year-old on the training course!"

Vivian's eyes went wide but Gail waved a hand at her wife. "Holly threw up. She likes boring sports like baseball and tennis."

"I like baseball," whispered Vivian and Gail tossed her hands up in mock disgust. Both Vivian and Holly laughed at the blonde, who muttered disparaging things about baseball while pouring drinks.

"Miss Holly, Miss Gail! There's a kinda angry lady at the door!"

Gail popped her head out of the garage, "Vivian, I told you that you can call me Gail." She shook her head and jogged over to the door. "What's she look like?"

"Kinda like you when you're grumpy, except with red hair."

That was surprising and Gail checked before opening the door even though she was pretty sure she knew who it was, "Mother." Hiding behind Gail, Vivian watched from safety. "Vivian, this is my mom, Elaine. Mother, this is Vivian Green, we're fostering her." She reached back and almost patted Vivian's shoulder. No. No you didn't pat Vivian.

Her mother looked at the girl and smiled. "Hello, Vivian."

As expected, Vivian didn't say anything. "You want to go tell Holly that my mother's here?" Gail's offer was readily accepted and Vivian ran to the garage. "She's still pretty closed off, it's not you."


"She's ... She's okay." The girl had nightmares, was deathly quiet around new people, terrified of men, and Gail was right about the guns being a problem. That was the hardest to work around and Gail was as circumspect as possible about her own. They'd had a sit down talk about Gail's job, how she did carry a gun, and yes there were guns in the house. Vivian was slowly getting used to the idea, but flat out refused to talk to Gail while she was armed and didn't go in the office.
Elaine shook her head. "I can think of few people who ... I think you and Holly are a good choice."

She sighed. And there was the other issue of Vivian's stay being still, officially, temporary. "It's not permanent, Mother." Elaine shrugged. "So, uh, not to be that way but why are you here?"

"Ah," her mother picked up the shopping bags at her feet. "You hate shopping," she said, guiltily.

"That's just not true," laughed Holly. "She loves shoe shopping." Behind her, Vivian made a noise that was almost a giggle.

Gail also liked shopping for guns but that wasn't a topic to bring up. "Thank you so much, dear," she rolled her eyes at Holly. "Vivian, my mother brought you ... What did you bring?"

"Clothes." Elaine put the bags on the coffee table and started to take things out. "I wasn't sure what she'd like." Elaine paused a moment, "I wasn't sure what you'd like, Vivian. All I had was Steven's descriptions..."

Aside to Vivian, Gail explained, "Steve's lousy with girl stuff." Then to her mother, "Why didn't you ask Traci? Or is she still not talking to you?"

Elaine shrugged and pulled out shirts and pants, letting Vivian pick what she liked. That process took a long time, well into lunch time, but Elaine did not stay. She took the rejects, told Vivian it was nice to meet her, and left with strained smile for Gail and Holly. It was about par for the course with Elaine these days. Their relationship was inching towards repair, moving forward at least to a way where they could talk without fighting and, more importantly, talk about what had happened and why.

Folding her shirts, Vivian looked up as Gail made sandwiches. "How come Miss Elaine looks so guilty?"

"Oh, we had a big fight," sighed Gail. She glanced at Holly, who shook her head. Gail was on her own with this one. "It was pretty bad, but we're making up. It'll just take a while before we figure out whatever our normal's gonna be."

"Oh," replied Vivian and she held up a shirt. "Are these really mine?"

Holly nodded. "You bet. Want to put it on?"

"No. I wanna wear it to school."

Gail smiled. "You excited about school on Monday?" That had taken a while to sort out, what school to get Vivian into. In the end, they'd opted for a public elementary school with a summer program. Not the one Vivian had attended before, a new school where she was unknown. And summer program because the therapist and social services said she tended to do better with a school routine. Gail had her own doubts about that.

"Yeah," Vivian said in a way that belied the words.

Happy about the clothes but not happy about the school. "Okay, go put your clothes away, kiddo," Gail said casually and Vivian went to her room.

"The school may not work out," Holly mused, wrapping her arms around Gail's shoulders from behind.

"Well, we'll deal." Gail smiled and leaned back into Holly's embrace. "I like you."
"That's good." Holly kissed Gail's neck. "I like you. And Vivian likes you."

"In very different ways," laughed Gail. She closed her eyes. "We can do this, Holly." Her wife made a noise of agreement and continued to kiss her neck.

There was an uncomfortable tension surrounding them these days. Five weeks in, they were getting to a place where everyone was accustomed to each other, but social services still made it clear that this was not meant to be a permanent living situation. There were family members out there, ones that had not been remotely close to Vivian's parents and ones that had been dead set against the marriage. Her maternal side of the family was a depressing closed book, wanting nothing to do with the girl. Since Vivian had never met them, they decided not to tell her yet unless she asked. The paternal side were just assholes, but had made a noise about custody.

Gail had a lot of sympathy for people with shitty families. She still wasn't talking to her father, though her mother was making a surprising turn towards humanity. When Elaine had come by the office, unrelated to anything Gail was doing, she'd even called Chris by his real name and apologized to Oliver. The staff sergeant had asked Gail if possession was a real thing. Bill, on the other hand, hadn't even sent Gail a get well card following the car bomb.

"Ew," announced Vivian, pulling Gail out of her thoughts and prompting her to open her eyes.

Behind her, Holly laughed but didn't let go of Gail. "Ew?"

"Kissing's gross." The girl faux-gagged.

Holly started to let go and Gail caught her hands. "One day you may change you mind, Vivian, and I will tease you," said Gail, smiling. "Close your eyes, I'm going to kiss Holly."

The girl gagged again but didn't close her eyes when Gail kissed Holly softly. "You're terrible," whispered Holly.

"I'm awesome," Gail corrected. "Okay, before my mother came to bribe you, Vivian, I believe you wanted to go to the batting cages?"

Vivian perked up. "Really? And Holly can teach me?"

"She's a terrible teacher," warned Gail.

"Gail's just saying that because she threw her bat at the ball her first time," teased Holly. "I don't think that was my fault. I assumed a police officer would have some fitness and dexterity."

Gail mock-scowled. "You don't use a bat on patrol!" Her indignant expression caused both Holly and Vivian to laugh.

They'd be fine.

Chapter End Notes

This ends Part 7 (Body Shot Blues)

The Vivian case is based on a real one I wish I was less familiar with, but sadly there are many similar cases out there. This last chapter is one I was really iffy about. I may lose
some readers who are dead against this idea, and I understand that totally. However as I
started writing out part eight and nine, I realized it was needed in a way. I hope I didn't
Cousin Oliver this fic for people.

The next arc is called either "Outbreak" or "Love in the Time of Ebola" depending on
my mood. I bet you can guess what it's about. More of Elaine's story will come out as
well.
Chapter Summary

Part Eight: Outbreak

Normal people get asked to write weddings and adoptions and pregnancy. I get asked to write about Ebola and Lisa being arrested... Well. Okay then! Lisa was arrested last arc, so let's get on with the obvious. Sometimes I call this "Love In The Time of Ebola" but that's a very depressing title.

It's been a few months since we were last here, some things have changed. Last storyline started with a half-year jump. This is just two and a bit, taking us to September.

Chapter 71: Playing House

Gail awoke with a start, coming aware of the room in an instant without moving. The bedroom was different.

She stared at the dresser on the wall and blinked a few times, the tendrils of terror from her nightmare drifting away as she reminded herself McNally was not, in fact, dead on the floor. She looked, to be sure. But why was the dresser there? The dresser lived on Holly's side of the bed, not the foot of the bed. She turned to look at the room slowly, spotting her uniform hanging up in the far side closet which she'd left open, having worn it the other day for a case. There was the outfit she wanted to wear to the school dance for Leo and Sophie and Winnie's that weekend, having been roped into chaperoning… That involved a lost bet with Steve.

Oh.

Right.

The new house.

She was home.

She grimaced, biting back a groan, and looked down at her wife. Holly was still blissfully asleep, sprawled out and taking up three/fourths of the bed as usual. Gail saw no reason to disturb her. Picking up her iPad, Gail eased out of bed and picked up her robe before walking into the hallway. Her therapist had asked her to start recording her dreams, especially the nightmares, with as much detail as possible. So now that she was awake, Gail typed the information into her stupid dream diary.

Getting back to sleep after doing that had quickly been found to be problematic, so she decided to make something warm to drink. Gail paused in the hallway, looking at the second bedroom. The door was ajar and she quietly peeked in to check on Vivian. Seeing an empty bed, Gail sighed and went downstairs. The girl hadn't been sleeping well recently either, which made Gail wonder if their nightmares were weather related, move related, or just coincidence.

Downstairs, the six year-old was playing Mario Kart with the sound off. "Please turn a light on,
"kiddo," Gail said by way of greeting, flipping on a lamp. She went right to the kitchen and pulled out milk.

"Sorry," whispered Vivian, looking like she felt guilty. "I can go-

"Want some cocoa?" Gail knew the girl would spend too much time apologizing and feeling bad for making noise, or playing with the Wii. No matter how many times Gail said it was fine, she worried. There was still too much unknown about Vivian's family and how they'd treated her and her sister, but there was enough evidence found in her actions to make Gail suspect everything but physical abuse. The psychological stuff was, in her mind, worse.

Vivian blinked, the game paused. "Cocoa?"

"Milk, chocolate, sugar?" Assuming the answer would be yes, Gail heated milk for two cups of the good stuff and brought them over. Vivian had not picked the controller back up, so Gail picked up the second one and restarted the race with two players.

Silently, Vivian sat down again and they played a short race before drinking the cocoa. "This is good," mumbled the girl.

"Sometimes it helps me get back to sleep."

The young girl eyed Gail as they played another race. There was no quarter given and Gail played as hard as she did against anyone. The one exception was Vivian got suggestions of how to play different items to their most effective end. They'd teamed up against Dov once, to Vivian's delight.

"What... What are yours?" She didn't have to specify what, they both knew the other had nightmares. You just knew when someone else had them.

They didn't stop playing. Neither of them seemed to look at each other directly, and that was okay. "I was kidnapped. Years ago." Gail blinked and realized that 'years' was accurate. It was Vivian's entire life ago. "You would have been just a baby, only a couple months old," she said slowly. "He attacked me, beat me up, threw me in the trunk of a car. It was pretty bad."

Vivian frowned and used a lightning bolt. "But you got away."

"I was very lucky, they found me." She threw a green shell and knocked Vivian's Mario aside. "Another officer died, though. I felt guilty about that for a long time."

Now Vivian looked over. "You don't now?"

Gail knew Vivian felt guilty for surviving the murder in her house. Her father had killed her mother, her older sister, and then himself. She'd been at a birthday party sleepover, her very first. Survivors' guilt was a shit-kicker.

"Most of the time I don't. Sometimes I do. Sometimes I have dreams where I relive it, sometimes they're about stuff that didn't even happen. Sometimes it happens to someone else and I have to watch." That last one had been that night's dream. She watched Perik beat down Andy and kill her in front of Gail. In reality, she never even known Andy had been there until days later.

After a little while, Vivian said, "I get confused sometimes. What's really what I remember an' what's not." She exhaled unhappily.

"You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to," Gail said, trying to channel Holly at her most soothing.
Vivian frowned and stared intently at the screen. "I hate talking about it," she mumbled.

"Me too," agreed Gail and swore when Vivian nailed her with a red shell.

That startled Vivian but she started giggling. "Do you play games when you can't sleep?"

Gail concentrated and hit the ramp to speed her Bowser past Vivian's Mario. "Yep. I've always been a lousy sleeper." She paused. "You can always play games, Vivian. If you can't sleep. You can read, watch TV. Do you want one in your room?"

Immediately she shook her head. "No. If it's out here, you'll play with me if you're up, right?"

It was said with such innocent sincerity, Gail felt touched. If she or Vivian had been the hugging sort, they probably would had done so now. Instead, she leaned towards Vivian, gently bumping shoulders. "You bet. You're not gonna get better if you don't play against the best."

After a few more games, Vivian started to yawn and they went back up to their bedrooms. Gail did not offer to tuck her in, something Vivian had balked at a few times, but did linger at the door to make sure everything was okay before going to her own room and curling up with Holly. Her wife stirred, sleepily asking, "S'okay?"

"Yeah, go back to sleep, baby." She kissed Holly's neck and wrapped an arm around her waist.

Holly mumbled something and drifted back off, though it took a while before Gail could join her. The comforting warmth finally took hold of Gail, letting her body relax and slip away into sleep. She woke up all at once again when Holly yawned, come actual morning, still feeling more tense than she wanted to be. "Hey," smiled Holly, stretching and rolling onto her back.

"Hey," Gail repeated, making room for her wife.

Studying Gail's face with her adorable squinty expression, Holly frowned. "You did wake up last night." She could always tell. Technically Holly was far-sighted and she could do a remarkable number of things without her glasses on. Reading was not one of them. Lately her vision had started changing, much to Holly's irritation, and she'd had to wear transition lenses that were effectively trifocals. Holly had been vocal about hating it and hating growing older.

No sense in lying. "Bad dream."

One hand caressed Gail's face. "Worse than the flying zombie vampire thing, where you had to get piranhas interested in eating them to save the world?"

Okay, that had been the weirdest mundane nightmare Gail'd had in years. "Well it was Perik, so your mileage may vary."

"Ah," sighed Holly. She brushed her thumb across Gail's cheekbone. "Definitely worse than the lost at the grocery store one."

"Vivian had a bad dream too. We played Mario Kart." With a frustrated noise, Holly curled up against Gail. "I think it's just getting used to the new house," decided Gail.

Holly was silent for a moment. "Is that good or bad?"

"Identifiable." They'd moved in to the new house three weeks ago and it still felt a little weird. Holly had found the house, working a murder case with Traci. The body had been dumped in the back yard, which suited Gail fine since she used that to bargain the price down. She'd joked that she'd
always wanted to live in a house where someone had died, only to have Holly point out the victim had died a mile away.

They hadn't told Vivian the details about the house, but when they explained she'd get to decorate her room, the girl had gotten excited. She still hadn't done much besides picking new sheets with Elaine, who used her as an excuse to visit a little more. The four months with Vivian had flown by, folding her into the Peck/Stewart insanity with remarkable ease. Leo, Winnie, and Sophie were like her big siblings, Olivia was a few months younger and an awkward friend, and even Izzy was good for a babysitting round when Gail decided the grownups needed a date night.

Against all odds, they were making themselves into a cohesive family.

It wasn't going to last, Gail suspected, since the grandparents had started to argue about custody. While they had been horrible parents, they swore they'd be better now, and the courts still tended to keep children with family. Certainly one thing in their favor was that Vivian clearly did not want to see her grandparents. Crazy family versus lesbians with busy, dangerous, jobs. Hard to say where it would go. Gail worried her having been turned down before would be a detriment.

They hadn't really talked about the long term decisions either. One was to keep fostering Vivian, the other was adoption. A permanent ward was just as legally binding these days, and both Gail and Holly wanted Vivian to stay, but adoption was a big step and it was something all three had to agree on before moving forward. Gail wanted to get the mess with the grandparents sorted first, since it would make everything faster in the end and hopefully be less stressful. Holly's argument was that if they started adoption proceedings, the courts would see how serious they were.

Holly's fingers roamed across Gail's silky top. "We should paint the bedrooms," she said, apropos of nothing.

"Sure," agreed Gail absently.

"What colors?"

"Dark." Gail had always liked dark walls, probably because her mother made them keep their walls white at home. No, not her mother. That had been her father.

Groaning, Holly took a fistful of Gail's top and buried her face against Gail's chest. Well, more like her breasts. "No. Blue walls. Dark wainscoting. Or crown moulding." Holly's breath was warm against Gail's skin and Gail was loosing the thread of the conversation. "White ceilings, though. They make it feel taller."

Gail didn't say anything for a bit, concentrating on calming down instead. And that was not going very well since Holly's hand started wandering again. "Holly," she whinged.

"Gail," replied Holly, her tone teasing. "We don't have to wake Viv up for an hour." She moved up, kissing the side of Gail's neck.

Odds were that since she'd woken up in the middle of the night, Vivian would sleep soundly and be harder to wake up ... Gail was somewhat glad to be used to not sleeping a full night and she tugged Holly's shirt up. When she ran her hands over Holly's back and sides, letting her fingers dip along the vertebrae, her wife grinned. "Good morning, Doctor," Gail grinned back.

Arching herself into Gail's hands, Holly sighed. "Did you lock the door, Detective?"

"Right." Gail kissed Holly quickly and hopped out of bed to take care of that. Of course, strange child that she was, Vivian always knocked anyway but it wasn't good to tempt fate.
They'd already had an entertaining conversation at the old house when Vivian had woken up in the middle of the night to catch them making out on the big chair on the back porch. Thankfully she couldn't see under the blanket where Holly's hand had been working its way into Gail's pants, or Gail's hand up Holly's shirt. That had led to a brief sex talk, and Vivian seemed to understand that grown ups sometimes needed private time, so if the door was closed and locked, just knock. At six going on seven, the details of what was going on didn't really matter and she readily accepted the logic that since Holly and Gail were married, they kissed and did other stuff.

With the intention of getting to other stuff, Gail peeked down the hallway to make sure Vivian's light was still off before closing the master bedroom door, locking it, and scrambling back into bed. She nearly tripped when she found, turning around, that Holly was already naked on the sheets.

"Oh, Holly, I am so gay," she sighed, fumbling out of her sleepwear to join her laughing wife.

The years together had flown by all at once, far far too fast for Gail's taste. Wasn't it just yesterday she'd been a patrol cop making out with Holly in interrogation after some idiot took pot shots at her and Oliver? But now they were married two years and Holly's 40th birthday had come and gone, not without some fear on her wife's part. Forty was old, less perky, a little more saggy, and there had been a very odd conversation about boob elasticity. Holly had some fears and doubts about the age difference between them sometimes, which was understandable. The age between them didn't matter at all to Gail any more than Holly's gender had really bugged her. Actually, the gender had more, but only because the somewhat late shock to realizing she was gay was surprising.

Looking at the woman in bed with her, touching her, Gail only felt delight and pleasure. She adored every inch of Holly's body and mind, her feel and smell and taste. Gail sighed as she melted into Holly's arms, their bodies fitting against each other perfectly. The smooth skin set her on fire and the smell, oh god Holly's smell was mind-blowing. Gail wanted to commit the smell to memory like she could words, to pull out and warm her soul on a lonely night when Holly was away. But then perhaps it wouldn't make the feeling as vibrant, the shocking sensation that struck her anew every time she inhaled, that jolted her to her marrow. She could lose herself in the smell and the skin so easily, forgetting time entirely.

From arms and legs to everything in between, she reveled in her wife's body until finally they both lay still, breathing deeply. They still touched, unwilling to lose even a small bit of connection just yet. Holly's fingers lazily trampled over Gail's skin, erasing the lingering tendrils of tension from her nightmare. Then Holly sighed in a way Gail recognized as pure satisfaction. She grinned, nestling against Holly's side and taking in the different smell of Holly after sex.

"Yeah, that was a good idea," the brunette breathed, wrapping her arms around Gail to hold her close.

"It was a great idea," replied Gail, oozing one hand up Holly's stomach to her ribs. As she did, Holly shivered and sighed, curving herself slightly towards Gail's hand, so she move her touch to the softer skin above, fingers brushing the underside of Holly's breasts. "Again?" She lifted her head just enough to look at her wife's face and the slow smile crossing it.

"Again," agreed the doctor and Holly's hands threaded through Gail's hair, pulling her close to kiss again. Gail's hands had just cupped the soft fullness of Holly's breasts when there was a knock at the door and a very quiet voice asking if they were up.

Dropping her head against Holly's neck, Gail smothered a laugh. Holly just groaned quietly, so Gail asked, "Yes, Viv?"

"Can I have pancakes?"
"Not on a weekday," replied Gail, kissing Holly softly and getting up. "I'll be out in a minute."

"Kay!" The thudding feet of the six year old echoed down the hall and the stairs. A moment later, the alarm went off.

Gail glanced back to see Holly covering her face with a pillow, muffling her laughter.

Ah, the joys of parenthood.

The only one of her friends who would appreciate the story was thankfully the detective assigned to the case that morning. "At least she knocks," laughed Traci. "Leo didn't for ages. Walked in on me and Dex more than once."

"That's sort of horrifying..." Holly sighed and watched the techs collect evidence around the body.

"Oh please, like you don't think we know you two got it on at the cottage."

Holly felt her skin flush. "Okay, you can shut it now," she grumbled. "I don't know why I'm telling you this. You suck."

"And you definitely hang out with Gail a lot," grinned Traci, finding it all amusing. "Thanks for lending us the cottage this summer, by the way. Leo says its way better than Dex's. And I promise, Steve and I stayed in his room. No sexy times in your bed." When Holly glowered, Traci took pity on her. "Okay, okay, Dr. Stewart. Tell me about the body."

Thank god. "Throat likely wasn't cut with a knife. It's too jagged, implying something improvised."

"Blood spatter makes it pretty obvious this is the primary scene. Nicely located too, by the drain. I've got a tech down there playing with the pipes."

There was a pause and Traci leered. Holly just rolled her eyes. "Looking for blood and other evidenecey bits, right."

"How very technical of you," smirked Holly. "This is your primary scene, though. Look at the ligature marks on his arms." She pulled a rope down carefully. "Premortem bruising. And the blood has pooled at the low points. He's been here a while." And he looked familiar in a weird way. Something about the nose.

Traci flipped her notebook open. "Fits with the witness report. Paperboy came to see why no one'd picked up the paper for a week. Apparently the owners are on vacation, forgot to stop the paper. Someone popped the back door and boom. Murder room."

Holly blinked, "People still get a paper?"

"Your neighbors do," chided Traci and Holly sighed. She barely knew the neighbors, which was nothing new. "How do you like having a real house?"

Looking up, Holly shrugged. "I like the house. I seem to be the only one sleeping through the night though."

Traci looked thoughtful. "It's that time of year," she sighed. There were dark circles under Traci's eyes, ones that could mean a few things but most likely indicated that her friend wasn't sleeping much either. It was that time of year. Soon, Gail would make a dawn visit to a cemetery.

It was difficult enough to talk to Gail about Perik, even now, and Holly had never tried bringing it up
with Traci. She tossed around the idea of trying now, when something caught her attention. "Well that's funny," muttered Holly, pulling the ropes around the arms down further. "Look at this."

"Track marks," Traci said confidently.

"Mostly," grinned Holly. "Those are, but this here, on the off hand? No, unless he was ambidextrous, this was done by your perp."

Taking a photo, Traci shook her head. "If this is another run of crazy mob driven ambulances..." They both smirked. Gail would be all over it if that was the case.

"Unlikely. I'll know more after the autopsy, of course."

"But...?"

Holly shook her head. "But nothing. It's too early to make even a hypothesis, Detective Peck." When Traci rolled her eyes, Holly asked, "Does that get confusing? Three Pecks, all detectives at Fifteen?"

She knew that Traci had seriously considered keeping her maiden name after both Gail and Steve pointed out the lack of benefits to be found bearing their family patronymic. But when Traci asked her, Holly admitted that had she not already made a name for herself in her career, she'd have changed hers. Peck was a cool name, with a lot of weight in policing.

Resting her hands on her belt, Traci shook her head. "Hasn't yet. Oliver still calls Steve Keystone, and I'm Nash Peck."

"And Gail's his Petulant Peck. Thank god you're all in different departments."

"Aren't you and your parents all doctors?"

Holly nodded, pulling her gloves off. "And most of my cousins on Dad's side."

"How confusing is it when someone asks for Dr. Stewart?"

Once at a dinner someone had walked up, asking to thank Dr. Stewart, and six of them had looked up confused. Holly smirked at the memory, since it had been the first time she had been the recipient of random public notice in front of her family. It had been the widow of a man who's mysterious drowning was solved by a newly minted pathologist, and her parents had come to see her in court for the first time.

Clearing her throat, Holly shrugged. "Sometimes it's more confusing than others. Want me to call you to watch the autopsy?"

"Please and thank you, Doctor." Traci gave her the impish smile Holly had come to enjoy from her friend. And Traci was a friend, with or without the Pecks they were attached to.

The lab was, sadly, backlogged following the retirement of one of the older pathologists and the transfer of another to New York. Holly knew it would be a few days before she got to the confusing, but thus far not significant, autopsy of a John Doe.

Naturally as she got ready to pick up Vivian from school, her new assistant, Andrea, popped her head in. "Hey, your wife is related to, like, every Peck in the universe, right?"

"Every one who's a cop." Though Gail talked about a cousin who was an accountant.

Holding out a folder, Andrea asked, "That guy who was tied up? DNA came back someone Peck."
Holly blinked. "Awesome," she grumbled and took the folder. Daniel H. Peck, a fireman. "Thanks, Andrea." When her assistant left, Holly dialed her wife. "Hey, do you have a relative who's a fireman?"

"Well that was sudden," laughed Gail. "Yeah, a few. Shay, Billy, and Danny." Blissfully unaware, Gail went on. "You'd like Shay. She's crazy and I'm pretty sure she's gay. Short for Shayne, which wasn't gay enough, right? Billy and Danny are why my mother's sure firemen are idiots. Did you run into one at a scene?"

Taking off her glasses, Holly cleared her throat. "You might say that."

Thank god her wife was smart. Holly's silence lingered and Gail sighed. "Shit. Seriously? I didn't hear about an arson."

"Oh, if only, honey. I've got to recuse myself, but I'm going to be late."

"Say no more, we're done anyway." Gail hesitated. "Who?"

"Daniel- Danny."

Gail was silent a moment. "Thank god," she finally exhaled. It was one of the moments where Gail didn't have to unpack her thoughts. She could just say what she was thinking without explaining that she was grateful it wasn't a relative she was close to. "We're done here, so I'll go get Vivian and finish paperwork at home."

They exchanged endearments and Holly went off to find her boss, explaining why she had to hand over the case to anyone else. For someone who was married into the Pecks, Holly had rarely found a need to step away from a case. Frankly she would have avoided the Perik autopsy, but no one else was really available and qualified and would let Gail watch. Sometimes Holly had misgivings about that, but the man was a part of her wife's psyche in an indelible way.

At home, there was a warmer atmosphere. Gail was cooking, making what smelled like meatloaf, while speaking in French to a sulky Vivian at the kitchen table. Lingering by the garage door, Holly listened to Vivian's halting replies and Gail's gentle corrections. "Bonjour, ma petit chou," called out Gail.

"Your ... What's chou?" Vivian's higher pitched voice was confused.

"Cabbage," Gail explained. "It's a term of endearment." But Vivian had the giggles over Gail calling her wife a vegetable.

Holly rolled her eyes and hung up her coat. "My little cabbage, you are so very weird, Gail." She came into the kitchen to first pat Vivian's shoulder hello and then collect a kiss from Gail. She wanted to be able to hug Vivian, or even kiss her forehead, but the girl was still skittish about anyone touching her too much. Holly had feared sexual abuse, but the reality of the ongoing mental abuse by her father was worse on some level.

Wrapping an arm around Holly, Gail pulled her close. "You okay?" Her voice was a soft whisper. Holly made a grumbling sound and Gail nodded. "Can I distract you?"

"Please do," sighed Holly.

"Vivian needs help with her math homework. And she's about done with French."

The amusing interjection of "French is stupid" came from the child. "And Gail's cheating."
Holly laughed and kissed Gail once more before joining Vivian at the table. "Gail is a natural linguist. She forgets everyone else has to struggle."

They traded French for math however, making it through the homework just in time for dinner.

After dinner was the usual arguments about showers and TV and books and bed times and at half past nine, Gail was sprawled on the couch looking dead to the world. Holly smiled fondly at her wife, hair smashed into the couch pillow, mouth open. She found Gail so adorably cute in those moments. Very carefully, Holly took a photo and sent it to her mother with the text 'Another successful fake-mom day.'

For a pair of fake-moms, they were doing pretty well, Holly felt.

They didn't have to be prefect, they just had to be there and do their best, and so far Vivian got three meals a day, every day, and a shower. Not that Vivian liked to shower, she wanted to be a filthy hoyden for some reason. But it could be exhausting at times, keeping up with a child and walking on eggshells around her because you weren't sure what would bother her and what wouldn't. It had taken until the new house for her to even converse with Gail when the detective was armed.

Holly sighed and leaned over the back of the couch, gently brushing Gail's hair away from her face. "Hey, honey, wake up."

"Five more minutes," groaned Gail, rolling to press her face into the couch back.

"Come to bed." That got Gail's attention and she opened one eye to look up. "Hi," smiled Holly. With a grimace, Gail pushed herself up. "I thought I was in bed," she complained. Holly laughed and turned off the lights, following the blonde up the stairs to their bedroom. She paused at Vivian's door, peeking in to see the girl had kicked off the blankets again.

After Holly slipped in to cover her back up, she found Gail smiling in the doorway to their room. "What?"

"Mom points," explained the blonde, holding a hand out. Holly rolled her eyes but let Gail pull her into a hug. "We're doing okay, right?"

Good question. "I think so," she replied, kissing Gail's cheek before scooting past her into the bedroom. "Did you hear from anyone about it?"

Gail made a face and closed the bedroom door. "Nothing new. Nothing good." Rubbing her lips, Gail looked a little worried.

It was funny how quickly you got attached to people in your life. Seven years ago Holly would have laughed at the idea of having children. In fact, she did and broke up with someone over the idea. Five, almost six years ago she'd thought Gail was insane for trying to adopt Sophie (currently 12 and interested in boys and maybe girls, much to Frank's dismay and Noelle's amusement) and panicked at holding baby Olivia (pushing seven and in the same school as Vivian now). Today she was the one who was pushing to make their lives complicated by adopting.

They didn't talk more about it that night. They didn't really need to. Anyway, Gail was out cold after her shower and Holly watched her sleep for a while in the soft light of the nightlight. That hadn't changed, and wasn't likely to any time soon. Her beautiful wife still had nightmares, still had moments where she over-reacted. She reached over to gently toy with Gail's hair. It was dusky blonde, almost brown with a hint of the red from her mother, and long enough that it was starting to creep into mullet territory. Gail's hair was fine and soft, though, and Holly liked it at any length.
Her wife hunkered down in the blankets more, looking innocent and young with a soft smile on her face. Holly smiled and took off her glasses to curl up along side. Things weren't perfect, but they were certainly doing more than okay right now.
"That is gross," John informed her, looking at the computer.

"That is a body tossed in a vat full of weird chemicals that caused his lipids to liquify ... You know, melt." John squinted at her and Gail sighed, "His fat, John."

"His fat melted? Please tell me that isn't our case." When Gail didn't reply, her partner groaned. "Well great. That is awesome. Can't we get the weird drug murder?"

Gail glanced up, "Daniel Peck? I think not, Johnny." Her partner had the grace to wince. "Besides, a gross case will be good for you. Toughen you up." Gail made muscle arms at John and went back to reviewing the case. Sadly it was not one she got to work with Holly. They were stuck with Jenkins, the Assistant Medical Examiner, resident asshole, and Holly's nemesis.

The last case they'd worked together had been a serial slasher. They'd not let Vivian know about the case, but when they'd been caught doing 'homework' together, the girl asked about things. Personally, Gail found Vivian's maturity regarding some parts of life a little daunting. But at the same time, she wheedled for dessert or extra play time like every other child on the planet, resented cleaning her room, and basically was normal. Except that she was still freaked out by strange men.

Thus far, only Oliver was cheerfully welcomed when he showed up. Steve was treated suspiciously until Gail caught her brother in a headlock and noogied him. After that, Vivian would smile at him, but it was guarded. Near her own age, Leo didn't count as a man yet, but Izzy's boyfriend scared the hell out of Viv for some reason. That was probably why Izzy had dumped him the next day. Even John and Dov were not particularly welcomed at first, though Chris was quickly tolerated. Of course, Chris was practically a child himself.

A few days before, John had come over to drop off a present for Rachel's upcoming birthday and Vivian barely looked at him while still keeping track on exactly where he was in the house the entire time. Gail suspected it was because he was armed at the time. The doctors swore there was no sign of systemic physical abuse, but that just told Gail the girl had probably many of the same emotional issues she did. And they were not going to let that happen again.

Gail's eyes drifted to her personal email. That morning she'd been told that Vivian's paternal grandparents were demanding a reevaluation. They claimed Gail and Holly were intentionally turning their grandchild against them. God, parents could be assholes. They made her own look like fucking charmers.

Weirdly, Elaine had been nothing but helpful in the matter. She came by every week or so, just to say hello. Sometimes she brought food or presents, other times she offered to watch Vivian in case the fake-moms needed a break. Thus far, she'd taken Vivian to a movie and they brought back ice cream because Elaine knew Gail would love it. Vivian called her 'Miss Elaine' and had yet to be dissuaded from that, though at least she called Gail and Holly by their names.

"Tell me Holly's working on this super fun case?" John groaned. "I mean, if I have to cope with goo guy, at least your wife will make it educational."

"Sorry, bucko. We've got Jenkins. Holly's training her rookie at the body farm today."
John blinked. "We have a body farm?"

"Nope, not legal. She's in New York. Went down yesterday after work, gets back tomorrow." There was no further comment from John but Gail felt his eyes on her. "What?"

Her partner coughed, "So how's the house with you and the kid?"

Gail rolled her eyes. "Fine. We had Nutella s'mores for breakfast," she deadpanned. "And she's in the car right now. I left the window cracked." When John opened his mouth she threw her Kleenex box at his head. "Jesus, you asshole, she's at school. We had Rice Krispies with banana slices for breakfast." Actually Gail had granola, in deference to Holly's comments about her cholesterol.

Putting the box back, John blushed. "I'm trying to picture you as a single mom and it's kinda crazy, Peck."

He hadn't known her then, realized Gail, thinking about the life she might have had with Sophie as her daughter. "Another lifetime," she muttered. "We're fine. It's two days and other than Viv hating me for making her do her French homework, it's a piece of cake."

And that was the truth, too. She and Vivian got along really well. So did Vivian and Holly. They weren't friends, but they easily fit into the mom-slot in Vivian's mind. Gail had joked they'd never be the best-friend-moms and Traci said that was overrated. Her own mother had been a teen mom with Traci, an incident Traci repeated with her own son while in high school. While Traci was very close friends with her mother, it was obvious that the friendship had made actual mom-duties harder.

That afternoon, Andy invited herself along to pick up Vivian, planning to go over some case notes while the girl was doing homework. They'd worked a very strange case involving stolen chickens the month before and the paperwork needed a review. They got to the school early, so Gail parked across the street and they sat on the hood, watching various children come and go.

"Okay, so I have a question."

"Seriously, Andy? We're at an elementary school!"

Andy rolled her eyes, "Yeah, and we're either at work or you have this mini human and I can't ask..."

There was a bit of Gail who felt sorry for Andy. She'd married Sam in a rush following a pregnancy scare which thankfully turned out to be a false alarm. Since then, Andy had been talking to everyone with kids about how it impacted their lives. Apparently it was Gail's turn. "Oh fine, ask."

Exhaling, Andy looked around to see if anyone was nearby. "Do you guys still... Y'know... Have sex?"

What the what? "Seriously? Why are you always asking me about sex? You're worse than Izzy." At least college student Izzy Shaw had an excuse. She'd finally had sex for the first time last year, panicked, and called Gail to talk her off the metaphorical ledge as it hadn't been particularly great. Both Ollie and Celery thanked her profusely for helping, though Oliver was stunned to find out Izzy had still been a virgin considering the incident with her abusive, drug using, practically pedophile boyfriend six years prior. People really couldn't be easily judged, though Gail pointed out to Izzy that a blow job was sex, but Oliver didn't need to know the details.

"Come on, I'm serious."

"So am I! Yes, of course we have sex." Gail shook her head, laughing.
Andy looked surprised. "Like you did before?"

"More or less. Tell you this, McNally, I'm not sexually unsatisfied." Far from it. And Gail unabashedly liked sex. Sex was one of the greatest discoveries in the universe and she was of the opinion that lesbian sex was its pinnacle.

"She's right down the hall. What if she walked in?"

Sometimes Andy felt less mature than Izzy. This was one of those times. "Okay, Girl Guide. You and Sam have that dog, right?"

"Walter, yeah." Sam had adopted the dog from a friend in K9 who'd passed away. Everyone, even Vivian, loved Walter. He was a big, cuddly, German Shepherd. Vivian didn't even like Sam, but when he brought over Walter, she'd talk to him. More the dog than Sam, but Gail felt it was progress.

Gail nodded. "Has he ever come in the bedroom or whatever when you two are getting it on?"

Andy winced. "God. Yes, he stuck his nose in Sam's butt-"

"Eeeeeeeeh! No details!" Gail waved her hands and Andy laughed. "What'd you do about it?"

"Closed the door..." Andy stared at Gail, stunned. "That's it? You close the door?"

With a shrug, Gail flipped her aviator shades down. "Yup. Viv knows to knock if the door is closed. And frankly, that's a hell of a lot easier to explain than it is to a dog."

Her friend, still a patrol cop though finally a successful TO, shook her head. "I don't get it. You just tell her you're having sex?"

"No, you idiot. She knows we're having adult private time. I mean, she's six. Her concept of sex is 'kissing and stuff.' She doesn't care about the details." Gail knew that in a few scant years that would change. After all, at eight Sophie had flaunted some knowledge about it. Now in two digits she sassed her information and drove Frank up a wall some times. Thinking about Sophie's age gave Gail a mini-heart-attack.

Andy made a thoughtful sound and leaned back to think about that.

It was going to hurt a lot if Vivian's grandparents managed to convince the courts they were a better choice. She and Holly had bounced the idea around seriously with social services. They had yet to ask Vivian, and Gail was planning on bringing it up that weekend. Would she want to stay with them? She hadn't fully made her room her own, outside of sheets. Maybe Vivian didn't want to live with them forever.

The school opened doors, no bells here at the private school, and a few teachers came out to spot parents. Gail raised her arm and caught the attention of one. They all knew her and Holly; the school was that small. That was one of many reasons Gail liked it. They also didn't have anyone who thought two women raising a foster child was weird, unlike the public school where Vivian had been picked on that summer. That they'd been able to get her into the private school's program late had been a relief and way better emotionally for everyone. The downside was Viv took French and hated it.

"Be right back," she told Andy, and walked across the street and over to the school.

"You're early," smiled Vivian's teacher. "Vivian was looking forward to after school."
The school had a progressive short and long term after care, where parents could pick up their children as late as seven, making it perfect for busy cop parents. Only once had Gail and Holly been forced to make use of the late pick ups. Normally they came by at three or four, taking turns so neither one's work was too overwhelmed. It helped that the school was on both their ways home and that both their jobs were alright with them working some from home. On the worst days, Frank and Noelle would pick up Vivian, or Gail and Holly would take Olivia and Sophie for the early evening. You made it work.

"Everything else is paper work today. Who else is staying late?"

The teacher smiled knowingly. "Matt, Christine, and Olivia." They were Vivian's 'best friends' in as much as six year olds had them. The first two had quickly adopted the new girl into their playground at the end of summer. Olivia, being Frank and Noelle's younger daughter, was somewhat of an enforced friend, but seemed to be doing alright.

When the children tumbled out to the playground, Vivian spotted Gail right away and pouted. "Gaaaaaaail, can you come back later?"

"Sure, but then you don't get to pick out Holly's welcome home dinner."

There was a moment of shrewd thought from Vivian. "Cheese puff burgers?"

Gail grinned. "And the broccoli with the onions?"

"Sweet tater fries," shouted Vivian, holding her hands high above her head.

"Deal. Go say goodbye and get your bag."

As Vivian ran off, the teacher laughed. "She's doing much better." Gail nodded, feeling a weight off her shoulders to hear that. The first month had been rough but first grade seemed to be working out. "I had a talk with social services this afternoon," added the teacher cautiously.

So she probably knew about the grandparents. "We haven't brought it up with her yet," admitted Gail. "This weekend we were going to sit and talk about it. The three of us."

Nodding, the teacher looked over the rambunctious children. "I'm sure you'll make the best decision."

Gail found herself blushing awkwardly, rescued by a surprise hand grab from Vivian. "All set?" Usually Vivian was reluctant to hold hands. This was new.

"Uh huh!" She over-exaggeratedly looked both ways before the crossed the street. No crossing guards to be had here at this school. Parents always walked their children. When they got to the other side, Vivian hesitated. "How come Andy's here?" There was the Sam fear again.

"We have some homework. Don't worry, she's not staying for dinner." That got instant relaxation and Vivian trotted over to say hi to Andy before getting into her car seat. She was still too small for the booster seat, being undersized for six, and Gail had gotten a very strange lecture from her mother about proper car seat usage. Gail clearly remembered her seventh birthday including a car ride with Uncle Al on the police training course. No car seats were involved. How the times had changed.

Andy watched the entire procession with unveiled amusement. "Look at you, Mom Gail."

"Bite me, asshole," snapped Gail without any real anger.
The insult made Vivian giggle and surprised Andy. "Ixnay with the idkay!"

Gail rolled her eyes, "She knows Pig Latin, you moron. And she's heard me say worse."

Piping in Vivian added, "And Holly too when she broke her phone. She said the f-word."

"That's right," grinned Gail. Swearing was not a taboo subject at Casa Peck/Stewart. They just had a time and a place for it, and a talk about appropriate usage of bad words outside the house. "Buckle up, McNally."

Pulling out, Gail knew she had the ingredients for burgers at home and they'd be a fast mix and cook, so as long as Andy was gone by six they'd be in good time. As Gail drove, Andy turned to look at Vivian in the mirror, "So how was school?"

"Nice small talk, McNally," chided Gail.

"I hate French," announced Vivian, emphatically.

Both adults laughed at her fierce tone. "I sucked at it," admitted Andy.

"You still do," Gail sassed. "How'd you do on the test, Viv?"

There was rustling and Vivian pulled something out of her backpack and handed it to Andy. The officer obliged and read the paper. "33 out of 40. That's pretty good!" Gail agreed. "How come you hate French?"

"Be-cause it sounds like babble an' its a whole 'nother language an' that's stupid." With an audible huff, she added, "French is for losers."

Andy stifled a laugh. "She sounds like you."

"Hey, I speak French beautifully." As well as Italian and Spanish. Her other languages remained functional and passable but not as amazing as the Romance languages. Maybe if she spent a summer out in Russia she'd get that good. Either way, Holly loved that she could speak multiple languages.

"Didn't you go to France once?" Andy tilted her head.

The moment Gail confirmed that it was more than once, Vivian was agog. "I've never been onna plane."

"Well. Maybe we can go somewhere for the holidays," offered Gail cautiously. They wanted to go to Vancouver, but between the stress Vivian expressed around strange men and the stupid situation with her biological grandparents, it was still up in the air.

"Like France?" Vivian was bouncing in her seat. It was crazy cute.

"Not till you speak it better, otherwise I'll get to order all your food and I'll pick liver and bratwurst." Vivian mimed gagging and Gail went on, naming more foods she knew Vivian hated, including Jell-o and avocados, until they got home.

As Gail and Andy worked on the case notes, Vivian did her math homework. A few times they were interrupted by questions about division and multiplication, but Vivian finished first and ran up to her room to play. That let Andy and Gail finish up faster. Naturally Andy had something weird to ask.

"So are you going to keep her?"

"She's not a pet, Andy," muttered Gail, hitting send on her report.
"I'm just saying... If you'd asked me five years ago, hell eight, I would not have pegged you as a mom. But... You're really good with her. And, y'know I think she's good with you. For you. Both of you."

Gail closed her laptop. "That is officially weirder than my mother's advice, McNally." When Andy opened her mouth to say something more, Gail held up her hand. "But thanks... Really."

They had become friends again, which was kind of nice. Andy would never be like Traci, someone she could talk to about almost anything, but they could rely on each other. While they waited for Sam to come by and pick up Andy, they talked about normal things. Andy had given up the idea of being a TO but was excelling at being a reliable veteran officer. Even idiots like Gerald looked up to her for advice and support. Ironically, Oliver had let slip that Andy was looking better and better to be a potential TO now that she wasn't freaking about it.

Given the direction of Andy's questions and thoughts, Gail suspected that she and Sam were considering little McSwareks. She could see it, really, though she wished it wouldn't be kids with Sam. Andy, like Gail, had grown up a lot in the eight years they'd been cops. Of course, no one would have picked Gail to have been married first. Both Andy and Gail marveled that Gail was over two years married, Andy was now three months a Swarek. Not that either had changed their names. Traci had, surprising all of them.

After Andy left, Gail started dinner with Vivian's help. Mostly Vivian stared at Holly's dot in the Find My Friends app on Gail's iPhone, giving announcements every time the app updated. Holly made it home shortly after six, just as Gail was tossing the burgers into the pan, and declared her undying love of Gail and food. Apparently they'd not stopped once on the drive back, so Holly's actual greetings were followed by a rush to the bathroom, which made Gail and Vivian laugh.

Over dinner, Vivian demanded details of the body farm, finding the whole idea totally fascinating. She agitated for dessert too, being six, but Holly's brought out a box of American cereal and they agreed that was breakfast and even cooler. They both made Gail promise not to eat the cereal, which clearly said it was for kids.

Finally everything was put away, everyone was clean, and everyone was in bed. Holly groaned as soon as Gail got under the covers, curling up to use her as a pillow. "That was a fucking long drive," she muttered into Gail's shoulder.

"But you had fun."

"It's a body farm," Holly pointed out, as if that was the silliest question ever.

Gail smiled and kissed Holly's forehead. "Nerd."

"Your nerd," replied Holly. "Everything was fine?"

"Well, we were hooligans yesterday, but we mopped up." They both chuckled. "I was fine, Viv was fine, we missed you though. Next time we should all go."

Holly picked her head up. "To the body farm?"

"Conference, visit your parents... She's never been on a plane."

With a soft noise, Holly settled back down. "I'd like that. Think we can?" Gail sighed and didn't reply. "Well. We'll see how this mess sorts out, but I would like to."

Gail brushed Holly's hair away from her face. "By 'this mess' … you know the fast way around it."
She chewed her lip a little. This wasn't an 'end of the day' sort of chat. This was the kind of talk you had wide awake and with coffee.

"Adoption," yawned Holly. "I can't believe I'm the one saying it, but we should."

"That was a feature of your proposal, I recall." And Holly pinched her ribs. "Okay then. We'll talk to Viv about it when we tell her about her grandparents, I guess." Holly voiced her agreement and then suggested it was time to sleep. So. That was what they had to do next.

Ever since Gail had been on the stand for Perik's retrial, Luke Callaghan had been Holly's least favorite detective to work with. He was arrogant, smarmy, and pushy. And he wasn't really the best detective. That was something Holly hadn't realized before. He wasn't a bad detective, but the more time she spent with people like Sam (who actually did his job very well, if you ignored his idiotic tendency to get too emotionally involved and his general negativity) the more she figured out that Luke was judgmental and tended to use people to better his ends.

Gail once pointed out she herself did the same thing once, though Dov countered that Gail had grown out of that phase. To date, Luke had not grown out of the behavior and it annoyed Holly to no end.

"COD?"

Pushing up her glasses with her wrist, Holly sighed. " Seriously? I've been here five minutes, Detective." She had literally just pulled her gloves on. The body lay face down with two bullet holes, exit wounds on the back.

"Because it looks like he was shot."

"That's why I'm the doctor and you're not," muttered Holly. She gestured at the pool of blood. "Exit wounds in the back, body's face down, not usually how they fall." Standing up, Holly walked around the body to study the blood spatter. He was shot while standing, based on the exit angle and the pattern on the wall and couch. "Andrea, get a photo of that," she said to her assistant.

The young woman was Holly's newest favorite assistant. She had drive, desire, and skill. Above all, she was smart and clever, a combination you didn't see all the time. "Nice spatter," Andrea muttered. "Shot here, tried to walk towards the shooter?" She carefully stepped forward.

Just a few days before, they had been at a body farm in upstate New York to walk through crime scenes. Andrea said it was better than Christmas. Sadly, Andrea wanted to be a Gil Grissom and not a Holly Stewart. While Holly lamented she wouldn't get another Rodney out of her, she still liked working with Andrea.

"Possibly," agreed Holly. "Wonder why... Oh." Holly pointed at the ground, "There's a void."

Andrea perked up. "Sweet!" The younger woman bounced over to take photos and Holly went back to the body. "Go ahead and move him around, I've got shots, doc."

"Last I checked, I was in charge," noted Holly, but she didn't mind.

Grumpily, Callaghan asked, "So he died from being shot and wanted a ... Suitcase back?"

It pissed off Luke, but he stalked over to look at the bag. "What does this mean?"

"Means he didn't get his crap. Can I look through it, Doc?"

"No, leave that for the lab." While Andrea muttered an agreement, Holly heard the snap of the camera and sighed. She was probably opening it and getting a photo anyway.


It was moments like this that Holly loved her job. There was an uncharitable joy at being the smartest person in the room. No matter how improper it was, she liked the feeling. She smothered her smirk, making a note to tell Gail about this after Vivian was in bed, and reached into the pockets of the body. "I've got a wallet. Cole O'Malley."

In a heartbeat, Andrea was there with an evidence bag. "Hey, he lives here. Lived here." She eyed the bag and labeled it for Holly, who approved and signed it. "That's a lot of blood on his face."

"True, but he fell in the blood." A forensic pathologist, Holly was well familiar with reading a crime scene and she knew when things felt off. "He walked all the way to there, stepped back, fell to his knees, then face planted. Maybe broke his nose too. Let's roll him over."

As they reached for the body, the door burst open to reveal a person dressed in a hazmat type coverall. "What the hell?!" Callaghan's gun was up. "Police! Freeze!"

Holly reacted by not true instinct but training. For years Gail had been drilling it into her head that if a gun came out, Holly took cover. She even made Holly practice it at the police gym, demanding that it had be second nature. Since Holly had no interest in learning how to use a gun and certainly never intended to carry one, Gail was adamant she know how to get the hell out of the line of fire quickly and safely. The practice worked and it was without conscious thought that she scrambled back, grabbing Andrea by her jacket. They had to get out of the line of sight and they had to do it fast.

The person (man? Holly was pretty sure the body was male from how it moved and acted) in the protective suit rushed the detective. Luke didn't fire, he probably didn't want to, but he managed not to lose his gun or balance as he met his attacker head on. The person was going for the bag! Holly reached for her phone and cursed when she couldn't find it. She probably left it in the pocket of her forensic kit again.

When Andrea didn't have her phone either, the two were relegated to watching the struggle. The crime scene contamination was going to be epic, winced Holly, and a moment later regretted the uncharitable thought.

A gunshot went off and time slowed down.

Blood spatter hit the wall and ceiling.

Luke crumpled to the ground, gasping. There was a second shot and then Luke was abruptly silent.

Oh shit.

When Holly's eyes met the face mask of the shooter she was horrified to see him holding Luke's gun. The mask was reflective, unreadable, and the gun did not point at her. Instead, the person put the gun down, picking up the bag. He'd been after the bag. Then the face turned to the original dead body (God, please be the only dead body, prayed Holly) and a male voice filtered out. "It's too late for you."
Holly was not a hero. That was something else Gail drilled into her. She was a damned forensic pathologist, and she did not get in the way of people with guns. Ever. But the gun was down now and the man was gone. Holly could hear her heart pounding, her breathing loud and panicked. Holy fucking shit.

"Andrea, check Luke," she managed to say, her voice cracking.

She wanted to check Luke, but the words of the shooter echoed in her mind. It was too late. Why was it too late? What could that mean? She swallowed and inched over to the body of Cole O'Malley, her gut bottoming out as she did.

"He's dead," whispered Andrea. "He... He's dead."

Holly closed her eyes. She'd known the man, annoying as he was, for years. She knew him closer from the time Steve had shown up with a knife in his back. And she knew him closer still when Gail threatened to shoot a nailgun through his testicles during their prep for the Perik trial. Or was it hook his balls by his ear? Her wife was not a Callaghan fan. Somewhere she remembered that Andy had once been engaged to Luke, but he'd cheated on her with ... Jo Rosati? She knew so much about the man and so little.

And now Luke was dead in the middle of her absolutely fucked up crime scene.

"Shit," muttered Holly. Where the hell were the uniformed officers when you needed them?

She opened her eyes and looked at the body. Cole O'Malley. It was too late for them. The words echoed and she had a horrible, sinking feeling in her gut. She turned the dead man's face to the side and stared at his eyes. Oh dear god. Holly's mouth went dry, her throat burned, and she felt tears spark her eyes. Oh no no no.

Andrea cleared her throat, "Do ... Who do we call? The chief-

"Andrea," Holly spoke firmly. She channeled the voice Gail used on her, once, to get her to back the fuck away from the car when it had a bomb. That was six ... No that was seven months ago. Not even a year. Oh Jesus. Holly didn't even believe in Jesus. She didn't even say that name when having sex, and Gail sure as hell had the ability to make a person scream out a deity's name. "Move away from the blood." Holly stood up and stepped back towards her kit.

Thank fucking god, Andrea did exactly as she was told, her skin waxen. "What is it?"

Holly shook her head and carefully peeled off her gloves. Had she touched the kit after touching the body? No, she was certain she had not. She had touched the body, gotten blood on her gloves, before the shooter burst in. She lost track of some of that when she'd run from the shooter. Had she touched herself in the frenzy? Folding the gloves in on themselves, Holly picked a fresh pair from her bag and only then picked up her phone.

She had the number saved. They all did. They never wanted to call it.

"Public Health Agency, Toronto. This is Howard. How may I direct your call?"

"This is Doctor Holly Stewart with the Toronto Centre for Pathology. We have a scene with possible hemorrhagic fever. One decedent, three possible exposures, two on site." Andrea went more waxen. She was as pale as a Peck.

The man on the phone swallowed audibly. "Just... Just... Uh, shit. Yes, hold on!"
Howard shouted someone's name and a new voice came on the line. Holly repeated the three sentences five times. Finally she hit someone who knew what to do. He asked the right questions. "Three exposures. Two there? What happened, Dr. Stewart?"

"A man in protective gear came in, he fought with the detective... Took a bag and fled."

"Did the detective chase him?"

"No... He did not."

"So he's the other infected?"

"No. No, the ... The thief shot him. He's dead. The infected are me and my assistant, Andrea DeSails."

The doctor on the phone swore. "Stay there. Call your police department, your boss, tell them what's going on and we're going to treat it as if you were infected. Do not leave the building."

Holly snorted. Like she or Andrea were going to consider that. Once she hung up, she called the chief medical examiner who swore a blue streak and said he'd contact the division. "There's something else, Tony ... Detective Callaghan was shot and killed on scene."

Silence. "I'll take care of it. You hold tight, Holly. We'll get you out of this."

As she hung up, Holly's morbid thought was if she'd get out of this alive. Would she even get to see Gail again?

She stared at her phone. They hadn't told her she couldn't call Gail, but there was protocol. Holly closed her eyes and held her phone. She shouldn't call Gail. She wanted to but if this was all her mistake, it would be something funny for dinner. If it was all for real... well. Take what came next.

But please let it be a mistake.

Chapter End Notes

Luke is one of the two major character death's in this fic. Expect at least two more people who were not main-cast members to perish in this arc, and at least one more main cast member before chapter 100 is over. These are your warnings.
The station was in a weird state of tension. Something had happened, but no one knew what quite what it was just yet. It was uncomfortable to have the half-feeling of worry lingering over her. Gail tried to ignore it as best she could. If it concerned her, someone would get a hold of her and that would be that.

As she went over notes from the melted guy, Gail's phone rang. Holly's face, making a goofy expression with a magnifying glass, flashed on the screen. "Hey, Doc," she grinned as she answered. They had no shared cases at the moment, which meant this was probably a personal call. It was almost noon, maybe she could slip out and hang with Holly for lunch.

"Gail, I need you to pick up Vivian today." Holly sounded funny and tense. And echoey. Was she outside? It didn't have the quality of a speaker phone.

Gail sighed, feeling a pang of jealousy that her wife had caught a case more complicated (and probably interesting) than her stupid farm-to-table scam. Did anyone really care that the chicken hadn't come from a free-range farm? Well. Maybe considering the prices on the menu they would be pissed. "Did you catch the big case that everyone's on about?" Weirdly, her wife choked back a sob. Something was way wrong. "Whoa, whoa, what's going on?" Gail sat up and stared at John across their desks. The hell?

"Gail... Can you not panic?" Holly's voice was tight. No... Scared. Holly was scared? Holly didn't ever freak like that, she didn't ever sound terrified. Not even when Gail had sat on a bomb.

Well hell. No, not panicking was not possible now but she couldn't let Holly know. Gail rolled her shoulders back. "Yes," she lied, keeping her voice relaxed thanks to years of Peck training. Never let them see you crack. She didn't let Nick see her cry. She wouldn't let Holly see her scared just yet. "I'm not freaking out at all, Holly. Are you okay?"

The sound on the phone was tense. "No. Yes. Maybe. I don't know." Holly took a long breath, Gail pushed the phone against her ear so hard it hurt and waited. "We were exposed to a possible filovirus."

We? Gail's hand spasmed and slapped her keyboard, pulling up the last rollout of the lab and found Holly's name. Holly, her new assistant the Genius Girl Andrea, and Luke. Filovirus. What in the world was a filovirus? Wait... She knew that one. Not from Holly. From something else. It was on an emergency report? Something someone said at Parade? No, a bulletin about what to watch out for and she and Noelle had laughed about it being like the whole mess with the puke. A virus. Oh. "Holly, can you English that for me? Because I think I know what you said, but I really want to be wrong."

"It might be a violent hemorrhagic fever. The dead body-"

"Holly, I love you. Non-nerd, please."

"I don't want to freak you out." When Gail snorted, Holly laughed sadly.

Gail closed her eyes for a moment. Filovirus. Hemorrhagic fever. And then she thought she knew what Holly was talking about and was so, so scared to be right. Gail opened her eyes and never
wanted to be wrong more in her life. But she had to know, so she asked the words she didn't want to voice aloud. "On a scale of one to Ebola, how Ebola are we talking?" She caught the movement of her partner across the tables, paying attention to her. He knew her moods and tones now, and he could probably hear that she wasn't joking. The word 'Ebola' caught his full attention and John's eyes were wide.

"About 80% Ebola-like. Maybe. We're waiting on the Public Health Agency to confirm."

Holy fuck. Gail felt woozy. No. No no no. This wasn't okay, this wasn't happening. She stop hearing anything except her heartbeat and breathing. It was deafening. "Gail, what's wrong?" John's hissed voice cut into the roaring in her head.

She closed her eyes and ignored her partner. How many years ago had she been exposed to that stupid shit and been in isolation? Six or seven. That idiot puked in her hair when she and Traci were in the cruiser. Naegleria fowleri. AKA why Gail avoided webMD. "Okay. How long? When will they know?"

"At least overnight. It may be a false alarm." Just like Gail's experience.

Except ... There was something in Holly's voice that sent Gail's hackles up. "You don't think so." She didn't ask a question. Gail knew her wife, she knew Holly wasn't a hypochondriac. Gail used to be one. One real scare later, she dealt with sick reasonably.

A pause. "I don't, no. It's... The case. Luke- Luke was shot and I have to give my statement-"

"No, no I understand but you can't tell me." Gail covered the phone mouthpiece to muffle the noise she was trying hard not to make. Don't crack. Don't freak out at work. She inhaled deeply and forced herself not to flip out more. Gail had to be the sane, stable, strong one right now. "Okay. Okay. You can't tell me. I can't touch this. But I'm going ... I'm gonna go insane, Holly. But I'm off this, and you have to tell me where I can see you, because I'm going to see you."

"It's isolation, Gail. You can't come in."

"It's one night, I can peek through a window."

Holly laughed a little. "It's one night. Unless..."

"No. No. It's one night. Period. Okay?"

"Yeah, okay."

"Okay. I love you."

Holly's voice was quiet, "I know. I love you, honey."

They hung up and Gail covered her face. Shit. If Gail thought it was Ebola, then she would have been overreacting and being a hypochondriac. But Holly wasn't. Holly was a damn doctor. Holly didn't guess, she used logic and science and did not guess. Holly made Gail stop worrying about being sick. And Holly was worried for herself. Fuck. This was serious.

"Gail..." John's voice was filled with concern.

Gail shook her head. "No..." She turned to the room, spotted her boss, and nearly caromed off desks trying to get to him. "Sir, you need to send someone to cover Callaghan's case now."
Butler stared at her. "How the hell did you-"

"Holly- Dr. Stewart- look just get someone on it now. If she's right, this is bad and it's big."

The inspector narrowed his eyes. "How bad?"

In her mind, Holly's voice repeated two phrases, so Gail said them aloud. "Possible violent hemorrhagic fever, a filovirus type incident." When Butler looked confused, she added, "Holly- Dr. Stewart said it was about 80% chance it was an Ebola-like virus."

The room was dead silent. Yeah, great, everyone on the floor just heard that one.

"She's exposed." Butler did not ask. You don't ask what you know.

Gail nodded, trying to keep herself calm. "I know. Off the case, out. Not arguing, sir."

The look on her boss's face was full of surprise. Then he looked grim. "I will tell you everything I can, but you should go home. What do you know?"

"Just that Holly and her assistant and Luke were exposed-"

"Luke's... Detective Callaghan's dead."

Yeah, that was it. Gail sat down in an empty chair before her legs gave out. Luke was dead. Wait. Holly said he was shot. "Someone shot him... Someone's still out there, spreading this shit around?"

"Peck, the reports are just coming in now and you... You need to go home."

He was right. She did. She nodded. "Right. I do." After a moment, Gail got up. "I'll... Be at home."

No one asked for her badge or gun, but every eye was on her as she went to her desk and quickly packed up.

"What the hell?" John put his hand on her laptop.

She took the laptop out from under his hand. "John. I can't."

Surprisingly, John was firm. "Gail-" he stared at her. "I'm not that guy," he said firmly. He wasn't trying to be her hero. He was something more important.

"You're my partner," she replied.

"What do you need me to do?"

Gail stared at him for a moment. He wasn't Nick. He wasn't Chris or Oliver or anything other than the man who had her back and depended on her. And he was the man who wanted to be what she needed because they were a team. "I really need you to do me a favor," she said quietly. "Stay here. Tell me everything you can. Ask Butler."

He nodded. "I'll call you as soon as I know anything."

And they understood. In that moment, he knew she needed him to be her eyes and ears and information giver. She needed him here, and he would do it. He would be this guy. With a nod, Gail shoved her things in her bag and walked out of the room.

God.
What if Andy was downstairs? What if Oliver saw her? What if Steve... For the first time, Gail took the back stairs out, cutting past everyone she knew and headed straight for her car. It was only noon. Vivian wasn't out of school till three and it would do no one any good to pick her up early. Not to mention it was Wednesday and she wanted to stay late and play with her friends today. That had been the mundane argument with Holly in the car that morning. While Gail had moved the good car seat to Holly's car, Vivian pleaded to stay after school.

Shit. She was going to have to get Holly's car. It was still at the station. Maybe John would pick her up so she could take it home. But she wanted him on the case as her spy. At least Gail had the spare car seat, the one Vivian disliked because it was for babies. Hadn't Holly teased her the night before to eat her dinner and grow? Everything had been so normal.

Gail ended up going home and locking up her gun and badge. She was off the clock until the case was closed, no questions asked. That was just a given. You did not work the cases with your relatives. God. Thinking of relatives, Gail considered calling Holly's parents but decided not to.

Because Holly would be home tomorrow, all clear, all fine. The car could spend the night at the labs. Holly would drive it home her damn self tomorrow and they would laugh about this.

The fact that they effectively destroyed the crime scene was pissing Holly off. "Damn it, no trace. How the hell are they going to find the asshole who took the bag?" She stomped around her stupid plastic tent and kicked the chair over. It was immature and she didn't care. She had no way to vent physically.

"Doc, come on," pleaded Andrea. She was drooping. The terror of the day had subsided into an emotionally empty cavernous feeling for her assistant. Clearly she was absolutely beat.

Holly on the other hand was fueled by anger. It was firing her up and giving her a headache. "Sorry," she muttered and righted the chair. "I need to go running ... Or the batting cages." She was frustrated. This was when Gail would make a joke about how gay Holly was and then go with her, willing to do sports to help her wife cool off.

On the other hand again, Andrea was just annoyed and lay down on the hospital bed in their tent. Since they'd both been exposed, they were in the same isolation room, but they'd had their plastic tents split up just in case. Holly had, after all, touched the body. She looked down at her hands, scrubbed totally clean and still tingling from the astringent used. What she wanted now was to work up a good sweat, take a long hot shower, maybe convince Gail to help her rub lotion into her skin as an excuse for a massage, and then a nice nap.

Dropping into the chair, Holly scowled. She would get none of that right now. She didn't even have a computer or a phone. They had emergency buttons and some food and water, and a stupid toilet they had to use behind a screen. For all Canada didn't really have an Ebola exposure 'plan' like the US did, they had recovered quickly. You were more likely to be trampled by a moose than be exposed to Ebola, after all.

Within an hour, the Public Health Agency had the house under wraps and Holly and Andrea were in protective, plastic suits and trucked off to isolation. She'd been able to see Gail's boss, Inspector Butler, running the scene himself. He'd nodded at her and promised this was their top priority. Nothing was said about Gail, which was probably for the best. On the edges of the scene, she spotted John and Griggs and a half dozen other officers and detectives she knew well. They were looking out for her and for Gail.

It felt like seconds later that they were scrubbed, dressed in sanitary cotton clothes, and dumped in
their little tents. Alone. The doctors and nurses came regularly to check on things, even setting up a television and a clock to help Holly not go insane. Of course, Andrea didn't want to hear the news, so Holly watched it with Closed Captioning on. There was nothing about them or their predicament. Holly wasn't sure how she felt about that.

"Dr. Stewart, you have a delivery and a visitor."

The nurse startled Holly out of her depressive revery. "Delivery? Is it Chinese food?"

"Funny," laughed Gail and Holly grinned. Her wife, wearing a surgical gown over her street clothes, was holding Holly's laptop and iPad.

"Remember, no touching anything except the path and the chair, don't touch the plastic." The nurse repeated directions for Gail and finally took the devices to have them passed through to Holly. "I'll be right out there," added the nurse, and she left from sight.

Gail screwed up her face and sat in the chair in front of the tent. "They sent your samples out and this twelve year old who swears he's a doctor said you'll be stuck two days minimum," she explained.

"Well that sucks," grumbled Holly, pulling her chair over to look at her wife. "Thanks for bringing those over. It's really boring."

"I seem to recall you reading People magazine on the frat couch once." It was hard to tell through the plastic, but Gail looked worried.

"I was desperate and you were asleep on me." She smiled sadly. That day had been terrible and lovely at the same time. But she'd had Gail asleep in her arms then, and spent the night at the frathouse. Actually that had been the only time Holly had slept over at Gail's in their entire relationship. Odd. "So this is real fun."

With a shrug, Gail tried to seem nonchalant and failed. "You just had to trump me sitting on a bomb."

They both starting laughing at the stupidity of it all. "Not exactly a fairy tale," agreed Holly. She wanted to hug Gail right now, to promise her that she was going not be fine. But this time it was Holly sitting on a bomb, and there was no Sue Tran to help save her. She had to wait for the cavalry, who always showed up at the end of a movie.

"Stop looking like that, Stewart," sighed Gail. "Your big brain is running a mile a minute and I can't kiss you to shut it up."

Holly blushed. She liked when Gail kissed her to stop her from talking. "Do you know anything about the case?"

Pulling out her phone, Gail looked abashed. "Not this one, but we found out what happened to Danny."

Danny who? It took a moment for the memory to click. "Your cousin?"

"Yep, he'd been dealing drugs for the firemen. He lost ten grand of product and, well, there you are." She shrugged. "Funeral is in a couple days, as soon as the Pecks stop shouting."

"Oh. Well. I guess that's better than knowing nothing."

Gail smirked. "Downright weird. Mom's old department is helping toss the place, see how corrupt it
"You going to the funeral?" This time Gail gave her wife an 'are you fucking joking?' look. Public gatherings were not her thing and Gail actually hated funerals more than weddings. Holly chuckled. "Fine, so you know nothing about the case? Did they get any evidence or-

Cutting her off, Gail stated the obvious. "Baby, you're my wife. I can't even look at the case." She then paused in a way Holly knew. Gail was totally keeping up with the case. "They sent samples to Atlanta."

Atlanta meant the American CDC HQ. That was not good. "They have a facility in New York," Holly pointed out.

"Yep, samples went there too. This is the just in case backup, since apparently our Public Health morons were a little stupid."

"The guy on the phone swore a lot," Holly mused. It was sickening at the time and not quiet amusing yet. There hadn't yet been an Ebola-esque scare in Toronto yet, let alone Canada now that she thought about it. Ugh.

"They're totally rookies," agreed Gail. "But y'know, they handled the quarantine at Fifteen okay."

Holly blinked. She'd never heard about that. Then again, she'd not ever paid any attention to what went on at the various stations until the day someone was taking pot shots at police officers from Fifteen, and she had this horrible crush on a straight girl who worked there... "When was that?"

"Couple years before I met you," smiled Gail, and she related the story about how a guy puked on her hair and she spent a whole night worried she'd catch something from him before they found they found out it was an amebic meningoencephalitis. That was actually amusing and explained to Holly why Gail said she wasn't allowed to read WebMD anymore. "Look, John's working the case from the division."

That was a relief. Oh, no it wasn't. "Can you call Rachel and Lisa? I was supposed to do lunch tomorrow..." Year five. This was year five. They knew so much about how each other thought and right now Holly knew that Gail understood why Holly thought that was important.

"He won't tell Rachel," she said firmly. "Besides the fact that this case is so fucking secret, all Oliver knows is that it's not his jurisdiction and he's pissed. John won't tell anyone. No ones saying anything after how freaked New York got."

Holly nodded. She trusted Gail and Gail trusted John. It would be fine. "You didn't tell Oliver? Wait, where's Vivian?"

"School, you idiot. I'm going to pick her up after. She wanted to stay late and play with her besties."

That's right. It was Wednesday and that was the day Matt and Christine's both parents worked late. It was also Holly's day to pick up Vivian and she had planned a meeting about Andrea, how they wanted to hire her full time, timed to leave just in time to pick up the girl and meet Gail at the batting cages.

There was a thought. "Are you going to to her to the batting cages?" With a dramatic sigh, Gail agreed she would. "God damn, I'm going to miss that," groaned Holly.

Gail smiled, "We'll go again when you get out. We always go, no matter how many times I beg you not to make me."
"It's fun. Cathartic."

"It's stupid, Holly."

Smiling, she looked through the plastic. Holly wanted to pull Gail in for kiss. Gail had the scared, nervous look on her face. It reminded Holly of the times, early in their relationship, when Gail was embarrassed that she'd revealed some self perceived weakness, like that she'd needed someone.

Those days were gone. Gail wasn't ashamed to care for someone openly and publicly. She wasn't afraid that people would think less of her for being human and having feelings. Not that Gail liked to share them with people, not all of her friends, but she would with Holly, Traci, even Steve now. The straight girl with a bitchy misanthropic attitude was a married lesbian with a slightly less bitchy but still quite misanthropic attitude. Holly wouldn't have it any other way.

"Gail, I love you," she said quietly.

Her wife exhaled. "Oh. Alright. Don't get sappy on me, Stewart." That was Gail with her defenses up. She was scared. But then she smiled softly. "I love you too."

It would be fine. Right?

She didn't lie to Vivian, she just left out the details. Holly was stuck at a work thing but should be home tomorrow. Done. Day one was difficult for Gail more than Vivian, who had dealt with Gail and Holly having to stay away for a night more than once. While disappointed she didn't get to play at the batting cages with Holly and had to cope with just Gail who wasn't great at softball and still hated it, Vivian was distracted with a good dinner at a kid friendly restaurant and fell asleep in the car.

It took Gail considerably longer to get Vivian up again, showered, and in bed than she'd have liked, but it wasn't like she had anything else to do. Cleaning up the house, Gail ended up sitting on the bed in her pajamas at ten PM, wishing Holly was there. She was supposed to be there, here, and it hurt in a way different from when they had to work overnight.

This was an unexpected ache, an empty hole not unlike the cavern she felt in those horrible weeks where they were broken up. No. Worse, it was like that gut wrenching hollowness from when she thought Holly was leaving for San Francisco. A time they knew they wanted each other and couldn't have it because it would hurt worse when it was over.

It was harder now, knowing everything she did about Holly. The way she came awake all at once in the morning, but that actually didn't happen all the time. If you got her in the right moment, she'd be blearily and cuddly and go back to sleep. But if you asked her anything, got that brain moving, she was up and there was no going back. As much as Gail hated being up early, Holly always made it worth her while, even if it was just a smile or a caress of her hair.

Tonight, after a round at the cages, Holly would complain about being old and Gail would massage her shoulders, telling her she wasn't. It was true, she never thought of Holly as old, even if she was older than Oliver had been when Gail first met him. She was older than Oliver had been when Gail started at Fifteen even. They might fool around, or not, but Gail would always rub cocoa butter into Holly's back, the smell lingering between them for hours, soothing Gail into comfortable sleep. She almost always slept the night through after the batting cages.

Gail popped open the lotion and sniffed it. Not the same without Holly's scent underneath.

She sighed and put the lotion down on Holly's nightstand, turning off the lights. The soft glow of the
nightlight filled the room, casting comforting color to the barely familiar placement of furniture. Vivian's room also had a nightlight, something Gail had set up without being asked. There were things she just knew. And today, tonight she knew the night would pass long and terribly.

She wasn't wrong. Gail barely slept, getting up with the alarm to wrangle Vivian to school and then ... Back home. She had nothing to do, nowhere to go, and it sucked. So she went into the home office and started reading Holly’s medical textbooks about Ebola and violent hemorrhagic fevers. It was dry reading while managing to be disturbingly chilling at the same time. It took her a while to get through it and she was unable to do so alone. Rachel and Lisa both were willing to explain the semantics of it, to translate WikiPedia for her, and assure her the odds were so low as to be laughable. Gail hadn't planned to tell them, but Rachel had heard about it from a friend at the CDC and Lisa was no fool.

It was with a lighter heart that she went to the hospital after lunch to talk to her wife. Holly, bored as well, was happy to talk and complain. The isolation room was covered in plastic, making it hot and sticky. With less to complain about, Gail told Holly about the batting cages and dinner. It felt like just another long distance trip, nothing major. But Holly was also tired, having not slept because of tension and stress. They were waiting for the pathogen to be identified, hoping it was just something mundane and not dangerous. As soon as that was done, Holly would be home.

They exchanged endearments, professions of love, and Gail let her wife go to nap. She probably should nap as well, but the medical books at home were calling her name. Gail fell into them and it was an hour later when her phone ringing startled her.

"Gail, I just got the report from the Public Health agent," John said without preamble.

Damn it. Damn it. Gail looked at the empty desk that was her wife's. "Shit," she said into the phone. John sighed. "Gail..." He hesitated. "They identified the filovirus. The pathogen. Luongo River Fever."

Thank god she was sitting down. She didn't know that particular disease and she didn't really care. At this point, they were all the same. "What're the odds?"

"It's Ebola like, same virus - viral structure." John was reading this aloud. The email must have just come in. "It's moderate onset for the incubation rate. Looks like anywhere from two to twenty days. Thirteen average."

Damn it. "John, what's the fatality rate?"

"There aren't any effective treatments. Just supportive, so pushing fluids and shit. Holly doesn't have a fever yet, right?"

"John!"

He drew a deep breath. "78% fatality rate."

Gail felt terror. This was more horrible than sitting on the fucking bomb. This scared her more than facing down an armed Russian with a shotgun that would rip through her vest. This moment would keep her up nights more than Perik. Holly, if she was infected, had a 22% chance of coming home. Her Holly, if she got sick, had less of a chance than Gail did at bat. And there was nothing to be done about it. You couldn't give someone a vaccine yet, they didn't exist, and there was nothing but supportive treatment possible. You waited. You waited and you prayed, and Gail didn't believe in God, or any God at all.
She couldn't find a single word to say.

John went on, "Most people who survive have no lasting issues. Less than five percent have muscle aches or lingering fatigue. The faster the recovery, the less likely any long term issues. I guess that makes sense... If infected, death occurs within six to fourteen days." He paused. "Gail, they swear Holly's antibodies are normal. They're retesting both of them now."

Touching the book on the desk, Gail could have quoted it. "As long as her viral antibody tests are negative, she's still exposed and not infected."

"Which means six days. Twenty-one at most."

"If they can detect it." The first symptoms were lethargy and fever. Holly had been tired when Gail saw her. Maybe it was nothing. "Can I keep seeing her? In the hospital I mean."

"Not today. The doctors kicked everyone out."

Gail sighed. "I saw her at lunch. Okay. I don't like this."

With a snort, John agreed. "Anyone who likes this is an idiot."

"Thank you, John."

"You're welcome." There was a lengthy pause. "Gail... Everyone here knows what's going on. We've got everyone looking for that guy and the bag."

Everyone. That meant her family, her friends, all knew. All of Fifteen knew. "I may turn my phone off," she grumbled.

"If you do, I'll deliver updates in person," promised John. "Butler knows I'm doing this. Hell, he told me to."

They were good men. "Thanks," she sighed. "I'm going... I'm gonna go. Clean the house or something."

"Do you need... I can come over."

"God no, John. No, please. I'm fine." Her partner coughed. "Okay, I'm not fine. But I'm holding up okay."

It was clear John didn't believe her. "Okay. If you need anything, just call."

Promising to do so, Gail hung up and put the phone down.

"Shit!" She grabbed the stupid medical book and flung it across the room, knocking one of Holly's degrees off the wall. "Stupid, stupid, god damned stupid!"

Thank god she was home alone right now. Thank god Vivian was at school. Gail felt an all encompassing anger, red hot and burning violence roaring in her veins, deafening her with make believe white noise. Clenching her fists, Gail pounded them on the table and then pressed her head to them, as if that could possible ground her. This was not a universe she wanted. She was the police officer. She threw herself into danger and protected people like Holly. This wasn't how it was supposed to be. Gail could live with being hurt, being shot at, being spat on. She wasn't sure she'd be able to deal with Holly being the one at risk.

Worst of all, there was absolutely nothing she could do about it.
She had to wait, like a fucking normal citizen.

Wait for news.

Wait and pray to a God that didn't exist.

Chapter End Notes

There is no such thing as Luongo River Fever, but it's named for a river in the Congo, similar to the etymology of Ebola. I made it up, it's related to Ebola like Marburg is, and it's got a lower fatality rate than a lot of the other rarer viruses. Ebola, at a reported 50% today, is astonishingly low and probably inaccurate.
At five, Gail showed up for the second time that day, unannounced. "Hey." Gail was laconic and casual, as if this was normal. Like she always visited her wife when Holly was in isolation. Which in a weird way, she did.

Holly stared at her wife in confused silence. They'd told her no one was allowed to visit after 3pm. Hell, they'd kicked out the detectives. And yet, there was Gail, in normal clothes except for the shoe covers, looking like it was just another day. Holly's eyes drifted to the belt, where no badge or gun sat. Clearly Gail was off duty. She knew that. Gail was benched, off the clock entirely, until this was solved.

"How are you here?" The blurted question made Gail laugh. "Shut up! I'm serious!"

There was a chair, but Gail didn't sit. "They're only letting me stay fifteen minutes. You really want me to explain how I called in a favor with our new, less drug addicted, fabulously gay mayor? How I pointed out that unless I touch something, there's no way I could possibly get infected, and it would go a long way to calming the public when this gets out to say that the family has been to visit? Or how Ollie helped me blackmail Jarvis? That part was fun."

A smile hit Holly's face so hard, it hurt. "I'm torn between the Jarvis blackmail and the mayor favor, actually. Is he really gay?"

"Yep," grinned Gail, popping the P. "Which means I can't ditch next years' parties."

"You'll live. The public calming bit sounds like something your brother came up with."

"Ugh, Steven. He and Traci are cooking at our place." Gail rolled her eyes dramatically.

Everyone knew Gail didn't hate her brother and Holly knew she actually liked his cooking (though not baking). "Leo too?"

Surprisingly, Gail shook her head. "He's at Traci's mom's, so she can spend the night. Apparently not telling your brother and sister-in-law that your wife is in quarantine is grounds for a night being watched by an angry Traci."

Holly remembered when Traci laid into her for not telling her about the Perik copycat. "She cares about you, Gail."

"Oh I know, but she'll want to talk." Gail tossed her hands up. "I don't. Because there's nothing to talk about. Max incubation is twenty-one days. But if you guys don't have any symptoms, they're gonna let you out before."

That was optimistic. Also a reveal. "Who told you they identified the pathogen?"
"Who do you think." Gail's tone was derisive and she didn't make it a question. Her cohorts in Major Crimes told her. "Luongo. It's not on Wikipedia, you know. I was thinking about making a page."

For a moment, Holly was entertained by the idea of Gail in a wiki edit war with people about that. "I think you'd get suspended if you wrote that the first North American case was in Toronto," she teased.

Gail smirked. "Possibly," she agreed. "How are you feeling?"

That was not a question that Gail regularly asked of anyone, not even Holly. "Okay. Tired. I was so pissed off yesterday, I barely slept." Her answer made Gail sigh and look relieved. "How's Vivian?"

"Fine. You know she likes Traci."

Getting Vivian accustomed to more people had been difficult. She didn't trust people easily, if at all, and she outright was afraid of grown men. Sam and Nick were the only of their friends whom she hadn't yet gotten used to. Nick just didn't come over often at the moment. There was clearly something about Sam, though, that reminded her of her father, but Vivian had not told them about it yet and they wouldn't ask the therapist. There had to be trust. They trusted the therapist would tell them if it needed their attention, and told the woman that.

But Steve and Oliver had easily been accepted into Vivian's life. She smiled at them, played catch with them, and in the case of Oliver, let him hold her hand crossing the street. Up until that moment, Vivian had only reluctantly held Holly or Gail's. One day, though, Gail had been called for a last second meeting and Holly was still in autopsy. When Holly came to pick up Vivian an hour later, she saw Oliver walking across the street holding Vivian's hand and four ice cream cones. She, Gail, Oliver and Vivian ate them happily on the rooftop terrace off Gail's squad room. It just reinforced Gail's claim that Oliver was special.

Traci was one of those people everyone trusted. Ten minutes into meeting her, Vivian said she was nice and asked if she wanted to play Lego. It took a week of knowing Steve to get that far, and Holly was convinced it was only because Gail and Leo both put him into a headlock one afternoon. The constant rough housing between the Peck siblings never changed.

"Hey, big brain," said Gail, sounding amused. "You went off somewhere again."

Holly blushed. "I was thinking about Vivian."

Laughter, bright and cheery, bubbled up from Gail. "I'd be crushed, but I get it. I've been thinking about how much I want to just hug you."

"That's not how you communicate," Holly remarked, surprised.

"You know our relationship destroys all my normal responses, Holly. I love you." Gail held her arms out and shrugged, helplessly. "You ... You changed me. Or helped me figure out who I really wanted to be."

Sometimes Gail said things like that and Holly fell in love with her all over again. "Works both ways, honey."

Gail scuffed her bootie on the ground. "We are so sappy. I think we're making me sick."

"Plus one forever?" They smiled at each other. Holly knew she was avoiding the elephant in the room. "Look, they still aren't sure about anything. So this is just going to be a very boring week or two of sitting in a tent in a room."
Her wife made a disgruntled noise. "You have wifi now at least." Gail looked over at the nightstand. "When I was in the hospital, I hated touching the phone. Sick people touched it."

That was right... Gail hated sick with a passion. Sick people grossed her out. And yet twice she'd nursed Holly through some fairly epic colds. Destroying normal responses indeed. "They took the outside phone away. This just calls the front desk. I'm surprised I have FaceTime."

"Really? You're the medical director of the city. They probably dumped all the paperwork on you. God knows John did."

There was that too. "Not all," muttered Holly. She didn't mind as it was better than just thinking about the stupidity of life and doing nothing.

A door behind Gail opened up and a nurse called her name. "Okay. Fine. I have to go, baby. I love you. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Oh you're going to come every day?"

"Every day at one PM. Swear on my badge, I will be here to see you." Gail smiled a little shyly. "That's okay?"

Holly smiled, "Wife." They'd fallen into that as a shorthand for granting each other permission to the obvious. "Why one?"

Gail shrugged, "I don't have to pick up Vivian till three." The nurse coughed, "Oh fine, I know I know." She hesitated, waved, and walked out.

The room felt empty and a little sad. That was a sensation Holly remembered having back when they hadn't lived together. When Gail would drop her off at home, or leave after hanging out, the townhouse had at always felt a little lonely. The hospital room felt lonely now. There was something so wonderful and large about Gail's presence that it filled buildings.

"She's really nice," Andrea announced.

Holly had almost forgotten her assistant was there. "Gail? I think so..." It was so hard to think of Gail as not friendly or nice, since Holly's default view was the woman who cuddled with her on the couch in winter, sang loudly with pop music, played video games with kids, and quoted The Princess Bride. Everyone else got grumpy, bitchy, non friendly Gail. Holly got that too. But Holly also laughed at Gail's morbid jokes and told some herself. They were a good match.

Looking through their shared transparent wall, Andrea elaborated. "I mean, at work she's all business and doesn't have, um, empathy for people. She's like... She's misanthropic, and I kinda think she's a sociopath sometimes."

More than once, Gail had remarked she thought she herself was a sociopath. Every time she did, Holly pointed out she didn't do psychobabble so she wasn't qualified to judge, which made Gail laugh. "Maybe," Holly mused. "She just doesn't like people in general." Gail dealt with the world by using sarcasm and insults. They shielded her.

"But she's nice. Impatient."

"Oh she's not patient at all," agreed Holly. "She hates waiting."

Andrea grinned. "I just mean... She's different around you."
That was true and Holly nodded. "Most people are. Different. I mean, we're all different people when we're comfortable being ourselves." Picking up her iPad, Holly smiled at the photos she'd stored on it of her and Gail.

"You're different too." Andrea looked a little jealous. "I had to cancel my date."

"What'd you tell him?"

"I was stuck at work." Andrea shrugged. "Can't really tell him I was exposed."

They weren't allowed to tell anyone anything about it. Holly was lucky Gail knew, but even so, Gail couldn't tell anyone either. It had to be maddening. Probably the whole Division knew, at least, so she had some support. "I'm sure after this is over, he'll either treat you to the fanciest night ever-

"Or run screaming from Ebola Girl," grinned the assistant. "Either way I'll know, right?" They both chuckled. "How did you know Gail was, y'know, the one?"

Holly exhaled explosively. "Wow... I don't think I did until I almost moved to the States." When Gail had stuck around, helping her pack and then unpack, with no overtly ulterior motive, Holly remembered wanting nothing more than to spend all her time with the cranky blonde. Gail had been the one person who stuck by her through that stupid, stupid, situation. Half-way through the packing up, Holly started to feel like moving was the stupidest decision in her life. And then, when that had fell through, Gail stayed and helped Holly again without asking for a thing. "We'd broken up, it was ... It was really complicated. But when we got through it, I just knew I was really in love with her."

Sometimes Holly felt it was a silly story. Not knowing what she had until she nearly lost it was so fucking cliché, as Gail would have pointed out. But it was entirely true. Realizing Gail thought Holly was the best thing to ever happen to her and then having Gail stay by her as a friend... Well that hadn't ever really worked out, the friendship. They were friends, but they'd never just been friends. They'd always, inevitably, irrevocably, been headed to a different sort of relationship. In retrospect it was so obvious, so blatant. The marriage was still strange and wonderful though. And now fake-parenthood.

In the next section over, Andrea chuckled. "You make it sound like you're soulmates or something."

"Ew!" Holly made a face and imagined the one Gail would have made. "What a horrible thought. Like it takes choice all out of the matter."

"You had a choice with Gail?"

"Lots of them, sure. Still do. But I think being with her is the best choice of them."

Andrea looked thoughtful. "I can't... Yeah, I kinda envy you."

Hopping onto her bed, Holly stretched out. "I wasn't looking for anything, Andrea, it just happened." She looked over at her assistant and frowned to see her wiping her face with a towel. "You okay?"

"Oh, fine. Just stuffy. It's all ... It's humid in here."

No it wasn't. It should have been, with all the plastic, but it wasn't. The air filters were high quality and kept the flow going at a moderate pace. If anything, it was dry in the tents. "Andrea..." Holly sat up.

Their eyes met. "Maybe the filter's not working right."
"There's a thermometer in the drawer." Holly's voice was steady, which was a miracle. She watched her assistant pull it out, replace the cover, and put the sensor in her ear. They waited for the beep.

"Thirty eight and a half," Andrea said softly.

A fever.

"Okay, thank you," Gail leaned against the wall and listened to the nurse from the hospital. "If Holly- if there's any change for Dr. Stewart-"

"I'll call you right away. There's no reason to do another blood draw at this point, and this may just be stress or something they had before. Nothing to worry about yet. You can still come by at one."

"I understand," Gail assured him, thanking him again and hanging up.

It was strange how numb she felt about all of it. She should have panicked or felt angry or a hundred other things. After all, she'd totally lost her cool the day before after talking to John. But ... This was different.

Her sister-in-law cleared her throat. "So?" Traci had spent the night, insisting Gail shouldn't wait this all out alone.

"Her assistant has a fever. No other symptoms, but they can be hard to differentiate." Gail shoved her phone in her pocket.

"And Holly?"

"Still fine. See? You can go home now. I'm just going to..." Gail looked around the room. "I don't know."

Traci shook her head. "That's why I'm here. You're going to go crazy, home alone thinking about all this."

Falling onto the easy chair, Gail groaned. "I actually have some work. Butler told me to finish all John's and my paperwork so John can work the actual case of that psycho nut job running around with vials of a deadly pathogen." She sunk in the seat. It sucked.

"He has vials of the ... The ..."

"Pathogen. Three syllables, Traci."

"How the hell do you know that?"

Gail chewed her lip. "This is ... So you're a Peck now. We get to know things sometimes before they're public knowledge. Not personal stuff to Steve, he's a gossip, but if you can shut up and keep quiet, you learn everything behind the scenes."

Her classmate, friend, and now sister-in-law looked concerned. "I get it." And Gail was sure she did. No one would be leaking this stuff. "How do we know about the vials?"

Picking up her laptop, Gail brought up the photos. "Holly's assistant, Andrea, took photos."

They both studied the photos of the scene and the bag, the photo Holly admitted she'd told Andrea not to take. "Four vials... What do they say?"
"Dunno. Not even tech could get a better resolution on the pictures. Looks like they were taken from a lab, don't they?"

"Yeah, do we even have any like that in Toronto?"

"A couple."

"Okay, that kinda creeps me out," confessed Traci.

Gail passed the laptop over and let Traci read through. "Wanna know what scares the shit out of me? They get ninety days to report bringing this shit into Canada. Three months. That asshole could be all over the damn country in three months." She pushed her hands through her hair.

The picture unfolded her mind, the same way it had all night long. First you infect a couple people in Toronto. Travelers if you're smart. A Starbucks would be a good spot, maybe fast food. Put it on cups with liquids that people expect to be wet. Spread it on the planes and busses. Then from there, hit Montréal, Vancouver, Alberta, Victoria, and every other major city.

Of course Niagara would be easy access into the United States.

Ugh.

"So what's the plan?" Traci looked at Gail curiously. "You know, how are we patrolling travel and looking for this guy?"

Slouching more in her chair, Gail noted, "It's more likely that you'll get hit by falling furniture than be exposed to Ebola, let alone catch it." Traci blinked at Gail's grumbling. "We don't have a plan. Not even a real sketchy plan. We're fucking Canada, Traci! You don't get Ebola here!"

The panic and anger was inching its way back into her again. That was bad.

And worse, Traci noticed. "Hey, Gail." Traci reached over and touched her arm.

No. Nope. Holly could calm Gail down like that. The touch and the name worked from her, but from Traci, even as close friends as they were, it felt patronizing and uncomfortable. Maybe it was because that was never the relationship Gail had with her mother, and any attempt to be mommed by Traci was weird and painful.

Gail pulled her arm away and put on her professional face. Her walls were up, as Holly would say. "We don't have a CDC type action plan. I read theirs. It's pointless."

"Okay," agreed Traci, not arguing or pushing. "What time are you going to see Holly?"

Topic change accepted. "One, so I need to get out of here by thirty till." Gail winced, "And I want to call her parents."

That was a lie. She didn't want to talk to Lily or Brian about this at all. She also knew she had to call them, and wanted to get it over with. Traci left her to it, going back to the Division to see if she could help find the missing masked man with the vials of pathogen, and Gail stripped the guest bed and did laundry. Cleaning the house was calming. It was stalling.

But she wanted to call the West coast before the Drs. Stewart's headed out to work. She picked up the phone and tapped the name of her mother-in-law.

"Hello, Gail! To what do I owe the early morning call?"
"Hi, Lily," exhaled Gail. "I wanted to catch you before you left for work."

"Are you coming out for the holidays? I know it's been iffy..." Lily had been pushing the question and Holly avoided the answer, pointing out they didn't know if they'd have the right to with Vivian. Gail's argument had been that given everything, Vivian would likely do better meeting people at home.

"That's still kinda up in the air."

"Well, don't wait too long. Ticket prices go up after those Americans have their Thanksgiving."

Gail smiled a little. "I know. But ... Well that's why I wanted... That's why I needed to call you."

"That sounds serious."

"It is." Gail silently went over what she was allowed to tell Lily, which wasn't a lot. "So, Holly's in the hospital right now, in isolation." The silence fell on the other end of the line. "She was exposed to a virus, her and her assistant, so they're in a bubble tent until they're sure she's okay. Probably a few more days."

Lily sucked in her breath through her teeth, making a whistle. She'd heard the older woman do that a few times before. Holly did it too, now and then. "Why didn't she call?"

Technically Holly could have FaceTimed or Skyped, but she'd not wanted to. "She doesn't know I called," temporized Gail.

"That does sound like Holls," sighed Lily. "Doesn't want us to worry."

"Neither do I," Gail noted.

Her mother-in-law surprised her. "Oh no, dear, you're not. Thank you. I appreciate it. Sometimes... You know, I think it's our fault that she runs off and does everything herself."

Gail had to agree that Holly was independent. "I try to keep her grounded. I think we're a good team."

"You, my dear, are like a cat."

Seriously? That fucking analogy was going to follow her forever. "Did Holly tell you that?"

"What? No!" Lily sounded honestly surprised. "I just think you're very touchy and aloof, but if you decide that you like someone, then they're your person."

A somewhat different analogy. "Oh. Okay..."

"Can you tell me what she was exposed to? Or ... Do you even know?"

"I'm not allowed to work the case, Lily. Conflict of interest." Also Gail would be tempted to put a serious hurt on the idiot who infected her wife if they caught him. No. When they caught him.

"I suppose that makes sense." Lily sighed again. "How are you and Vivian holding up?"

"We're fine," lied Gail. She wasn't but she didn't want Lily to fly out unless she had to. "It's just like when Holly goes out of town for a couple days. No big."

The noise Lily made was 'disapproving mother.' She knew Gail was lying. "If you change your
mind, Gail, I'd be happy to come help you."

"God, no. Please, I have Traci and Steve and Ollie and everyone, I'm good." That part was true. "Everything's totally under control, I promise." And that was probably a lie. Gail wasn't sure she had herself under control.

Accepting that, Lily thanked her for calling and Gail hung up. She knew the mother didn't believe her and wondered if Vivian was buying it either. It would just be so much easier if Holly was here and no one was sick.

Holly flinched when Gail explained she'd called Holly's parents. She understood why of course, but the last thing she wanted was more people worrying about her. Looking at Gail through the sheet of plastic, Holly sighed.

"They're not coming, are they?"

"No, I don't think so," confirmed Gail. Only Gail had been able to visit her. Rachel and Lisa had FaceTimed her, making sure to entertain her, but only Gail had successfully pushed her way in.

"That's good," Holly decided, but she noticed Gail was looking a little stressed and worried. "Hey, no panicking, Detective."

"Trying my best," sighed Gail.

Holly frowned. "You know you're not alone out there."

Of all things, Gail laughed. "Oh I know! Traci and Steve, Ollie and Celery, Chloe and Dov, Rachel, John, Chris, Andy, even stupid Nick and BitchTits. Everyone's checking on me, making sure I'm okay. It's like they're expecting me to fall apart!"

Which explained the stress actually. Gail probably wanted to shoot them by now. "Honey, you know they care about us. They care about you."

Gail exhaled deeply. Closing her eyes, she nodded at Holly. "Yeah, I know. I ... I haven't told Viv why you're here."

Oh. Holly blinked and sat down. For some reason she thought Gail would have told the girl right away when she picked her up. But this made sense. There was only a scare, a possibility. Now there was a positive confirmation of a filovirus exposure and the very likely reality of infection. Of course, only Andrea showed and signs of illness... Holly looked over at where Andrea was sleeping with headphones on. Sleeping or pretending to sleep. It was some privacy.

"What are you going to tell her?"

Gail sighed. "I was thinking of saying you got exposed something like chicken pox." There had been a scare at the school right as it started, and since they hadn't known if Vivian had it yet, she'd been sent home so she wasn't exposed any more. Holly had explained about viruses while they'd gone to the doctor's for a check up and some shots.

Absently, Holly noted, "We could use that in our argument, you know. Her parents and grandparents didn't even get her immunized..." Her wife was giving her a very droll look. "What?"

"You got exposed to a freaking filovirus, Holly," Gail gritted out. "I think any arguments about public safety might fall flat."
Holly huffed, "And I followed protocol right away to limit the potential spread!" Gail's lips quirked. "Shut up," laughed Holly, realizing her wife wasn't fully serious.

"Seriously, Holly, I'm not touching that one. They're already bitching I have a dangerous job. I don't want that door open."

With a sigh, Holly nodded. "Okay, fine, I get it." She pushed hair away from her face. "What did Dad say?"

Gail stretched her legs out in front of her. "Brian said that he knew someone in the CDC and would get you guys fast tracked for the vaccine."

That sounded like her father. Then the words sunk in. Her parents knew about the specifics? "You told them about the virus!?"

Her wife smirked, "Of course not! God, how dumb do you think I am?"

Holly shook her fist at Gail. "You suck." The smirk didn't fade. "You need to tell Viv, honey."

That wiped the smile off. "Yeah, yeah, I know," sighed Gail, looking away. "I will tonight."

It sucked. Holly wanted to be curled up on a couch with her arms around Gail. "You're doing fine, honey," she promised. "You know that, right?"

"I do," Gail tilted her head, "It's a lot, you know."

It was and Holly knew it. "Can I be horrible?"

"God, please."

"I'm glad I'm the one in here."

The blonde startled. Holly knew it was a totally uncharitable and mean thought, to dump all this horror and pain on her wife, but Gail was more equipped to handle Vivian in this case. It was easier just waiting to find out than it was to deal with the fall out. If it had been Gail in here, Holly would have been a mess, sobbing on her mother's shoulder every night, terrified she'd be left alone. There was always a part of Gail that was prepared for loss like that. No matter how many better days Holly brought her to, the years of abandonment had left her wife scarred.

Gail exhaled. "Okay," she finally said. "I can see that." They looked away from each other for a while. "I handle disaster better," Gail said quietly. "Normally. But this is you, baby. I... I want to punch Luongo in the damn river."

Goofy as it was, Holly understood the meaning. "That's normal," she said soothingly.

"I know that," grumbled Gail. "That's not what I meant."

A couple years ago, Gail had admitted to having issues with understanding what she was mad about. Misdirected emotions, generally showing up in the form of bad decisions on tequila, but once Gail stopped drinking it cropped up in the shape of anger issues. It wasn't news to Holly even then, but she'd appreciated the self reflective side of Gail.

It wasn't even that Gail didn't control her own anger, it was she had trouble understanding her own feelings and emotions, got frustrated, and reacted poorly. She was getting much better at it. Gail was able to identify when she was being unreasonable, when her PTSD had charge of her, and was able
to walk away and cool down. It still happened, even with Vivian around, but Gail was reined in more and somehow managed to never scare the girl.

Knowing that didn't help her nightmares much. After Perik had died, Gail went almost four months without a panic attack or a nightmare or a single flashback. Then, on a routine check, some half-brained thug had kicked a swinging door into Gail's face. John had described it as a volcano. He didn't even see Gail move but the next thing he knew, his partner had the man on the ground with his arm torqued up his back. It had taken a while to pry Gail off the guy. They made the arrest and the man had been their guy, but Gail had been shaken badly and confessed to Holly that she really didn't remember anything from the moment the door hit her to the moment John pulled her off the guy. Worse, after that the nightmares came back. They weren't as bad, or so Gail said, and she'd started writing them down. The downside to that was Gail pretty much always got up for an hour after having one.

"Sorry." Holly laced her fingers together.

Gail stared at her knees. "I don't have an interrogation room to haul you into," she said at length. "And the courier can't even come here, so that doesn't even work."

Holly smiled softly. Gail was terrified for her and couldn't do anything. "Honey, this is so not my job. I'll go back out there, but I'm going to make a uniformed office stick by me like fucking glue."

"I can support that," Gail said softly.

They talked about little things until the nurse came to shoo Gail out and get Andrea's temperature. Holly tried not to listen to Andrea and the nurse, giving her some privacy in an embarrassing moment, and thought about how it must feel for Gail to be in a place she herself had come to terms with a few years ago. Living with someone who lived at risk all the time was hard, it was wounding, and it was draining. At least Gail already had a therapist.

Holly's iPad beeped at her and she frowned. Gail had sent her an iMessage with a photo. The preview showed what looked like a Mountie uniform. Tapping expand, Holly's eyes widened to see her wife in the uniform. Holy crap. Her skin felt hot and Holly knew her temperature had just jumped. Gail had hinted that she had these photos, but she was saving them for a special occasion. It sucked that this was the special occasion, but Holly did appreciate it. There was the indomitable smile, ear to ear with canines showing, the short hair showing from under a broad brimmed hat tilted to one side. Gail's hip was cocked, making her gun more obvious, and the silly things on the pants looked even sillier. But it hugged Gail's curves and the jacket did flattering things in the same way Gail's dress uniform did.

She tapped in a reply as fast as possible.

Please tell me you kept that uniform.

Gail's reply came a moment later.

You know that's against the law.

That was depressing, but Holly made the image her new contact photo for Gail then and there. Damn she was beautiful.

You look stunning.

I'll hold you to that when you come home.
A different nurse came into her room, interrupting her thoughts and taking her temperature and a blood draw. Since Holly still felt fine, if tired, they weren't terribly worried about her, and that was comforting.

Holly glanced over at Andrea's section. Her assistant was already curled up again, seemingly asleep. Please let that just be a normal fever and mundane. Please be nothing more.
Playing For Keeps

The doorbell rang. "I swear to fucking God," snarled Gail snapping at the door. She'd finally convinced Vivian to go to sleep. The six year old had been incredibly twitchy about every doorbell and phone ring all day long. Gail threw the towel onto the counter and stomped to the door. "Steven, I told you not to come back. I will hurt you in ways you've never dream- Oh."

It had been a very long day and Gail had regretted how she told Vivian about what was going on. The day before, the fourth day of Holly in the hospital, she'd picked Vivian up from school and sat with her outside the house with milkshakes. Very carefully, Gail explained that Holly wasn't going to be home for a while because she might be sick. When Vivian demanded details, Gail said Holly had been exposed to something like chicken pox, but since no one else had it before, Holly had to stay away until the doctors were sure she was okay and couldn't infect them.

Vivian had seemed to understand, but the next morning the school had called Gail before lunch saying that Viv had gotten into a screaming match with another child. When the teachers pulled Vivian aside to cool off, she'd broken down crying and they wondered if everything was alright. Gail had to explain the public version of where Holly was, but took Vivian out of school for the rest of the day.

They'd had a long talk after that. They talked about how it was very scary that Holly might get sick, that Gail was scared too, and that it hurt a lot to have someone you loved be away and not know what was going to happen. And then Vivian did something she hadn't before. Vivian climbed into Gail's lap and wrapped her arms around Gail's neck. Very carefully, Gail returned the hug. She kept the hug light, non-restrictive, and tried to be comforting.

That night, Steve and Traci came by with Leo and had dinner. They made noises about staying over again, but Gail firmly said she and Vivian wanted a quiet night. An hour after leaving, Steve had come back, interrupting the episode of Doctor Who that the two were watching. He'd wanted to make sure Gail really was alright. It took a while to chase him off, and he'd still called twice more after.

But at her door now was not Steve. Not Traci. Not even Chloe, who'd taken Gail out for lunch. Her mother stood there with a shoulder bag and a guilty expression.

As she stared at her mother, who looked just as uncomfortable as Gail felt, the sound of small, slippered feet bounded down the stairs. She felt a small hand ease into hers as she continued to stare at her mother. "Now you look alike," Vivian said firmly.

Absently, Gail squeezed the little hand in hers. Elaine cleared her throat. "Is everything alright? I can come over another time..."

"I thought you were Steve... He was here the last couple days..."

Elaine nodded, "Yes, and I'm here tonight." She held up a small bag and Gail felt her world turn backwards. "You're not staying here alone, Gail."

The tone was the one Gail remembered from growing up. Her mother was firm and serious and stern and there would be no negotiations. She was about to protest, point out that her mother hadn't shown up when Gail was in the hospital years ago, when Vivian asked, "Did you have dessert?"

Both Gail and Elaine stared at the girl. "No," admitted Elaine. "I have eaten dinner, considering the
Gail pressed her free hand to her face. She was not equipped for this conversation. "Vivian," she grimaced. "Fine. Two cookies. And I'm serious. You're going to school tomorrow."

This was how Gail found herself having cocoa and cookies with her mother and her crowne ward at nine PM on a weeknight. The adults actually had coffee, which Vivian begged for one sip of before bed. Per usual, she made a grossed out face and declined a full cup. She just wanted to know what the fuss was about, after all. Two cookies done and Gail walked with Vivian back upstairs, repeating the process of making sure everything was alright and lounging in the door while Vivian squirmed under the covers.

"Gail," she asked, her voice quiet and shy. "When can Holly come home?"

"Soon as they figure out if she's sick or not. The doctor said it was probably going to be another week." Gail was trying to be assuring but frankly she didn't know for sure either and was just as worried. "Go to sleep, okay? I'll leave my door open."

Vivian nodded and turned off her light only after Gail partly closed her bedroom door. There was still no tucking in with the girl and Gail tried not to take it personally. She looked back at her bedroom door and sighed. The room was too damn empty. It was empty, missing that Holly goofy laugh, that smirking smile when she quirked her lips to one side, her droll humor... Ugh. Days three through five had been no better than one or two.

Downstairs, her mother had loaded the dishwasher and made tea. Gail could smell that it was the way she liked it and sighed. "You know you don't have to stay," she told Elaine, pushing her hair away from her face. It was getting longer and while Gail hadn't let it grow past her chin in years, any time it got in her eyes it felt 'long' to her.

"Do you want me to leave?"

The reply was on her lips. Yes. She wanted a quiet house and a respite from people offering sympathy and hugs and all manner of things. Elaine wouldn't do that. In fact, Elaine was a near perfect buffer to everyone else on the planet. And damn it, it was nice to have someone around who cared. It was nice to have a parent there. "Yes, but I hope you don't," confessed Gail.

Elaine smiled and pushed a tea mug towards Gail. "I thought the hordes would get you down. I made certain your brother was aware I was here."

"Oh good, that'll spread around like herpes."

"Your brother is quite the gossip."

They shared an amused look. "Thank you," Gail said grudgingly.

Her mother nodded. "Well. I can tell you from experience, being home alone with a child makes any adult presence palatable." Gail quirked a smile at her mother and nodded.

They ended up sitting at the kitchen table with tea, saying nothing through two cups of tea. Finally Gail cleared her throat. "Chess or scrabble?"

"Scrabble," her mother said, relieved. "So long as you promise not to flip the board over again."

"I was ten!" Gail shook her head and set up the board.
With a smirk, Elaine shook the bag and pulled out a tile. "You spent the next week memorizing the Scrabble dictionary."

Gail stuck her hand in. "Mother went first. "Only the words for big points in the game, and I had no idea what they meant." She picked her tiles and set them up. "English only, no cop words."

"Agreed." Elaine held up a finger. "No fancy medical words." Smirking, Gail nodded.

Halfway through the game, there was a creak at the stairs. Gail didn't look up, but simply asked, "Do you want some tea?" She caught the arched eyebrow from her mother and gestured for Elaine to stand down.

Mumbling a no, Vivian pulled a chair up beside Gail and watched them play for a little while. Without a word, Gail handed over the pen and Vivian took over score keeping once the rules were explained. She proudly told Elaine that she was top of her class in math. After half an hour, and a yawn, Gail escorted the child back upstairs and into bed for the third time.

With sleepy eyes, Vivian asked, "You gonna sleep?"

"Nah, I'm a vampire." That got a giggle and Gail smiled. "After the game with my mom. Don't worry about me, I don't need a lot of sleep."

"C'cept on weekends." Vivian climbed into bed and paused. "Would you.. Would you tuck me in?"

Gail blinked a few times at the request and fought down the smile. Play it cool, Peck. "Sure." She crossed the room and pulled the blanket up. She'd tucked in children before, like Leo and Sophie, and even foster children who'd stayed for a day or weeks. But this time it felt a little different. It was like that first smile she'd gotten from Vivian. It felt like things were becoming right. "No reading, okay?"

"Kay," promised Vivian, eyes already closing. Gail gently brushed the hair away from Vivian's forehead. They didn't say anything else, though Gail lingered to make sure the girl was indeed falling asleep this time.

At the door, Gail paused. "Sweet dreams, kiddo."

Back downstairs, her mother was looking at the photos on the fridge. "She doesn't sleep well?"

"Sometimes. Some nights are fine. When she's scared or upset, she wakes up."

Elaine ran her fingers across the photo of Gail at this year's Pride Parade. She'd gotten a sunburn for once, but Vivian had enjoyed watching with Holly, and Gail had managed to ditch some of the parties. "You were like that. Steven slept through someone driving a car into the pool."

That sounded like Steve. That also explained a weird memory of a car in the pool from when she was about Vivian's age. "Can't tell you about Steve, but I'm still a crappy sleeper."

"So am I," admitted Elaine with a smile. "How's it ... Is it going well?"

Gail sat down and sipped the tea. "I think so?" She wasn't sure. The hug, the sitting in Gail's lap, and the tucking in had all been private things. As if only Gail was allowed to see that part of Vivian. They were very similar, she and Vivian. "It's a lot of work. I mean, way more than I thought."

Her mother smirked. "Everyone feels that way. And fitting in two jobs... I didn't take the full maternity leave with either of you. I regret that a little."
Really, Gail couldn't imagine her mother taking the two years granted by law for the both of them. Her career would never be where it had been if she had. "Well I was in the NICU for months," sighed Gail.

"I should have taken more off, just to recoup from the surgery," Elaine replied. "And to spend time with you. Maybe we would have been closer if I had."

The admission surprised her. "Was that a Peck idea? Don't get too attached to the sickly kid?"

Elaine's lips pressed together in the thin, pained, line she got when speaking of Pecks.

"To a degree, yes. There's a fine line between being empathic and being a punching bag for your emotions."

That sounded familiar. "I thought we were supposed to be wise."

"A Peck should be more empathic than intelligent."

"Well that explains a lot," Gail said dryly. And after a heartbeat, she and her mother laughed. "Seriously? They thought I was too clever and would be a bad cop because I was too smart? What an pack of idiots."

Elaine shrugged. "I went along with it. I can't claim any great smarts there, Gail."

That was true. "But that wasn't all of why you ... When you stopped ..." How do you ask your own mother why she distanced herself from you?

"You don't like people."

"Generally no. They're stupid, selfish, and will hurt you."

"It was threefold." Elaine sipped her tea. "I didn't hold you until you were almost four months old. We never connected as parent and child, so I was very... I was very susceptible to influence when it came to raising you. Apparently freakishly intelligent Pecks show up from time to time, and the traditional way of handling them was to force them to learn from silence. To make them hurt until they saw pain in other people and then learned to care about people."

Gail screwed her face up. "Wait a second, I read about that in one of Holly's journals... Some psychobabble about how you learn suffering through silence?"

Elaine nodded. "It had some valid point," she allowed. "I know you think of yourself as bitchy and icy, aloof even, but you were very unpopular in first grade because you just refused to connect with people."

"I'm not very good at it now," muttered Gail. Her mother made a noise that neither agreed with nor argued the point. "Do you think it worked?"

Staring at her teacup, Elaine nodded. "I do. But I think it was the wrong choice."

They sat quietly, playing their tiles on the board in silence. "You said threefold ... What was the third?" She could understand the bad advice and the non-connection. Those things made sense.

Tired, pained, eyes looked up at her. "For many years I put myself before you and Steve. And that was entirely my decision. And it was wrong. I saw both of you as a means to further my career."

"Investments in the future?"
Her mother winced. "No, that was Bill's feeling. Mine was that with children in good standing in the force, I would be a more attractive suggestion for chief." She sighed loudly. "I was a terrible mother, and I really am sorry, Gail."

Gail toyed with her tiles. "Well. Can't go back," she replied. "Not without a TARDIS. And you can't cross your time stream." Elaine didn't seem to get the joke, but she didn't ask for details. Holly would have laughed. The pang of not having Holly around hit her again. Turning, Gail looked up the stairs briefly. "How do you know you're doing it right? With kids?"

Elaine put her tiles on the board, spelling out 'recliner' and getting on a double word score. "It really is one of those things you can't be sure of for years, you know."

"I just don't want to hurt her more." Gail studied her words and smiled as she put down 'lunchbox' off of Elaine's C and got the triple letter score for the X. "She's six and her life has been pretty sucky already."

"For what it's worth, I think you and Holly are doing the right things." They both paused, breathing in the absence of the goofy doctor. Elaine looked at the board. "Lunchbox... Isn't that what you call Holly some times?"

"Yeah, she didn't have her ID badge on, the first time we met at a crime scene, and she had that goofy forensic kit, so I called her lunchbox."

Elaine rolled her eyes. "That sounds like you," she smiled. "You always liked the nerds."

"Felt sorry for them," muttered Gail, but she smiled.

They played the rest of the game quietly, Gail eeking out a win by less than thirty points. As it inched towards midnight, they talked about quiet and simple things, like the car bomb case. Now that it was settled, Gail was able to share the more fun details. Her mother appreciated the story and gave Gail one of her own detective days, where she'd had to infiltrate a street racing ring. Gail was fairly certain that most people wouldn't find this a normal mother/daughter conversation, but it was actually the most fun she'd had with her mother in recent memory. Hell, it was the most fun since she'd turned double digits.

By one AM, they realized they should both get some rest. Gail showed her mother to the guest room (mentally cheering that she'd put on clean sheets) and checked on Vivian. The girl had kicked her blanket off and was curled up in the corner of the bed. Gail sighed and walked in, picking up the blanket to cover her up again. She was surprised to see her mother still standing in the doorway to the guest room.

"When she first moved in with you, she was very distant."

Gail pulled the door to Vivian's room to where it was cracked a little bit open. "She was," she agreed. "Still is. Viv doesn't trust people easily. I can't blame her."

Her mother looked thoughtful. "If anyone would understand being betrayed by the people who should love you unconditionally, Gail, it would be you."

They looked at each other, awkward and unsure. "I know what you mean," she finally said to her mother. Pressing her lips together, Gail finally fought for the guts to ask the question that had been dogging her since her mother had started to step back into her life. "What … What happened to you?"

Elaine exhaled loudly through her nose. "What happened when? That's a very large question, Gail."
True. She pointed at the ground, "The you now is really … you're not the you I remember growing up. So … which you is you? What happened to that? It's not just that you got divorced. I know that."

Her mother couldn't meet her eyes. That was interesting. "You weren't the only one under a lot of pressure to live up to the Peck name, you know. I think …" She paused and looked rueful. "My therapist thinks that I got lost on the way. Somewhere in trying to be a Peck, I forgot who I was. I forgot I had dreams other than the agenda of a father."

Gail blinked. Her mother couldn't possibly mean her own father, not with that wording. "Grandpa Harold?" She barely remembered him except that he had been a very daunting personality and a dick when her uncle Gary had died. The former police chief had died of a heart-attack just days after retirement when she was around Sophie's age. Most Pecks died in uniform or shortly after retirement.

With a nod, Elaine crossed her arms. It wasn't a defensive motion for an attack from Gail, it was protective from something else. Something about all this still hurt her mother and the arms held her together. Thinking about this hurt her mother, and that was very odd to realize. The expression on her face was that thin one. The bad-Peck one. That was Harold? Something terrible had happened with him, something that had made Elaine never allow her or Steve to be alone with their grandfather and hurt her mother badly. Her world felt a little rocked.

That reminded her of something Sarah Mills had mentioned to her years and years ago, before she'd been suspended. Everyone's version of a story includes parts the others missed. Her mother's version of the story of what happened, from Gail's childhood all the way through Elaine's retirement, was different from Gail's and Steve's. What happened to Elaine, what made her make certain choices, was still a bit of a mystery, until Elaine chose to reveal them. And maybe, maybe like Gail there was a desire to let the past be. Let the old secrets die with her and not force others to carry that burden on. It wasn't a cheerful thought.

But all Elaine said was, "I wanted a career in politics. I still do. That's my dream, Gail. To be mayor."

"Still?"

"Still," confirmed Elaine. "Unlikely now, I know."

"Well, after Rob Ford…" They shared a smirk. "But I get it. Top brass in the police would be a pretty awesome stepping stone." And it made perfect sense. The Pecks would be a perfect place to position one's self. It would serve Elaine's goals and the weird Toronto-Domination plan the Pecks seemed to have. "Aren't you going to lose their support, though? I mean, I'm the gay black sheep."

Elaine shook her head. "I'm not worried," she said firmly. "We're holding each other in mutual détente right now."

That was amusing. "That seems fitting, actually." It didn't fully explain the personality shift, except it did. Gail totally understood losing yourself in the Peckspectations. She glanced at Vivian's room, feeling adamant that she never push the girl the way she'd been. Even if she wanted to be a firefighter. That reminded her. "I didn't see you at Dan's funeral."

Surprised, Elaine blurted, "You went? You hate funerals more than weddings."

Gail laughed in an unfunny way. "It was the same day as Callaghan's. Andy needed moral support and I figure I might need the favor returned one day…"

"Attending the funeral of your ex-fiancé who cheated on you? Nicholas didn't, you know."
"Cheat? Oh, no, I did that. But I meant the ex who was kind of a friend in a weird way." She shrugged, catching her mother's slight surprise to learn Gail had been the cheater. Apparently Blackstone had never been on her payroll. "Dating other cops was way more a pain in the ass than non-cops, just FYI."

Drolly, her mother replied, "I'll keep that in mind." The silence crept in and Gail was about to say good night when her mother dropped a bomb. "Stockholm Syndrome." Off of Gail's stunned expression, she added, "That's the term you were looking for. How you get lost in an abusive relationship where you do what they want to the exclusion of your own self." Elaine looked up over Gail's shoulder. "I can't classify those Pecks in any other way than abusive."

Neither could Gail, frankly. "Those Pecks?"

Her mother nodded. "They are those Pecks. You are not. I'm … I'm very … I want to say proud, but I don't think that's right. You're succeeding at everything that matters, Gail. Even this shit storm."

It was perhaps the first time she'd heard her mother swear outside of a high-speed car chase. Gail lost the fight and smiled. "God, I hope so. I feel like I'm just hanging on."

"We always do, sweetheart. Get some sleep. You've got mom work in the morning." Elaine jerked her chin at Vivian's room and stepped back into the guest room.

Strangely enough, Gail slept soundly that night, woken up by her alarm at the 'normal' time. Her mother was impressed and amused to find Gail up and awake and mobile before seven AM, carefully teasing that she hadn't know Gail was on voluntary speaking terms with mornings. Vivian was surprised to see Elaine there, having coffee with Gail, and made another go for having pancakes since it was clearly a special morning. Negotiations were lost (pancakes remained a weekend treat) and Gail managed to get her off to school at the normal time.

And that was about the only good part of next few days of having Holly be stuck in isolation.

"Why the fuck didn't you call me?!" She knew she shouldn't yell at the doctor, but here he was telling her this shit while she was actually at the hospital. There had been no warning, no lead up, to any of this. He'd just walked up and told her Holly had a fever.

"We hoped it would go down," explained the doctor. He looked about twelve, which wasn't helping Gail rein in her attitude at all. In fact she let go and snapped.

"Look, Doogie Howser," snarled Gail. "This is my wife you're talking about. If she has a fever or an ingrown toenail and you morons even think it's related to this Luongo shit, yes I know what it is, you damn well get off your ass and tell me."

There was an amused cough behind the doctor. Gail's eyes flicked over his shoulder and she spotted the face of a more experienced (one hoped) doctor. "Ryan, let me." The grey-haired doctor ushered the infant one away and held out his hand. "Detective Peck, I'm sorry about that. I'm Dr. Otto Wainwright."

Gail eyed the hand suspiciously but shook it nonetheless. "Tell me you're in charge of Doogie over there."

"I am. In fact, I'm overseeing all viral outbreaks like this in Canada."

"So why am I just meeting you now?"

"I was in Atlanta with the samples," he sighed. "Frankly, with a possibility of this magnitude of a
disaster, it seemed important to stay with them. As you know, supportive care is really all we can do at this point."

That was a good answer. She liked him. "Alright," begrudged Gail, shoving her hands in her pockets. The doctor did not, as many other had, immediately wash his hands with antibacterial sanitizer. Interesting.

"Let me catch you up— Actually, what do you know? Inspector Butler warned me about you this morning."

Gail rolled her eyes. "I know it's Luongo River Fever and yes, I know what the hell that actually means. As of yesterday, Holly's blood didn't show any markers of infection, but she and Andrea were exposed and since Andrea's got a fever it means she might have it, but you don't know."

Dr. Wainwright pursed his lips. "We do know. Ms. DeSails had a positive indication in her blood work today."

Oh dear fucking god. Gail heard that horrible white noise in her head again and tuned right out. She couldn't help it. The terror of an unknown demon crawled out of the pit she shoved it in every single morning. As a child and a rookie, it had been unnamed and bore no face, dragging her parents and family friends out of their squads and into death in her childish nightmares. But for the adult Gail, she'd known it by name for too long and too well, brought face to face with it by Perik, and now she saw it hovering over her heart, looming towards Holly. The possibility of death.

This was not how it was supposed to be!

Holly wasn't the one who lived dangerously, and she wasn't the one who was at risk. That was Gail. Gail took doors and radios to the faces, got shot at, spat on, and cuffed people twice her size. Holly used that amazing mind, that weird brain, to solve sciency crimes and flaunt her degrees at idiots like Gerald. This was all wrong. Holly wasn't sick, she couldn't get sick!

A hand touched her elbow and she startled, the world slapping back into normal colors and sound levels. The doctor looked surprised, jerking his hand back. "And Holly has a fever," she said slowly, rubbing her elbow as if she hadn't just had a panic attack and freaked the hell out.

Her reaction clearly set him off, confused him. Tough shit. The only reason Gail was able to function half the time that first year after Perik was that she was able to tamp down that crazy. She wasn't breaking down in front of him, as much as Holly would give her crap for swallowing her emotions. "She hasn't yet tested positive, but it's not as if we expected that—"

Gail cut him off and recited, "The virus is detected in blood only after the onset of symptoms, usually fever." She sighed and squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. "I told you I knew, okay. I know. Holly has a fever. It could be ten days before we know if she has it."

"Three is far more likely," assured the doctor. Gail wasn't really sure that was calming and gave him a glower. He had the grace to wince. "Sorry. Would you like to see Dr. Stewart now?"

She did, but she had to ask a couple serious questions first. "Have Andrea's … Has she gotten worse?"

"No, thankfully. No vomiting, no … er … well you know." He waved a hand. "It's possible she's going to be extremely lucky, but we can't be sure yet."

Okay. That was good. Now for the next one. "Are there any known survivors of this? I read about how the US is testing using the antibodies from Ebola survivors to treat people."
Dr. Wainwright looked impressed. "You mean the convalescent serum? It's been somewhat effective, but you're right about exactly what our issue here is. We don't have access to any survivors from whom we can harvest antibodies."

Harvest was such an icky, painful word. Gross. "Unless Andrea survives."

"Oh yes. If she does we'll use her antibodies for Dr. Stewart." There was the slightest hesitation. If. That was a heavy two letter word.

"Is ZMapp an option?" Gail felt like she'd memorized every single treatment possibility for all the various Ebola type diseases.

The doctor's head wobbled side to side. "Maybe. The effect of that and something like TKM-Ebola on healthy people has yet to be safely confirmed, so I wouldn't feel confident giving it to Dr. Stewart, or anyone else not confirmed to be infected, until that was resolved. We're considering ZMapp for Ms. DeSails, if it progresses any further."

Gail had heard about TKM-Ebola, it was even made in Canada, but it had failed Phase 1 human testing back in 2014. Apparently giving it to people who were healthy ended up with them experiencing flu-like symptoms. The US had, however, seen fit to give it to people who had been positively infected by Ebola later that same year. It hadn't helped.

The doctor was answering all the questions she had in the best way possible. "I like you," she informed Dr. Wainwright. "Keep Doogie in line."

That settled, they let her in to talk to Holly, under strict orders from Doogie to let her rest of she needed to. Gail muttered she'd nursed Holly through the flu before, getting a grin from the nurses.

"Why did the nurse just call Dr. Ryan 'Doogie'?" Holly was sitting up in her bed, looking cranky and sweaty.

"Why are you making that sound like its my fault?" Gail tried to sound offended, but the nurses leaving the room were laughing. "I didn't know Ryan was his last name," she muttered.

Holly quirked a smile and Gail returned it. "You are in so much trouble."

Sitting down, Gail yawned. "I'm too tired to take offense."

"You're tired? I'm the one who's sick."

So Gail explained about Vivian's outburst at school and the subsequent sleepless night. Also her mother's strange appearance. Holly's expression was worried and guarded. "Today seems to be okay, though. I called the school before I came here, and they said Vivian's been fine all day." Wiping her face off, Holly sniffled. She'd been crying. How could Gail not see that? "Hey, Holly, this isn't your fault!"

"Really? That's your argument?" Holly was upset and angry, her face red. "I got sick. She flipped out when I was exposed. How's she going to react when she finds out I'm sick?"

Gail sighed. They were going to kick her out today if she agitated Holly too much. "You have a fever. Unless it gets worse, I'm not telling her anything more, baby. She's six, I'm not-"

But Holly cut her off. "That's the point, Gail! She's six! She had a horrible- her life was crap, and we're supposed to make it better! All we're doing is making everything worse." Holly's words got caught in her throat. "What are we doing? Thinking we can make anyone's life better? Look at our
lives!"

God, this was hard. "Holly," Gail spoke quietly. "Viv hugged me. She wants to be closer to us, and yeah, this sucks. This is pretty much one of the worst ways to get there, but ... Life isn't perfect. It's not a fairytale. It's messy, it's painful, and ... Maybe this moment isn't making her life better. But seeing us work through it is. Seeing us not give up is. So when you're healthy, you're gonna shut up and let me bring Vivian here to see the awesome space bubble tent."

Holly sniffled wetly. "She hugged you?"

"Sat in my lap and hugged me, swear to god."

"You're an atheist," muttered Holly.

Gail smirked. "Or the anti-Christ, depending on who you ask." Snorting, Holly blew her nose. "That was attractive."

"Shut up. I can't even take a shower."

They were apparently over this outburst. Good. "Just don't get your snot on the iPad," she teased.

Holly fixed her with a glare, "I'd seriously kill for a shower right now, Gail, I'm not even joking."

Smiling at her wife, Gail held her hands up. "Maybe you'll have better luck convincing Vivian it's not going to kill her."

"Still?" Holly blew her nose again. "It's just water!"

"I know!" Neither of them understood why the child hated showers or baths. She loved swimming, she loved the rain, but just the idea of bathing made her cry. It would be hilarious if it wasn't so gross.

They talked a little longer, but Holly clearly was flagging. "Gail, don't take this the wrong way…"

"You're not half as drunk as you usually sound when you're really sick, you know," she teased.

Holly rewarded her with a smile. "I feel like I was … run over. Everything just aches right now."

Muscle aches. Swollen joints. Headache. Fever. All signs of the first effects of Luongo River Fever. Or just Holly being sick. She'd had all that before once, when she'd had a nasty case of the flu.

Forcing her voice to be lighter, Gail nodded. "I understand, baby. Sleep. Get some rest. You can FaceTime me tonight if you feel up for it. I'm pretty much glued to my phone right now anyway."

She gave Holly her biggest, toothiest grin.

The smile in return was waning. "I love you, Gail."

"I love you too, Holly. I'll see you tomorrow."

When she left the room, she knew she couldn't face the doctors right now. They'd tell her what she already knew, what the odds were and what the chances were. They'd tell her they didn't know anything. Gail went to the parking lot and sat in her car. Jesus. Folding her arms on the steering wheel, Gail tried to fight back the fear. This wasn't a panic attack. Those were fears based in memory and brought on by similarities. A panic attack was unfounded fear, stuff your stupid brain made up without asking permission.
This was the fear you had when someone aimed a shotgun at your face, or a guy with ten inches and fifty pounds on you threatened you. Or when you stopped a door with your face and were choked out... Waking up strapped to a table. Being injected by an unknown drug... Those were the same as this moment, this feeling.

This was actual, honest to god, piss your pants, fear and nothing could be done about it.

She couldn't talk it down, get it not to jump, or convince it not to shoot. There was no way to take the hit in the vest and keep going. There was no cruiser to hide behind. There was no backup.

If this was how normal people felt every day then Gail hated it.

Gail swore and pounded her steering wheel a few times until her hand stung. The pain helped her focus, though she knew her therapist would chastise her for that. You weren't supposed to use pain to block out more pain. Or sex. Or tequila. Or a hundred other things that were shitty coping mechanisms.

But her regular methods, her normal outlets were unavailable. She had gotten far too used to having Holly there to lean on when she was freaking out. She had come to rely on those steady hands to fix her hair disaster or hold her still and stop her. Her wife would hold her close while she cried, or freaked out for no good reason, and tell her she was okay.

Holly was her partner. Holly came when no one else did. Holly was always there for her, supporting and helping and being exactly what Gail never expected from anyone before. Holly cared about her mental, emotional, and physical health. Hell, Holly loved her. Like actually, totally, really, loved her enough to marry her and not leave her at the altar.

And now, Holly needed her support. She needed Gail to be her full partner. She needed for Gail to be the strong one in the storm, to hold steady and not flip out, and Gail was epically failing.

"Shit!" She shouted it loudly and smashed her fist into the wheel one more time.

That hurt. A lot.

And that pain did its job.

She could fail at her job a million times and not care anymore, but she couldn't fail Holly and she couldn't fail Vivian, and most of all she couldn't fail herself again.

As terrifying as all this was, she had to be the strong one and she had to keep on protecting her people as much as she could. Gail had no other choice.
Playing Devil's Advocate

Holly woke up feeling stiff and sore. Her head was pounding and she felt a little queasy. Crap. Holly squeezed her eyes closed and tried to convince her body to hurt less, thank you. They wouldn't even give her the good painkillers because most of them were also blood thinners. You didn't want that when you might have a disease that killed you by bleeding out every possible place.

Shuddering, Holly reached blindly for her glasses. Once they were on, she sat up slowly and looked over at her assistant. Andrea was staring at the TV on the wall. Holly squinted at the screen and saw words. Closed captioning. "You can turn the sound on," she told the younger woman.

"Did I wake you?" Holy shit, Andrea sounded horrible. She looked like a wraith.

"No, I think my body decided I should be awake to enjoy the pain." Holly grimaced and picked up the bottle of water on the nightstand. "How are you feeling?"

Andrea looked sad. "Pretty shitty. Literally. You tossed and turned through me crapping my guts out."

That wasn't good and explained why she was so emaciated. "Better than vomiting, I guess."

"Missed that too," lamented Andrea. "You were dead to the world."

Holly winced and rubbed her knees. "Sorry." Maybe they would get her an ice pack if she asked nicely. They hurt worse than the time she'd done a mud run with Lisa.

"Don't be. If you feel like I do... God I hope you don't."

So did Holly, but this wasn't the place to talk about that. So she changed the topic to something else. In-between naps, Holly had called Gail to chat. "I'm sorry if chatting with Gail kept you up."

The younger woman shrugged and pulled the blanket up as she hugged her knees. "I was a foster kid." Holly blinked and turned to sit cross legged and face her assistant. "My mother abandoned me, just left me at a hospital when I was four."

What were you supposed to say to that? Holly twisted her blanket in her hands. "That... Um. Sucks."

Andrea smiled. "It's okay. No one knows what to say when you drop that gem. It's why I don't."

"Did you even, I mean, your mother... Did you ever see her again?"

Shaking her head, Andrea admitted. "I never looked for her. She didn't want me. Why would I want her?" She paused. "But I see you two talking about your kid and it makes me wish I'd had foster parents as cool as you."

Holly tilted her head. She was cool? "Really? I was thinking getting exposed to a deadly pathogen sort of failed the fake-mom test."

"You're not a fake mom, Holly." They had forgone the whole professional names crap after the emergency shower. It was just silly after you've been hosed down in the nude with someone. "You guys obviously care, and you worry more about Vivian than yourself right now."

That much was true. "Not much I can do about myself," she pointed out. "I can't even shower."
Seriously. She'd cut a bitch for a shower right now.

"My foster parents were assholes. Dumped me out when I was sixteen."

From her classes, Holly knew that as a foster parent she was only obligated to provide a home until the child was sixteen. "They kicked you out?"

Her assistant nodded. "I wasn't worth the money, I guess."

It was absolutely mind boggling. "What did you do?"

"Lived in shelters. Got a job and bought a shitty car. Lived in my car for a while." When Holly made a face, Andrea pointed. "That's the face people make when you tell them that. I hated that face."

Past tense. "Hated? It's okay now?"

Andrea shook her head, "God no. But now... I've seen you guys and I was thinking maybe I can do that too, foster kids."

Oh. That was how it worked. You did the right thing, people wanted to do it with you and be like you. This was what people meant when they said to be the change you wanted to see in the world. "When we get out of here, I'll introduce you to Anne. She was Sophie's social worker, and helped me and Gail."

"I'd like that." She coughed, setting off a spasm that wracked her for a while. "Fuck, I could do without that."

"Are you feeling any better?"

"No," Andrea said morosely. "They gave me ZMapp while you were out."

Sighing, Holly picked up her iPad. They still had some wifi access, so she pulled up information on the medicine to remind herself of the details. All she knew off the top of her head was the Americans had experimented with it on Ebola patients. "I feel like I should have paid more attention to this in our briefings."

Her neighbor laughed. "What did Gail say? You're more likely to get hit by a falling piano than catch this."

That sounded like Gail. "Probably. She likes to memorize what I say, what we say."

"Ouch. Bet that makes a fight a fun time."

"You don't even wanna know," grumbled Holly. Thankfully Gail didn't whip it out much anymore, but there had been a time where she did. Holly had once ended a date night early for that shit, telling Gail to go home. That had been over four years ago. "God. I've been married two years!"

Andrea laughed softly and coughed again. "Creeps up on you?"

"Insanely fast. Sometimes I feel like I just met her." Holly felt the smile on her face. "Thank you, Andrea."

The younger woman looked confused and queasy. "For what?"

"Calling me a good fake mom."
A loud snort was Andrea's official reply. "Stop calling yourself that. Who picks her up from school?"

"Me and Gail."

"And who makes lunch?"

"Usually me..." Holly shook her head. "I get what you're saying. It's just that she's the crowne's ward. It scares me, thinking they could take her away." Holly looked at her hands and then around the room. "I mean, this?"

Andrea nodded, understanding. "Honestly? I've seen a hell of a lot worse. But ... Yeah. I can see it being a problem." She chewed her lip. "Are you two gonna adopt her?"

Wasn't that the $64,000 Question? "I don't know," Holly admitted. "I ... I'd like to. But Vivian's grandparents are trying to get custody right now." It was touchy. Do they try to adopt, making it obvious they wanted to keep her, or wait for it to be done and then make the next journey? "We didn't get a chance to talk about it with her before all this happened, but we wanted to. Want to. And it's not something we should just do without talking with her, right? It's her life. What if she doesn't want to? We aren't a normal family, but Gail keeps pointing out that you can't tell what normal is, and abnormal's pretty awesome sometimes." Holly recognized she was babbling, winced, and made herself stop. That would normally be where Gail kissed her to shut her up.

When Andrea didn't reply, Holly glanced over to see her assistant looking like she wanted to hurl. Keeping quiet, Holly hugged her knees and thought about adoption. She honestly liked Vivian. The child was guarded and reluctant to share things, but at the same time she clearly liked Holly and Gail. They'd managed to make a weirdly cohesive family unit. Or maybe it wasn't weird at all.

Gail understood not trusting people. Holly understood being yourself. Neither of them pressured Vivian to tell them things, or be a certain way... Except for being clean and taking showers. That was different. But they just clicked with the girl who liked Holly's nerd jokes and Gail's childish nature.

Not that it was all perfect. Vivian had what were clearly minor panic attacks when someone suggested a sleepover, and Holly had to explain to other parents that she'd just had a bad experience. She was starting to warm up to the other people in Gail and Holly's life as well, friends and family who were trustworthy. Vivian was making a new family, ten months after losing her birth family. Holly had thought they were doing okay with it, but she wasn't sure she could tell anymore. They hadn't really addressed the issues Vivian had with trusting men, but everyone from Gail to the therapist had said that would be years. If ever.

For her part, Holly hadn't introduced Vivian to a lot of men, but she mostly knew women anyway. Her family, with the exception of her father and uncle, was skewed towards women. So were her friends. For some reason, Vivian liked Lisa quite a bit, calling her the most fun of Holly's friends. No one understood it, but it worked both ways as Lisa liked Vivian, in as much as she liked any child.

The sound of vomiting startled her out of her thoughts. "Shit, Andrea..." Holly reached for the phone. "I'm calling the doctors," she said louder, trying to get Andrea's attention.

"Don't bother," groaned Andrea, sitting on the floor and hugging the bucket. "You need an IV to replace some of those fluids," Holly pointed out.

And then Andrea looked up at her. "Can I just sleep?" Holly stared, her hand frozen. This was terror. Holy crap. Everything else before had just been a test, a mere trial sized sample. "What's wrong?"

Holly's hand shook as she reached to touch her own face. "You're not crying," she said quietly. This
must be what Gail felt like when she was facing insane people with guns.

Andrea's eyes widened and she touched her face. Taking the hand away, Andrea stared at her fingers. Holly swallowed a dry throat. "It's just a ... Burst blood vessels. Right?"

And Holly had to shake her head. "It doesn't look like that." Holly picked up the phone and called the nurse. "Andrea's bleeding. From her eyes."

The world spun into motion that Holly wasn't ready for. Nurses and doctors rushed in and pulled the curtains in Andrea's room. One nurse came in to Holly's side of the room, checking her temperature (still in the low 38s) and take another blood sample. She was starting to feel like a pin cushion. Since Holly could still eat real food, they got her chicken stock soup and crackers.

It was hard to want to eat when Andrea was groaning in pain just ten feet away. The doctors and nurses came and went in an unending flow of people. Every time one looked in on her, they chastised her into eating. Holly managed to finish the soup and wrapped her arms around herself. The second tears ran down her face, she panicked and had to keep checking they were tears.

You shouldn't be afraid to cry because you were terrified you were going to start oozing blood.

Dr. Wainwright stepped into Holly's enclosure, garbed in protective gear. "Hell of a night," he said by way of greeting.

"I've had better," she sighed. Finally she was able to file the horrible night at the ballet away. It was no longer the worst night of her life. Steve would be thrilled to hear that, no doubt.

The other doctor laughed sadly. "We're going to move you to your own room."

Holly blinked. "What? No!"

Her doctor blinked back. "No? Dr. Stewart ... Ms. DeSails is infected."

"So? She's been infected for days!"

Wainwright paused. "She wasn't evidencing symptoms like this."

Oh good lord. "It's not like I'm going to get more exposed unless someone rips the plastic." She watched the man hem and haw. Ah, he didn't want her to see someone else suffer. "Studies have proven that patients in true isolation, alone, have a lower survival rate."

For a moment, Dr. Wainwright's eyes twinkled. "Alright. You're right." He shook his head. "Under no circumstances are you to cross the barrier. There is still a chance you're not infected, so I'd like to be able to return you to your rather daunting wife in good health."

Holly smirked. "Oh good, you met Gail."

"She's nicknamed Dr. Ryan 'Doogie.' It stuck."

Of course that was Gail. That's what Gail did. "Andrea doesn't have family, Otto," she explained. "She's got me right now. I can't just leave her alone."

An hour later, Andrea pulled her curtains back a little and looked at Holly. "Well today sucks," she croaked.

Holly laughed softly. "Once Gail took me to the ballet and we came home to find her brother, stabbed, bleeding in the kitchen. She ended up having to go arrest the guy and interrogate him for
hours, after I stitched Steve up."

"Huh, that's a pretty epic date."

"Yeah, but on the scale of shitty days, this isn't too far past that one." It was an outright lie, but it made Andrea smile. "So. How do you like Toronto?"

That gave Andrea the giggles. "It's okay. Haven't seen too much of it, really. New York was fun, though. Better than Timmins."

A small world. "Gail's ex, Diaz, is from Timmins. You've met him, he's a cop."

"Is he the mountain man-child?"

"The very one."

Andrea nodded. "He looks like Timmins." She sighed. "He's cute though. Would Gail get mad if I asked him out?"

"I doubt it, but maybe you should give your guy a second chance."

"If he calls me back." Andrea closed her eyes. "How are you feeling?"

"Shitty," sighed Holly. "Wanna try sleeping?" Andrea mumbled an agreement and they turned off the lights.

Holly tried not to think about how she felt, how her knees throbbed and her back ached. Everything hurt in a new, agonizing way that couldn't be blamed on being over forty and stuck in a hospital bed. Holly couldn't remember being this sore when sick before, or even when Sam knocked her out at a softball game. In a weird way, she hoped it was Luongo River Fever, then her agony would be justified.

Of course Gail wouldn't agree. Holly closed her eyes and tried to think about her wife. Her favorite thing about Gail, besides the beauty, was that silly, goofy, fun mind. But she did love the body too. Gail was fit without being sporty and her skin was an amazing color. The skin and hair were what Holly had noticed first, before Gail had opened her mouth to berate her for crossing the tape line. She remembered thinking that Gail was gorgeous and aloof. She'd not been wrong.

Naturally she dreamed about that first meeting, but her imagination took a turn to the bizarre with a return to the room where they'd found the dead Patient Zero. This time, after shooting Luke, the mystery man pulled his hood off and revealed himself to be Ross Perik. It was Perik's voice that said it was too late, and he opened the bag to show Gail's head, whispering that she was still beautiful.

"No!" Holly's eyes snapped open and she cried out as everything hurt even more, including her head which was pounding. Was this what Gail's nightmares were like? She felt debilitated and empty, like everything was insurmountable and she may as well give up. "Fuck," she groaned and realized what the other sensation was, under the panic. Nausea.

Oh no.

Before she could really process her nightmare and its meanings, Holly swung her legs out of bed and wobbled. She could barely stand and ended up crawling, but she made it to the toilet before her stomach rebelled. The vomiting wrenched her. She emptied herself completely into the bowl and then heaved a little longer, until her abs ached more than they had after going to the gym once with Sue Tran. God, it was disgusting. And painful.
Once it was over, Holly couldn't even muster the energy to rinse her mouth out. She managed to flush and then just lay on the floor. Holly closed her eyes and pillowed her head on her arms. It was so nice and cool down on the floor. If anything, this proved they weren't being monitored 24/7, because no one came running in. Maybe they were at shift change, or it was still night, and the check-in wasn't for a while. They didn't have a window and, without her glasses, Holly could make out that a clock existed, but little more.

Finally she shivered, the floor becoming too cold, and Holly pulled herself together enough to crawl towards her bed. She tried to stand, twice, before finally giving up on it. Instead, Holly pulled the blanket down and wrapped it around herself. She should call the nurse's station, but she didn't want to wake up Andrea if she'd managed to sleep through all that.

"Hey, Andrea?" No answer.

Yeah, it wouldn't really change anything to wait a little.

Leaning against the bed, Holly closed her eyes. Jesus. Was this what Gail's nightmares were like? Was Gail having them now? She wanted to be there, with Gail, to help her wake up from those dreams and bring her to a better place. Holly also wanted Gail to be there and help her into bed, to wipe her forehead, rub her back, and bring her coconut water. She sniffled a little, knowing it was childish, but she wanted her family back.

The groan from the other enclosure pierced her depression. "Andrea?" She fumbled for her glasses and pulled them on to look over. The younger woman's sheets were spotted with red. "Oh god, Andrea!"

Holly couldn't be sure how she mustered the strength, but she pulled herself up and grabbed her phone. She wasn't sure how she made any sense, but the nurse rushed in, took one look, and ran off again shouting for a doctor.

All of it was far too late.

In agony and unable to form words, let alone sentences, Andrea died from what was likely internal hemorrhaging from the fever. Rapid onset, they'd said.

In a daze, Holly was pulled from her room and scrubbed down in a sanitizing shower. The part of her that had itched and screamed at not being able to get really clean was cheering. The scientist was screaming. They had a nurse help her, as she wasn't able to wash herself and stand just yet, and bundled her into a new room, smaller and just for her, alone. She couldn't even bring her iPad or computer. She'd be lucky to get them back.

The fever had progressed back to the chills and Holly shivered as she wrapped herself in the rough cotton blanket in her new room. It wasn't just from the cold. Years before, when she was a resident, she had seen people die. But she'd never known them. She'd never had to stand by and watch someone she'd worked with, talked to, joked with die.

If she hadn't already been sick, she'd have felt sick.

By the fourth episode, Gail was humming along with the credits to Degrassi. It had been a million years since she'd watched the show, and it had been the original series at that (on repeats). Steve had teased her for watching it as children, but he'd liked it too. Dimly she'd remembered the next generation being a thing years ago, but she'd really not paid attention outside of a few late nights with desperation wrought from insomnia driving her to watch anything new.
That was the only reason Gail even knew there were lesbians and transgendered characters. Well, that and Sophie and Winnie were totally addicted to the show. Gail and Ollie had both been lectured on the series and the characters, so she was able to explain some of the nuances to Vivian as they worked through the tenth season.

It certainly held Vivian's attention that evening and made it so she didn't notice Gail's distraction.

Day seven, eight, and nine were officially, absolutely, without a doubt the worst. Andrea was dead. Luke was dead. Holly was still in isolation. And there was another funeral on Monday.

The very idea of going to Holly's funeral scared the crap out of her. But she had to actually consider it seriously now. Holly had a fever over 39 degrees and while Gail had been able to see her, there hadn't been much conversation. Her wife had been in agony, stuck with an IV and painkillers that only worked to moderate the pain. Gail would have moved heaven and earth to ease Holly's fever. What words they did share were brief. They'd made their last wishes known to each other after getting married, at least in a informal way. Whomever went first would be turned to ashes and wait in an urn for the other.

Gail had never thought about Holly being the first, and certainly not so soon. It hurt.

A small hand snuck into her own, squeezing it, and a small body scooted closer so their arms were touching. This was her Friday night. No more going out drinking and playing with her friends. No avoiding being a grown up and pretending not to care. Gail was a mom now, fake or temporary or whatever you wanted to call it. She was Vivian's parent and had to be there.

"Holly's real sick," whispered Vivian.

"Yeah. She's really sick," Gail replied.

"Is she gonna die?"

The question hung there long enough for Vivian to turn and fix Gail with a wide eyed stare. "I don't know," admitted Gail, finally. "She might." She could have lied or deflected, but looking at the wide hazel eyes of her foster daughter, Gail saw only one answer. Vivian had been shocked by death before. Admittedly it was a totally brutal and unexpected death. This was just as unexpected, but they could brace themselves for it.

That death, that idea of her wife's death, wasn't the one that was hurting her that day, though.

Vivian stared at Gail and then did something Gail had not seen coming. She let go of Gail's hand and hugged her. "Hey, hey, it's okay." Gail tried to keep her voice soothing, gently patting Vivian's back, but her throat was dry and the words caught.

"I really like Holly too," Vivian's voice was thick and she sniffled.

It probably wasn't going to do her mental status much, but Gail asked, "Did we ever tell you how we met?" Vivian let go a little and shook her head. So Gail pressed pause on the TV and told Vivian about the case, leaving out the child abuse bits, and how she'd tried to arrest Holly, spent a whole day with her, and then became friends.

That led into Vivian asking when Holly knew she was gay, when Gail did, and other innocent questions about a world before she'd been introduced. When Andy asked the questions, it felt strange and uncomfortable. Vivian was just curious in a way that said she wanted to know so she could be a part of it. And Gail did something she'd have previous felt was impossible. She welcomed someone into her past.
Eventually Vivian let go and they made dinner. It was the first night since Holly had been exposed that it was just them. Gail’s mother let everyone think she was over while actually being at a mayoral dinner. Not that Elaine didn’t offer to ditch, but Gail pointed out that spending that many nights in a row of the two of them hanging out was stretching it, especially for them. That made the night a little tough for Gail, though, since the lack of adult conversation was getting to her.

Which was not at all why she called Holly’s parents after Vivian went to sleep. This was a promise she had to keep to Lily, to make sure Holly communicated. Sometimes her wonderful wife forgot to call her parents about things like fostering or marriage. Right now, Gail knew her wife was afraid to talk to her parents because they would hear her voice and know.

"Hey, it's my favorite daughter-in-law!" Brian always made her smile. He was just a good person.

"Hi, Brian. Stole your wife's phone?"

"Lil's in the garden. Frosted last night and she wants the pumpkins to survive."

That sounded like Lily alright. "Will she be long? I kinda need to talk to you guys..."

She could feel the tone change. "Hang on," Brian replied in a dad voice. It wasn't Bill's voice of disappointment, or his dread look of failure. This was a serious parent sound. Gail had heard it from Oliver more than once. It was strangely comforting.

A moment later, the phone beeped and Gail heard the faint echo of speaker phone. "Gail? Is everything okay?" That was Lily, a little breathless.

"No," she said baldly, closing her eyes tight.

Brian sounded strangled, "You're not divorcing, are you?"

"Brian!" Lily's voice snapped. "For god's sake, you're an idiot." Brian grumbled and Lily hushed him. The banter was, somehow, comforting. "Gail, go ahead," she said gently. There was something about the Stewarts that was calming and amusing at the same time. They too didn't always understand their child, but they loved Holly and, as she'd learned, Gail as well.

Gail took a deep breath. "I'm going to tell you something that isn't even on the news, so I need you to swear not to talk to anyone about this."

They were silent for a long moment. "Gail, is this illegal?" Brian, the worrier, was worried.

"She wouldn't tell us if it was," Lily, the trusting one, was doubtful.

"Technically... I don't actually have permission to tell you, but you need to know."

Brian growled, "Permission? I don't like the sound of this."

But Lily caught on. "What happened to Holly?"

"Holly was exposed to a viral hemorrhagic fever called Luongo River Fever. She hasn't tested positive for it, yet, but her assistant did and... Her assistant did and died. Right now, Holly's in isolation and she's had a fever around 39 degrees for the last couple days."

Silence. She could hear her in-laws breathing deeply. "Are you alright?" Lily's voice was gentle and kind. It could have killed her.

All Gail could do was laugh sadly. "I'm holding on, Lily. Thanks."
Brian cleared his throat. "Have you seen her?" His voice sounded suddenly rough, as if it took everything not to cry.

"Every day. I saw her this afternoon."

More silence. "How ... What are the odds?"

"78% fatality rate if infected, but her antibodies still don't show any markers." That was the faint hope to hold onto. She wasn't yet infected. Except for the horrible fever, she was alright.

Lily spoke quietly. "Gail..." She sounded just like Holly and it stabbed at her heart. Sympathy was going to break her.

"God, don't do that. Please. It's ... Yeah, look I know. We're just waiting. There's nothing else I can do. I'm not on the case." Her voice caught.

"How did she get exposed?" Brian's voice was the wondering tone of a scientist and it helped.

Gail cleared her throat. "It was on a case." She couldn't tell them details.

Brian was angry. "What the hell is up with that? Tell me you caught whatever bastard did this!"

She smiled. She really did like Brian. "They did. Last night they caught him trying to leave Toronto." And that hurt too. "He shot ... They got him. No one else has been exposed, either."

That was her world. The one where people got shot and killed in the line of duty. The one where people ran in front of a bullet to save everyone who, asleep in their beds right now, had no idea about the danger they'd all been in. Gail could feel the stunned realization in the silence. They were not prepared for this world.

"How many people died?" Brian was strained, grasping at facts.

"Three. A detective, a patrol officer, and Holly's assistant."

"Did you know them?" Lily's voice shook. "The detective and the other officer?"

"I did," Gail said carefully. "The Detective worked on the ... He picked up the Perik case, after I was kidnapped." Though Holly had given them the overview of the case, Gail hadn't brought it up at all to the Stewarts. She still didn't want to talk about it and they respected her feelings, knowing only that Gail had been kidnapped in a case once, but obviously rescued. "And the uniform was my rookie, a few years ago."

Stupid, silly, smiling Snowflake. That was something she'd not told Holly yet. She didn't know how. Holly probably already felt guilt over Andrea dying. The last thing Holly needed was to feel like that about Luke or Snowflake. And the deaths were far, far, less Holly's fault than Jerry's was Gail's. But oh, Gail knew exactly how that felt. Samantha Gagnon. Maybe if she'd trained her better...

No. This was just one of those horrible things, those terrible cop moments that you can't stop. Gail had read the report at Oliver's desk that morning. They did it all right, by the book. She'd just been the unlucky one, catching a bullet at the wrong place. She'd bled out through her femoral artery before the ambulance could get there. Dov had told her, blood still staining his hands, tears running down his face.

"Do… Do you need anything?" Lily was the empathetic one. Lily would ask.
"A TARDIS?" That made both parents laugh. "No, it's just waiting and waiting. We're okay."

"Have they tried any treatments for Holly?" Brian was the scientific one, though they really all were. He just didn't ask about your feelings often.

"Not until she tests positive," Gail replied and both Stewarts made understanding noises. They talked about the medical status, questions that Gail could answer easily having grilled Doogie and Wainwright the other day when trying not to panic about Holly having a 39+ degree fever for multiple days. That was hard. She'd probably feel the same way if Viv had a fever for that long. Holly had appreciated the joke about her brain melting, at least, in the moments she'd wanted to talk.

After she hung up with her in-laws, Gail lay on the couch and stared at the ceiling, trying not to think too much, trying to keep her brain empty and relaxed. A white ceiling was going to stay because Holly liked that. The walls were still white, but that was just because they hadn't taken time to decide what they wanted the rooms to be. Bedrooms were going to be blue for relaxation. Gail wanted caramel, showing Holly the study that suggested that color led to more sex, only to have her wife point out that sky blue also had that effect. So blue it was. Hell, Gail had the damn paint swatches in her car. She may as well pick that up while Holly was away.

Hot tears trickled down her face abruptly. Shit. Holly wasn't away. Holly was sick and in a damn tent by herself. Holly was sick, really and truly sick and may not ever be coming home again. The feeling, the empty and sick feeling in her gut churned and burned. It wasn't fair to be this far into life and lose the best person in it... Or was it not fair to only have Holly for this short a time? They'd already done some time apart, the time when Gail felt more empty and broken than she had in years. She needed Holly. She loved her and there was an ache without Holly there. Gail covered her face with her hands and just let the tears flow silently. The only benefit she could think of to being able to cry silently was that at least she wouldn't wake up Vivian.

At some point, after crying, she fell into an exhausted sleep. At least, that's what she assumed because Vivian was gently nudging her shoulder to wake her up. It was light out and she was still on the couch, her back killing her. Fuck, she was too old for couch sleeping. Squinting at Vivian, Gail swam to the surface of a night that felt like she hadn't slept at all. "Gail. Wake up, please. Someone's at the door," whispered Vivian.

The door? Opening her eyes fully, Gail realized Vivian was still in her pajamas. She grimaced and sat up. "What time is it?"

"Almost nine."

Guilt ran through her. What a shitty mom she was, wrapping herself up in her own misery and depression and not feeding the kid or even being awake and around for her. "Crap, I'm sorry." But to her surprise, the girl just gave Gail a tight hug. "Hey, hey, it's okay, Vivian."

They didn't communicate with hugs, except now they seemed to be doing so. People hugged for reasons like this. People hugged to express a feeling they didn't have words for. Gail had done that herself with Dov and Chris years ago. And now, here, Vivian was hugging her to say the things she didn't know how to say in words.

With Vivian's hand in hers, they walked to the front door. "She looks like Holly," explained Vivian.

"Looks like..." No way. Gail rubbed her face, hoping she didn't still look like she'd been crying half the night, and looked through the glass. It couldn't be who she thought it was and yet... It was. "Lily!" Gail threw the door open in surprise. "How? Why are you here?"
Instead of trying to hug Gail, Lily handed over her shoulder bag. "Why do you think? I'm not leaving my girls to deal with this on their own." Lily gave Gail a slightly disappointed look. That was something she'd gotten a lot as a child, her own parents being masters at the look, but never with the soft look of support under it. The difference made her uncomfortable.

"You took the red eye?" Gail had a vague memory it got in at 6am, but it had been a while since she'd had to pay attention to that.

"Booked the flight as soon as I got off the phone with you, dear. Of course we ended up stuck on the Tarmac for hours. It was sleeting somewhere." Lily followed Gail inside, glancing down at Vivian and then back at Gail.

Oh right. "Vivian, this is Holly's mom, Dr. Lily Stewart. Lily, this is Vivian Green."

Neither said anything, so Gail nudged Vivian by squeezing her hand. "Nice to meet you, Miss Lily," she said quietly. "What kinda doctor?"

"Botanist," smiled Lily, not moving for a hug or a handshake. She'd been coached by Holly obviously.

Vivian frowned and looked at Gail, "Plant doctor?" When Gail nodded, Vivian seemed to accept that. "Is she gonna get to see Holly?"

"No," sighed Gail. "I told you, the mayor had to let me in." She knew that Vivian had no real concept of what that meant. The mayor was just a mythical person to her still. Though the girl had started to pay attention to the news, which was weird.

"Is that how?" Lily looked highly amused.

"Their office owed me a favor. Come on, I'll show you to the guest room." She paused and realized she had to embarrass herself in front of her mother-in-law. "Hey, Viv, did you eat breakfast?"

The girl let go of Gail's hand and nodded. "Cereal. Can I watch TV?"

"Sure, we'll be back down in a minute," Gail tried not to feel like a shitty parent, having no idea if her kid had eaten, and rubbed her forehead as she led Lily upstairs. "So, uh. New house, hey. There's an attic and everything."

Lily made a small noise of appreciation for the house. "Holly took me on a Skype tour."

"Oh good. I'm sorry," Gail sighed and bumped open the door to the guest room. This made the third person to sleep there in eleven days. Jesus. Eleven? She paused and looked at her hands. Yeah, Holly was exposed on Wednesday, they knew it was Luongo before the weekend, and here it was Saturday again. "Sorry," repeated Gail. "I'm … not really. Um. I just woke up."

Without a word, Lily put her suitcase down and wrapped her arms around Gail.

Oh. Shit.

Mom hugs were a thing Gail was just not prepared for. Holly's hugs were kind of the same way. That first time Holly had just held on to her when she'd freaked out had been the weirdest feeling ever. Someone held on to her. Like Holly's hug that horrible day, this hug was the same way. It wasn't assuming, it wasn't pressing, and it didn't ask her anything. It was just someone who didn't judge her for things outside her control. It was someone offering to be a stable rock in the middle of a storm threatening to drown Gail, or swallow her up whole.
Could she even offer that to Vivian? Here she and Holly had given the girl a home and a place to be safe, but it was Holly who gave the hugs that were safe ports in storms and stable rocks to cling to. That wasn't what Gail could possibly do when she barely understood the hug she was enveloped in right now. Hell, here she was, an epic failure by sleeping through her kid having breakfast, and all but making Vivian be a grown up to soon again, trying hard not to cry on Lily's shoulder.

"It's okay," whispered Lily, holding her in that protective embrace.

Those two fears, the fear of losing Holly and failing as a fake-parent, when combined with the hug and the words undid her. She squeezed Lily and gave up, crying against her mother-in-law's shoulder. Lily didn't say another thing. She gently stroked Gail's hair, like Gail had seen Noelle and Frank do with their daughters, like Ollie did with his, like Traci did with Leo. Like Holly had done with her five years ago when Chloe was shot and Ollie had been kidnapped and Gail had been unable to cope with the flashbacks. Lily just held her and let her cry herself out.

Finally Gail was just done crying. When she let go so did Lily, though the older woman held Gail at arm's length for a moment. "Come on, let's wash your face."

Gail sighed and let herself be pushed into the guest bath. "I'm sorry, it's been a really long week."

Sitting on the edge of the tub, just like her daughter did, Lily shook her head. "Honey, that's what family's for. You're not supposed to go through these things alone."

"Oh Jesus, I haven't been alone," grumbled Gail, splashing cold water into her face and taking a look at herself. She was a fucking mess. "I don't even know what I'm doing anymore."

"None of us do," Lily pointed out. "But we keep moving forward."

How odd that Lily and her mother had the same mindset with that. Gail scowled at the mirror. "Crap, I need a haircut," she whinged. Holly usually teased her at this point, but she practically had a mullet.

"I think the world can forgive you for being preoccupied," smiled Lily. "You may not be alone, but I have a feeling you don't have anyone you can have a melt down in front of besides my daughter. Hmm?"

Okay, that was true. It was pretty much Holly or her therapist, and while the latter had been helpful, Gail had a lingering fear that if she broke down in front of her therapist, she'd lose Vivian. Gail met Lily's eyes in the mirror. "Hey, I'm not drunk and chopping off all my hair again." She had told Lily that story a few Christmases ago, much to everyone's amusement.

The silly side smile Holly loved to do crossed Lily's face. Instead of ripping at her heart and making her miss her wife more, it made Gail feel a little better. That was weird. But it was a reminder that Holly existed, that Holly wasn't just in Gail's head. She was a real person who impacted many people. "I think you need to take a shower and I'll make us all something to eat. And we'll have coffee outside and you can tell me about the garden my daughter seems to have staked out."

Gail sighed again and nodded. They could do that. "Vivian likes pancakes on the weekend," she noted, leading them back downstairs.

"Who doesn't?"
"I'm not really happy you're in your dress blues," coughed Holly. She liked less that Gail looked exhausted and drained.

"I'm not really happy you look like ass, baby," remarked Gail, sitting in the fold-out chair in the room. "But you're awake and coherent. I'll take what I can get right now."

Holly snorted and let the bed sit up. "Glad to know I look like how I feel. The nurses keep saying I'm looking better." She'd been out of it for two days, to the point that she only knew Gail had visited because the nurses said it had been strange that Gail watched her sleep.

Tilting her head side to side, Gail seemed to somewhat agree. "You do, but that really just reflects how much you looked like death warmed over the last couple days."

Her wife's honesty was actually a relief. "Good." Holly smiled and wished for the hundredth time that Gail could sit next to her and hold her. That would feel a lot better. "Did you tell me my mother was in town?"

"Two days ago," confirmed Gail, looking amused. "You were really out of it, baby. Scared the shit out of me."

That must be why Gail looked exhausted. Holly tried to think about how long she'd been in the stupid tent and had to ask, "What day is it?"

"Monday. Vivian went to school, which was her idea." Gail held her hands up, defensively. Holly didn't really have the energy to argue, but sighed a little sadly. Holly felt like she didn't know anything anymore, that the last four days where when the Fire Nation attacked and everything changed. The last clear memory she had was a second nightmare and puking all over the floor halfway to the toilet and not being able to get into the bed. That was why she had a bucket now. "What do you want to know?" God, her wife was shrewd.

"In my next life, I want to be the detective and you can be the doctor." They smiled at each other. "Who died? I remember you telling me Luke's funeral was the same day as your cousin's." She knew Andrea died, of course, but that funeral was going to be much later.

Gail nodded. "It was. I went to both, since they were at the same cemetery." She put her hat in her lap and scratched the back of her hair. Gail was in desperate need to a trim. She practically had a mullet. "Good news or bad news first?"

Her wife was deflecting. "Bad news."

"I was at Snowflake's funeral." Gail's voice was flat and empty. Oh god. In the middle of all this, Snowflake had died? The universe had really shitty timing. "She died helping catch François L'engle." Holly blinked and asked who that was. "You know him as the loser in the hazmat suit who shot Luke."

Holly's eyes widened. "You caught him? Tell me that's the good news!"

But weirdly Gail shook her head. "No, the good news is that all the vials of Luongo River Virus are accounted for, including the one used to infect patient zero."

A weight lifted off Holly's shoulders. "Wait, how the hell do you know that?"
"Andrea took photos. She got one of the inside of that messenger bag." Gail grinned. "Also Maxim was the middle man. He was trying to go to Montréal to meet his contact. It's a whole international conspiracy. Butler's got a major feather in his cap."

"First one without you," smiled Holly.

"I am generally a good luck charm," Gail agreed, though her smiled faded.

When Holly reflected on the cost of the feather, hers did too. "I'm sorry." She'd barely known Snowflake. She knew her real name was Samantha Gagnon, and she'd just been promoted. Snowflake had broken up with Duncan two years ago, though Holly didn't know what had happened after that. She knew the woman was filling the void left by Chloe's detective promotion.

But the officer had been Gail's first rookie from start to finish. Her only real rookie. "She did her job," sighed Gail. "She saved Dov, that idiot. Hell, she saved everyone. She stopped L'engle from getting away. She was a hero."

She wanted to hold Gail's hand. "You made her a great cop, Gail."

"Ah, shit," sighed Gail, wiping her face. "I was thinking I'd have to be all supportive of you."

Holly blinked. "Me? Other than feeling like three day old road kill, having the energy of a sloth, and smelling like I feel, I'm okay."

Chewing her lip, Gail pointed out, "I thought you'd think Andrea and Snowflake dying was your fault."

Ah. Because Gail would in her place. Because Gail saw their death as her failure somewhere. "Andrea ... What happened could have happened to me. So much went on when we ran for cover." Holly sighed. "I did everything right. I did everything you taught me to do. I got out of the line of fire, I let the evidence get compromised and I saved myself. The only, only regret I have is not letting Andrea process that damn bag first."

Her wife looked impressed. "You are amazing, Holly Stewart. I think I'm in love with you." From Gail's perspective, being well adjusted was amazing, but Holly blushed at the look of adoration being given her.

"Honey," she sighed. "You must be in love with me, putting up with this."

Gail laughed softly. "I need you, Holly." Her voice was the soft, shy tone Gail got when she was trying to talk about her feelings. Embarrassed. "When your mom hugged me, the way you hug me when I freak out, I realized I can't do this without you. I can't be the other mom, the one who gives the good hugs that make you feel safe."

"Yes you can," Holly said so fiercely she coughed. "You can do anything. You can be the mom for scraped knees and broken hearts. You-" she coughed again and it made her feel dizzy. Crap. No wonder Gail had been such a brat when she'd broken her ribs. This shit got old. Fast.

"Holly, just lie down." Gail's voice was a very odd mixture of stern and gentle.

Thumbing the control for the bed, Holly got herself propped up correctly. "You hug me like that too," she wheezed. "When I freak out, have a bad day, fire someone, you hold me and let me cry myself out. You can be that person, because you already are. Okay?"

And Gail nodded slowly. "Okay."
"Good." Holly lay back and closed her eyes. That was it for her energy. "I'm sorry I'm freaking you out, honey."

Gail sighed loudly. "How were you so calm when I nearly got blown up?"

The car. Right. "I wasn't." Holly opened her eyes and turned to her side. The blonde was fidgeting a little in her seat. "I was scared to death, Gail, and ... in shock. By the time I wasn't so stunned, you were back at work." Holly sighed a little. "I don't think I ever even got the chance to process it. Or I'm used to it, and ... I don't know if I like that."

"Pretty sure I don't like it at all," muttered Gail. "I hate you worrying about me out there."

Holly wanted to snort, but she was just too tired. "I trust you. And your friends. They'll bring you home every time. Oliver promised."

Pulling her badge off her jacket, Gail studied it for a moment. "Oliver always says that the crest there, means we're going to protect everyone out there. I'm supposed to be protecting you."

"Oliver said that it meant he was always coming home."

And Gail looked surprised. "Oh. That's from his rookie speech. Comes after you don't touch anything." Gail smiled a little. "I am, you know. Always coming home to you."

"I know." Holly smiled back. She wanted to say she was as well, but ... she just didn't know. And it was painful. "Mom's not coming here, is she?"

Gail cleared her throat. "Here the hospital? No. Which is making Vivian less grouchy about not getting to see you."

Smiling, Holly squinted at her wife. "Good." She exhaled. "What day is it?"

With a worried expression, Gail replied, "Monday."

"No I mean..." Holly counted. "Thirteen."

"Oh," Gail sounded relieved. "Day thirteen. Three to seven more, and you can come home."

Holly sighed. "I'd settle for the fever to stay away," she muttered and looked at the IV. She needed a refill soon. "Or an appetite. Or a damn shower." Gail laughed softly. "Tell me a story, honey. A good, happy, one."

"Okay," agreed Gail. "Uh, oh! Vivian is okay touching now. Like, she sits right next to me when we watch TV, she holds my hand even if we're not crossing the street. And she hugged me. Multiple times. And sat in my lap when we kicked Oliver's ass at Mario Kart."

Okay. That was good. "See? Told you."

"She misses you," Gail said wistfully. "I miss you at home."

"I miss me at home."

After Gail left, Holly drifted off. She was getting used to being bored and sleeping alone, which wasn't good at all. Seven days. One week. Maybe she could sleep it away.

Before picking up Vivian, Gail stopped by the house and changed out of her dress uniform. Lily had
cleaned the house to Holly levels of perfection, something Gail and she normally did on Saturdays but the week had been a little messed up.

"You didn't have to do this," Gail said weakly, pulling a blazer on as she came back down the stairs.

"Of course not, that's why I'm doing it." Lily smiled and looked Gail's attire up and down. "You're going to work?"

Gail nodded. "I'm checking in with my boss. I may go back to half-days, since the case is over."

Frowning, Lily started the dryer. "Do you think that's wise? Holly's still-"

"In isolation, I know," sighed Gail. She did know. It wasn't like Gail's nightmare was anywhere near over, but getting back to work seemed like a relief. "But she's getting better, the fever is dropping, and I need something normal," she added.

Thankfully, the Stewarts were all workaholics. "Well. I suppose."

She couldn't really explain why she was a cop to people who didn't do this sort of thing. There was a compulsion to work, to do her job and help people. She needed to feel useful like that. Thankfully her boss understood, as did her coworkers, all of whom welcomed her back. Butler wanted to be sure she was okay, since Holly was still in the hospital.

Tuesday would mark her back on the clock.

When she picked up Vivian from school, she got a frown from the girl. Vivian's eyes went to Gail's hip. As she buckled Vivian in, Gail told her she was going to work tomorrow. "Is it 'cause I'm going to school?"

"No." It was always more complicated than that. "Is it okay that I'm going to work?"

Vivian shrugged, but did that slight retreat into her shell that Gail was well familiar with. After all, Gail did it herself. So she let Vivian think about it and aimed the car home. "I don't like guns," she finally told Gail, looking out the window.

"I know," Gail replied casually.

"My dad had a gun."

Gail glanced at the rear view mirror. She knew Lily was at the house, but this was not a talk to have with someone new. Decisions. Instead of going home, Gail turned towards the bakery and coffee shop Holly loved. "I know. Holly and I know what happened."

They hadn't talked about it at all. Both Gail and Holly had agreed that, if asked, they would tell her the truth. So now Gail got to have the talk alone.

Looking out the window, Vivian was closed off. "You don't make me feel like my Dad did."

They didn't say anything else about it until they walked into the bakery and ordered cocoa and a fluffy mocha. With fresh cookies, they took over the quiet table in the corner. When Vivian didn't pick up the conversation again, Gail realized she had to. "My dad and I haven't talked for a long time," she told Vivian. "He got mad when I was dating Holly, and didn't understand it. He thought he was a bad parent."

Confused, Vivian wrapped her hands about the mug. "Because you love Holly?"
"Yep," Gail replied, popping the p.

Vivian's face was screwed up. "That's stupid."

"Yeah, isn't it? Sometimes people think things and do things that don't make any sense and that hurt us."

"Did he yell?"

"No." He'd raised his voice, but it wasn't yelling really. Her father had yelled at her before, many times. The quiet disappointment hurt more.

The girl stared at her cocoa. "Mine yelled at me and Kimmy." Vivian poked a finger into her whipped cream. "Mom didn't do anything."

So for her whole life, she had no support. Oh, yeah, Gail knew that one. She half reached over towards Vivian and hesitated. This was where Holly would call her honey and pull her in for a hug. She wasn't Holly. Gail took a deep breath and put her hand on Vivian's shoulder. A big fat tear rolled down Vivian's face and Gail knew it was the right thing to do. Moving her chair, she carefully pulled Vivian into a hug.

They sat like that for a little while. Vivian snuffling and hanging on to Gail. Finally she let go a little. Scrubbing her face with the back of her hand, Vivian sniffled. "I don't wanna live with my grandparents." She didn't let go of Gail completely just yet though.

"You don't have to live anywhere you don't want to, Viv."

The girl nodded, wiping her face again, and let go. Then she changed the subject. "We should bring cookies for Miss Lily."

"Yeah we should," smiled Gail. "And a pumpkin latte. She likes them." It was too bad they couldn't sneak food in for Holly, but the hospital had told her under no circumstances could she do that.

They brought the treats home and helped Vivian with homework when there was a knock at the door. Gail was only slightly surprised to see her mother and bags of food. Peripherally she remembered mentioning to her mom that other people were coming over too much and she needed a break. "I see you have guests... I can come back tomorrow."

"No, come on in. Lily, Holly's mom, is here."

Both of Elaine's eyebrows shot up. "Are you sure?"

Gail rolled her eyes. "I'm too tired to do this one the long way, Mother." She ushered her mother inside and went to the kitchen. "Lily, we got dinner covered. This is my mom, Elaine, please don't hit her. Mother, Lily."

Her mother blinked. "Oh, she knows?" When Gail nodded, Elaine looked suitably apologetic. "I am sorry, Lily."

"It worked out alright," replied Lily, a little tersely. Lily and Brian had not taken the story particularly well, learning that Gail's parents were the reason Holly failed to get her dream job. That said, they were also pleased that Holly had stuck around, and that Gail had as well, so all in all they decided they would reserve judgement until they met and talked to Elaine. This was going to be interesting.

Ready to ditch homework any day, Vivian looked up from her despised French. "Miss Elaine!" She
bounced out of the chair and rushed up to look in the bags. "What's dinner?"

"Hello, Vivian. I brought schwarma dinners with falafel." The boxes were from the restaurant Gail and Andy had rescued a million years ago. "Yes, Gail, it's the lamb. No tomatoes."

God, her mother knew what food she liked. "Thanks," she muttered and helped her mother take the boxes out. At least her mother knew to bring a lot of food. Gail's insane metabolism made it easy to burn through food without worrying about leftovers. There would be enough for four. "Viv, finish your French first."

The girl faux stomped, but brought the homework over for Gail to check. One page of homework shouldn't take that long, but Vivian had a remarkable talent to drag it out for hours. Dinner was not as awkward as Gail feared, Lily and Elaine getting along surprisingly well. Elaine did not fake an interest in her fellow parent, instead seeming to be honestly interested in her. Making no attempt to steer that conversation, Gail only offered information about how she and Lily had met.

After dinner they watched The Muppet Movie, the original one, and Vivian fell asleep with her head in Gail's lap while the mothers cleaned up the kitchen. Leaving the TV on, Gail eavesdropped on the two women when the conversation turned towards the sleeping child.

"Gail's very close to Vivian," said Lily softly.

"It was touchy earlier. I'm very glad they bonded."

"I recall. Holly called me for advice, the first month. Now I get fake-mom texts."

There was a soft noise from her own mother. "I envy you that. Having that relationship with your daughter."

Gail gently brushed Vivian's hair out of her face, looking down at the girl. She was succeeding at the whole fake-mom thing, maybe. Asleep, Vivian sighed and hunkered down like a cat. No, a monkey. She was holding on like a little howler monkey. They watched a lot of animal documentaries in their house.

"You and Gail ..." Lily paused. "I really don't know much about you, Elaine. Except the mess with Holly's Visa."

The wince from Elaine was audible. "Not my finest moment."

Lily laughed quietly. "Obviously you and Gail have made amends, though."

"Some, but it's too late to hope for the kind of friendship you and my daughter have, let alone the one you have with Holly."

"I don't know," mused Lily. "You've clearly changed. Gail has changed a lot since I met her. So has Holly. Your daughter is a tempest, but she seems to have steadied Holls. Stopped her from running, got her to stay and try again. They're good for each other."

"Gail has become an amazing person," agreed Elaine. "And your Holly... She's brilliant."

"I know she's smart... I've never understood why she's a pathologist," sighed Lily.

"There's a drive to give yourself to something greater." Elaine sounded thoughtful. "Its not always about wanting power or control, sometimes it's just knowing you can do a thing and excelling at it because the world needs people like you. Like Gail and Holly."
Over the years, Gail had heard that a million times. Stand between people and the dangers. But hearing it from her mother now, it made more sense. Or maybe it finally made sense after all. Hearing it applied to Holly made sense.

"When you put it that way, I suppose it makes sense," mused Lily. "Did Gail want to do this her whole life?"

Her mother made a pained noise. "I don't know. For her and Steven… there wasn't another option. They're Pecks. Pecks are police. It's a heavy burden."

And Lily, surprisingly, replied in a very understanding tone, "That makes sense. We tell our girls they'll grow up and meet a boy and get married and have babies. Heteronormative culture. For Gail, it sounds like she had police-normative."

Elaine's reply was almost too quiet for Gail to hear. "Sometimes I think the only thing I did right was help her be strong enough to fight back."

What the what? Gail tilted her head slightly, but she knew her mother would be aware Gail was eavesdropping, and the conversation shifted to the mundane. Where had Lily lived in Toronto, what schools, etc etc. When had Gail fought back? Just that mess with IA, really, which was self-defense. Except…

Four years prior she never could have done that. She would have been mad, but she would have accepted the fact that her life wasn't her own. When had that changed? Sometime around the time she'd started doing things like the stupid gay pride parade. That was when she knew people didn't see her as that tragic little girl who got kidnapped. Okay, yes, they started to see her as that weird lesbian, but they also saw her as a police officer.

But how did that give her the confidence she'd lacked? Gail wasn't sure. She just knew then that she was capable of taking on her mother's machinations and standing up for herself. And Elaine hadn't fought back. She folded. Gail frowned. Her mother, who never stopped pushing, did stop. But why? Why would she file to stay Gail's transfer and then not fight? It hadn't made sense then. It didn't make more sense now, except maybe it was a plan?

And what did it have to do with Stockholm Syndrome?

She turned her head to eye her mother. The implication was that someone was forcing Elaine to do things she hadn't wanted to. Harold, dead and buried along with Gail's uncle, couldn't do things from beyond the grave, but he wasn't the only Peck with power. But. Elaine hadn't turned on whomever it was. She kept that secret to herself and blamed no one but herself.

Maybe that was why Gail was willing to talk to her and treat her life family again. Because Elaine accepted she'd been wrong and was trying to not be wrong anymore. Hadn't that been something Andy had struggled with? Hating her mother for leaving them but growing to like the person when she learned there was much more to the story?

Life was complicated. Gail did not regret letting her mother back into their life, at least.

The movie ended and Vivian showed no sign of waking. "I'm going to put the kiddo to bed," sighed Gail, easily scooping her up. It was only with mild protests that Vivian allowed Gail to walk her through the normal routine of showers and brushed teeth and pajamas. By the time she got back downstairs, a little damper, Gail was not surprised to see her mother had gone home.

"I'll finish up the dishes and go to bed," Lily informed her. She wore a curiously introspective
expression, as if Lily and Elaine had talked things out more while Gail was out of the room. There was no blood on the walls, so that was probably okay.

"No, it's fine, I think I need something mindless, Lily." Gail took over and shooed her mother-in-law away. She did appreciate that they weren't leaving her alone at the moment, because just having Vivian and her in a house might be overwhelming after the series of incredibly draining days she'd had. The last time had ended with Gail falling asleep on the couch, so she took it with thanks.

Her wife was shaken and scared, with good reason. Gail had seen people die in front of her before, Holly had not since her ER rotation years ago. And Holly had never before seen someone she knew and liked die right there. To top it off, she watched someone die and then had to be showered down again and moved to a new location just in case, because she already had a fever and muscle aches which were some of the signs of a stupid filovirus. Her blood work was maddeningly inconclusive.

At least for Gail, the stupid simple stuff she and Holly always did together was calming. She just had to remind herself not to try and shatter the glass with her bare hand. The nights before, after she'd seen her wife miserable and sweating in her tent with a fever, Gail poured through the medical texts to read up on all the similar diseases Holly had told her this might be like. On the one hand, she wanted to bless the woman's honesty while sick. On the other, there were a god awful number of communicable diseases that caused a reactions like a violent hemorrhagic fever that she could have caught. Maybe she had Luango River Fever. Maybe not. Andrea's autopsy confirmed she had died of the disease, and it had been horrifying. But Holly, horrible vomiting fever and all, still tested negative (or at least 'not positive').

Gail put the dishes away exactly how Holly liked it, stacking the glasses in the right order, putting the newly cleaned glasses in back and the dishes on the bottom. She cleaned off the counter, perhaps not as exactly as Holly did, but still far beyond her normal swipe and done method. She even swept the floor. Mopping was for Saturday.

With all that done, Gail opened the fridge and stared at the beers. If Holly had been there, a night like this might end with them sitting outside with a blanket and beers. Maybe they'd sit on opposite ends of the wood couch, feet in each other's laps. Or perhaps one would be in the other's arms. And they'd talk about things, work and friends that one had seen. Sometimes they just sat there, quietly enjoying being together. Sometimes they read their own books, or listened to one of Holly's sports games.

Leaving the beer alone, Gail stood by an Adirondack chair and looked out over the backyard. The yard was why Holly liked the house. It had a big tree in the back and a fence, giving them more privacy than one might expect in the city. Gail liked the kitchen and open downstairs. Vivian had liked her own room with it's own bathroom. The guest room had it's own tiny bathroom, just the right size for a guest who wouldn't stay more than a few days. Normally.

Gail shoved her hands in her pockets and walked out into the yard. They had started making little plans. A vegetable garden in the back, under the master bedroom windows, had been staked out not three weeks ago. Holly had wanted to prep it before winter, have it all ready when spring hit and they could plant. Maybe she should ask Lily to help... Would Lily still consider Gail family if Holly died? Gail wiped her face, aware of the tears that came with that morbid thought.

If Holly died.

Her whole life seemed to centre around that thought right now even if it was becoming less likely every day, that fear of losing the best person who had ever stumbled into her life with a lunchbox and attitude. The quirky, weird, smart, goofy Holly Stewart, no middle name thank you. Holly had a smile that made Gail feel warm and special in a way she never had before. She liked holding Holly's hand, or better yet, holding Holly in her arms. She liked sitting on the couch or singing in the car
when they drove up to the cottage. She loved Holly, and it was really that simple.

Five years and change was not enough for Gail. She wanted to grow old, find some place nice to retire where kids could visit for summers. Maybe they could retire to the cottage and spend winters down in Tahiti. But she wanted to have the future with Holly, no matter what. And right now she wanted Vivian in that future, a silly six year old who would become a cranky teenager, maybe even a fireman.

Turning to look at the house, their house, she was not too surprised to see a light from Vivian's room. She almost expected to see the small head peeking out the window, but Vivian was not as bold as Gail had been at that age. Gail smiled and went back inside, locking up the house before she went into Vivian's room. Of course the girl was pretending to be asleep, but a book lay open on her nightstand and there was a lump of a flashlight.

"Scoot over, Monkey," she told Vivian, stretching out beside her.

"I'm not a monkey," protested the girl, making room.

"Are too. You hang on like a little monkey." Gail smiled and got one in return from Vivian.

They settled into a comfortable position, Vivian tucked up against her side but not really touching much. That part of their relationship had changed rapidly in the last few days. Neither communicated with hugs, but right now both held on to the other like drowning men on a ship. They weren't cuddling or snuggling, they were just close and comfortable. "Is Holly gonna die?"

Gail sighed and stroked Vivian's hair, trying to be soothing like Holly would be. "I don't know." She hated lying to the girl, given everything else that had gone on in her short life, and in this moment it was so painful to be honest. But. She had to be honest. She did not know if Holly was going to die soon.

There was a sniffle beside her. "I really like her."

"Me too." Gail would be wrecked if Holly died, but there was nothing she could do about it now. There was nothing she could ever do except help make sure more people didn't get infected, and they didn't let her work on the case.

Vivian squeezed her. "If Holly dies, do I have to leave?"

What!? Gail lifted her head up to stare at the six year-old. "No, absolutely not. Vivian, you can stay here forever if you want." What a horrible fear. She pulled Vivian into a hug. "No matter what, you can always live her with me, her, or us. I promise."

Nodding, Vivian sniffled again. "I want to. Can I be your real 'dopted daughter?"

Ah. That's what it was. "Honey," she said softly, "Of course you can." Holly might yell at her, they were supposed to talk about it, all three of them, but Gail didn't care. She knew Holly would be okay with this now.

"I was afraid, cause you didn't ask..."

And Gail laughed softly. "We were going to last- the other weekend, but all this stupid shiiiii- stuff happened." The slightly droll look from the child told Gail she wasn't buying the cover up. "Holly and I want to, Monkey. We want very much to have you be family. We just didn't know if you wanted that. It's a big change."
Vivian looked at Gail seriously. "I don't want to live with my grandparents."

"Then you won't." It was that simple. It had to be that simple. That had to be the answer.

"I like you guys," Vivian said in a smaller voice that implied not so much fear of her grandparents, but exceptional reluctance. How Gail wished she knew that story. "And if you adopted me, then they can't take me away, right?"

Well. Not exactly. "Not without a big fight. And you bet we'd win, Viv." They would adopt her and that was that. She knew Holly had wanted to and hoped she still did after all this shit.

Beside her, the child exhaled and rubbed her face against Gail's shirt. Good. After a while, Vivian asked, "Can I paint my room blue?"

"Sure," smiled Gail. "Dark blue? Light blue? Light to dark and we can put glow in the dark paint on the ceiling?"

Vivian giggled. "Medium blue. I like the white ceiling. Feels taller."

That was what Holly said and Gail snorted. "You and Holly, man. You're conspiring against me, I see how it goes." There was another giggle. "Blue. Okay. Want a wallpaper border too?"

"Yeah! With robots and dinosaurs and princesses and superheroes."

Princesses? "Princess dinosaurs?" She made finger hooks with her hands and rared quietly. "Grrr, I am Princess T-Rex!"

The giggles from the child were not particularly quiet. After a little more joking about who was cooler, a superhero dinosaur or a robot dinosaur, Gail suggested they try to sleep and Vivian asked, "Will you read to me?"

It was impossible to say no, so Gail reached to the nightstand and picked up the book. "Five Children and It, by E. Nesbit." Lily had brought it, a present from her and Brian. Young Holly had loved the book. She flicked the light on and scooted up a little, Vivian settling beside her. "The house was three miles from the station, but before the dusty hired fly had rattled along for five minutes the children began to put their heads out of the carriage window and to say, 'Aren't we nearly there?' And every time they passed a house, which was not very often, they all said, 'Oh, is THIS it?' But it never was, till they reached the very top of the hill, just past the chalk-quarry and before you come to the gravel-pit. And then there was a white house with a green garden and an orchard beyond, and mother said, 'Here we are!'…"

They didn't make it through a full chapter before Vivian was asleep. Marking her place carefully, Gail put the book down on her lap and closed her eyes. She decided to just wait until she was certain the girl was asleep before going to her own empty bedroom. There was something calming about having a child sleeping on you. It relaxed some of the tension from the week and Gail felt a non-work purpose about life again. With Holly, she'd found a drive to improve herself not because she thought Holly would like her more or less for it, but because it was a goal and having a goal felt good. Accomplishments felt good.

Vivian was sort of a quiet, daily accomplishment. Well, not always quiet. She'd found her voice and was coming out of her shell with more than just Gail and Holly at last. In a way, Gail could see Vivian's growth as person reflecting who Gail and Holly were. Was that what parenthood was supposed to feel like? She wondered how Traci had gotten anything done at all with Leo on her own, since Dex was certainly a sack of shit.
She yawned and felt herself grow too tired to move. There was a soft exhale beside her and Gail smiled. Her last thought as she drifted off to sleep was how easy it was to relax with Holly or Vivian beside her, but how different the reasons were.
The life of Bubble Boy was insanely boring. At least John Travolta's version got to leave the room and the one with Jake Gyllenhaal had been remotely entertaining if filled with infantile potty humor. Holly, on the other hand, was stuck in a plastic tent with a curtain around a port-a-toilet which was scanned for evil microbes before being chemically destroyed. She hadn't had a shower in days, even though she'd roasted her brain with what may or may not be a viral hemorrhagic fever, except for the emergency wash when switching to her new isolation tent and the second one after Andrea died.

At least her temperature was reverting back to normal and she hadn't started bleeding from her eyes. That made it likely that she'd survive, but they wanted to keep her under isolation and surveillance for a few more days. Ebola, for example, took up to 21 days to develop, as did Luongo, and she was nearly there with no actual evidence that she had anything other than a seriously fucked up flu. If she did happen to contract the virus, and somehow survive, there was no way to know if she'd recover with no further symptoms or have lingering pain for years.

Ugh.

Holly slammed her head back against her pillow and tried not to cry in frustration. She wanted to be at home, laughing at Gail doing something silly like shoving straws up her nose. Or maybe Vivian would want to read one of the E. Nesbit books Lily had brought them. Perhaps Lisa or Rachel would kidnap her for a sports game. And at night, Gail and Holly could sit on the back porch and cuddle. Just simple, normal, people things. Hell, Holly even missed working with idiots like Gerald or Callaghan... Best not to think about Luke. Maybe she could sleep and feel better when Gail came by.

Reaching over for her iPad, Holly glanced at the time. It was almost one. Visiting hours started at one and that meant Gail would come. They got half an hour to an hour every day and Gail hadn't missed a visit yet. Sleep was forgotten. Holly struggled to sit up and wiped her face with the medical grade wet wipe. They supposedly got you clean, but she still felt gross.

On time, the door to the outside world opened and Gail came down the hallway in paper slippers. She rolled her eyes at the young doctor (Doogie) who recited the same warnings he had every day. Holly smiled, trying not to let her exhaustion show, and covered her mouth when Gail started to recite along with him.

"Sorry, Doogie, but I know. Sit in the chair, don't unzip the door, blah blah blah. Can I talk to my wife now?"

The doctor grumbled but left them alone. "Gail, you're going to get kicked out," smiled Holly.

"Not today." She sat in the folding chair and studied Holly through the layers of plastic. "You look a little better. They said your fever is all over, no more brain melting."

Holly nodded and coughed. "It's nice to not be sweaty when I can't take a shower."

Gail's hands made fists on her thighs, as if she was keeping herself from reaching over. "Yeah, I can imagine that's annoying. Vivian's finally not complaining about daily showers, though."

"Hey, progress," smiled Holly.

"I think she's taking pity on me in front of your mom."
Smiling more, Holly pointed out, "And the hugging?"

"And hugging, yeah, which would be great except I think it's because she's worried about you." Gail paused. "We're both worried about you." Her hand twitched, as if the blonde wanted to reach over and caress Holly's face like she always did when Holly didn't feel well.

Holly tried to think about other things. "Hugging is good. Means she trusts you." Sometimes she was a little jealous that Vivian was so close to Gail. They had a connection Holly didn't share, though perhaps now she did, having seen Andrea die. What a horrible thought.

The blonde snorted. "Showers and hugs and french homework. I'm clearly super mom."

"The showers are big, honey."

"Do I lose points for bribing her with Rice Krispie Treats?"

"Maybe," laughed Holly. "Did you dip them in chocolate too?"

"I'm not going to answer that," Gail smirked.

Holly laughed again and winced at how much it hurt. That just wasn't fair. "I'll give you a pass. It's improvement."

Six years old and asserting her independence in weird ways, Vivian had loudly decried showers for quite a while. It had been her first 'rebellion' since moving in. The therapist thought it was related to stress. They moved her to a small private school at the start of the school year, with help from Elaine and Uncle Al and Al's wife. They had all agreed that being the daughter of a mass murderer and the foster child of married lesbians, it would be less stressful for her to be at a smaller school where the teachers had a little more control over the hordes. One of the school's mandates had been regular bathing and letting the children pick out their clothes, which made the shower argument rather frustrating and circular.

Following Holly's train of thought, Gail smiled, "She wore a green shirt and purple pants today."

Gail pulled her phone out and sent the picture to Holly's iPad. "Nothing matched, but she was happy."

The photo was adorable and Holly grinned. "She doing okay?" Holly missed Vivian almost as much as she missed being able to touch and hold Gail, though in very different ways. In the last day, she'd started to think they should actually adopt Vivian, to keep her in their family forever just in case she died. Now if she could figure out how to get Gail on the same page. Gail had been balking since she was worried about the grandparents, but Holly wanted the papers filed now. So if she died, she'd be sure Gail and Vivian were okay.

"Yeah, better than I am, I think." Gail pushed a hand through her hair.

Her own hands twitched and Holly itched to run her hands through it. Her hands ached to tousle the red-blonde hair and she missed the smell of it when Gail fell asleep on her shoulder. Gail liked to use Holly's shampoo because it smelled of Holly, and yet Holly felt it smelled totally different. That smell of her and Gail in one was soothing and comforting. "You need a haircut," she informed her wife.

Gail snorted. "I know. I'm going Saturday. My mother wanted to take Viv to the zoo."

"God, not the zoo." Holly hated the zoo and often cried seeing all the animals in cages as a child. As a teen she'd protested the treatment of the animals. In college she'd carried signs outside of the circuses. At least more and more circuses didn't use animals in Canada. Poor Vivian had gotten a
near lecture about why they were absolutely not going to see the circus. Gail took the, to Cirque de Solie instead.

"Don't worry, I talked her out of it and into taking her to the hardware store for paint and stencils. We're going with blue walls and little robots and dinosaurs as a border."

For the first time in days, Holly laughed. It felt good to laugh. "Robot dinosaurs?"

"It gets better! Princesses and superheroes too. I made up a whole Princess T-Rex thing last night." And Gail proceeded to make hooks with her fingers and roar. It took a while for Holly to stop laughing, but when she did she saw Gail's wide, childish smile. Oh, how Holly loved that smile. "There's my Holly," she said quietly.

Holly wiped her eyes. "Bubble Holly."

"Not a fan of the plastic wrap," agreed Gail. "I wish you didn't look so damn exhausted. I wanted to take a photo so Vivian would stop worrying."

There was a Gail type compliment in there somewhere. "Thank you? And aren't you worried?"

"No, you're going to be fine. You're not allowed to die on me yet." And there was Gail's perfectly logical, perfectly sensible argument. Holly wasn't allowed to die yet. "The fever's been gone for 24 hours, you still don't have any little Ebola markers in your blood-work. Clearly you're fine. So you're coming home by Monday and we'll go back to being a normal, busy, lesbian family. Or I take Doogie hostage."

A normal family. They were quite a muddled, confused, family half the time, especially since they'd never been able to sit and talk to Vivian about adoption. Looking at her wife, Holly frowned and swung her legs off the bed. She really just wanted another nap but this felt important too. "Hang on," she told Gail before the blonde could speak. Holly pulled out another wet wipe and cleaned her face. Then she tied her hair back and propped up the iPad so one could just make out Gail behind her.

"What are you doing?" Gail's voice was wary and confused.

"Hush." Holly tapped the record button. "Hi, Viv honey. I know this is weird and scary and Gail's being a big turd not letting you visit, but I want you to know I love you and I'll see you soon, and when I get out of here, we're going to keep you in our family forever." She pressed the button to stop recording and turned to look at Gail.

Her wife's expression was remarkably deadpan. "Keep her? She's not a puppy, Holly."

"God no, I already have a cat," coughed Holly and she sat back on the bed. "Two of you up trees? No thanks. It was hard enough with your mother."

"Is now the time to tell you our mothers are talking about us when they think I'm asleep?"

Holly frowned and studied Gail's face. She wasn't making a joke. "Gail. Our mothers are talking? To each other?"

And of course, Gail replied how Gail always replied. "Yep." The P was popped loudly. Holly hated when she did that.

"When exactly did our mothers meet?"

Gail looked thoughtful. "Last night. It's up on the top of my weirdness scale, tell you that much."
Sighing, Holly pulled the blanket back up, feeling cold again. "Awesome. Any more great news?"

"Well. I'm back at work. This is my lunch break. Vivian asked if we'd adopt her and I said yes. Oh and our mothers seem to get along." Gail was doing that thing where she slipped in something she was sure would annoy Holly into the middle of other distracting subjects. Except Holly was not annoyed at all about that. Adopt. Yes. She hadn't said that in her video, had she?

The conversation was making her feel dizzy and tired, forcing Holly to lie back down, but she caught the important part. "Oh. Good, yeah, we should adopt. I was thinking if I died, you'd need someone more mature around the house." Gail snorted and Holly smiled. They were on the same page after all. "After this, call Anne, will you?"

"I already did. The paperwork will be ready by the time you're out of here. After this, we're going on vacation. Your mom can come."

"Gail," sighed Holly. "Please get the adoption papers started. If I die, I want that at least to be going."

Gail exhaled loudly. "You're not allowed to die, Holly. Not for something this stupid. You're a good doctor, you're safe, careful, and you didn't make a single fucking mistake. So … Nothing's wrong, you're not infected, and you'll be fine. Okay?"

Holly smiled, closing her eyes. "Okay, honey." She heard Gail mutter 'alright' and laughed. "I really want to keep talking, but ...

"But that took all your energy to call me a turd, baby, I get it."

Squinting one eye open, Holly saw Gail's smirk. "I'm going to take a nap. You don't have to stay."

"I get to be here for another ten minutes, Holly. I'm staying here until they kick me out. I'd stay here all night if they'd let me."

Holly opened her other eye. "And leave Vivian with our mothers?"

"You're right, that's horrible." Gail smiled and sat in her line of sight. "I love you. Go to sleep."

When Holly woke up, hours later, her dinner had been left with a note to watch the video. She tapped the iPad to life and saw a video message from Gail. The still shot was of Gail with Vivian in her lap sitting in their home office. "This is going to make me cry," sighed Holly, but she pressed play anyway.

"Okay," said the Gail in the video. "Go."

"She can see me?" Vivian leaned in to the lens. Behind her, Gail promised she could and Vivian grinned. "Hi!" She waved and Gail gently tugged her back from the camera. "I saw the video and Gail already promised I could stay so now you're gonna have to get better and I can paint my room and stay here forever." Vivian turned to look at Gail. "Do we say it now?" Gail assured her that they did.

As one, her wife and her foster daughter said, "Plus ones forever!"

 Yep. Waterworks.

Finally it had been Friday. Finally it was Saturday. Friday had the best news Gail had heard in
seventeen days. Friday was when Dr. Wainwright pulled her aside as she left visiting hours and told her they were sending Holly home on Sunday.

"Wait... For real?"

"Absolutely real," smiled the doctor. "Your wife had aseptic meningitis."

Gail frowned. "I know viral and bacterial, Doc. What's aseptic?"

"It means we have no clue how she got it," he sighed. "The ... Er. Your patient zero wasn't tested for it. I asked the labs to run a test on the leftover samples, but it's likely she was infected while she was in the room. It's rare, but it happens. With the stress impacting her immune system, she was the perfect host."

It was just meningitis. Gail would have laughed if it wasn't so sad. "You treated her for it?"

"No," he replied flatly.

Narrowing her eyes, Gail realized he was joking. Still, she threatened him in a dry voice, "You know, they gave me my gun back." They'd never taken it away, but it was the principle of the thing. She rested a hand on her empty hip warningly.

Dr. Wainwright smiled. "Supportive treatment, what we were already doing, was all she needed."

Exhaling, Gail pushed her hands through her hair. "Why can't she come home now?"

"The CDC is running some more tests. They asked us to wait another two days." That would take them to the maximum time for Luongo to display symptoms, but if Holly didn't have it after all this, the odds were she wasn't going to. She was okay.

"Stupid Americans," muttered Gail unkindly, and she didn't care. "Sorry, I had an international case a few months ago. I'm not real fond of their last-minute cavalry bullshit."

The doctor smiled. "I understand. I'm not much of a fan myself. Can't even get health care right."

Friday they prepped the house, cleaning everything. They were nearly done with the paint work as well. Gail informed the school that Vivian would be out of school for the next week, on a much needed vacation. She also finally told them exactly where Holly had been all this time, though not exactly why. The news would eventually get out. Friday blurred into Saturday, and it was a day for a haircut. When Gail came home with lunch, the downstairs was empty. "Hello the house," she called upstairs.

The thundering of childish steps in the upstairs hallway preceded the exclamation of surprise. "Wow, your hair is cool!" Vivian had paint smeared across her face and bounced down the stairs. "Miss Elaine! Miss Lily! Gail's hair is bright!" Catching hold of Vivian, Gail swung her up to her hip and let her ruffle the haircut.

A moment later, Elaine came down with paint on her POLICE baseball cap and nose. "Ah, I see we're platinum again," she smiled.

Lily, oddly paint free, was right behind her. "Does she do that often?"

"She did it for years." Elaine had never really been a fan of that color, but seemed alright with it just then.
Defensively, Gail pointed out the real reason. "Holly likes it." Holly absolutely adored the cut and color. Even though Gail had kept the cut, off and on, it had been almost two years since she'd bleached it that blonde. It was a present.

In Gail's court was Vivian as well. "I think it's cool!" Gail stuck her tongue out to the mothers and carried Vivian into the kitchen. She plunked Vivian on the kitchen counter and started dishing out lunch.

"Holly will be upset she can't play with your hair," Lily informed her, helping with the glasses. "Though I suppose she won't see it till tomorrow anyway."

"I'm just grateful it's not black again," sighed Elaine, taking her hat off.

Since Lily had not seen the photos, Gail was obliged to dig out the album and show both her and Vivian the proof that until shortly before the academy, she'd had jet black hair and fingernails. The fingernail color had stuck around until shortly after she met Holly, at which point she'd stopped painting them at all. Huh.

Vivian looked through the photos, going back as far as Gail had pictures. "Do we have a photo album?"

While they had the albums from Vivian's parents, Gail had put them away in the attic for now. "We do. Remember I took photos when we went to the batting cages?"

Her mother scoffed, "I'm sorry, Gail, but I simply cannot believe you played softball willingly."

With a sigh she knew Holly would have called overly dramatic, Gail flipped the photo book to the end, where Holly had put a photo of Gail actually making a pretty dramatic catch at the division's last game against 27. It was her only star moment. Ever. You couldn't see Holly shouting at her what to do. "Sorry to disappoint again, Mother."

Elaine stared at the photo, as well as the one where Holly was dumping a cooler of water on Gail's head later that day. She flipped back a couple pages and looked sad. "I seem to have missed a lot," she murmured.

"Out loud voice," remarked Gail, ruffling Vivian's hair. "Why does my mother have paint on her face, monkey?"

"Cause she's taller." There was some odd logic found in the heart of a child and Gail laughed. "Will you help finish painting my room? I wanna put tiaras on the t-rex and capes on the stegosauruses."

"Okay, let me put a hat on so you don't paint my hair."

Gail ended up with a bandana covering her hair and they painted more than just Vivian's room. The stencils were done in layers, with the dinosaurs as robots and super heroes going down first, a break for a snack, and then the tiaras. There were no actual princesses. In fact, it ended up being dinosaurs all around, some were robots, some were princesses, and some were super heroes. Lily had found the most awesome stencils to use. After they did Vivian's room, they finally painted the downstairs (having done the master bedroom a few days before), moving everything away from the wall to get the color Holly had picked out up and done.

An early dinner came by with Oliver and Celery, who were quickly enlisted to help move the furniture back into place, and invited to stay for a Peck barbecue extravaganza with Steve and Traci and Leo. The house was noisy and warm and welcoming, which was a change towards normal. Just feeling the relief of knowing Holly would be home the next day made everyone happier and easier to
Oliver stuck around the longest, sitting on the porch with Gail and a beer after everyone else had gone and Vivian had fallen sound asleep. In the kitchen, Celery and Lily were cleaning. While Gail had come to think of herself as a fairly neat and clean person, her mother in law spent an inordinate amount of time cleaning. It was probably deflected stress. But Oliver had not cleaned on his many daytime visits, bringing her news and donuts.

"Surprised to see your mom still here, darlin'," he told her.

"We're making up, I guess," Gail sighed. She swirled the beer in the bottle and sipped it again.

Oliver shook his head. "Don't say it like it's a bad thing," he chastised. "She's changed a lot. Reminds me of Constable Armstrong again."

It was weird to think that right here was one of the few people who would remember her mother pre-Peck. She could have just asked him to start with. "Didn't she say you were the worst rookie?"

Smiling, Oliver nodded. "Her other rookies are all Inspectors now, so she has a point." Gail snorted, making Oliver laugh.

"You're the best TO, though. And the best White Shirt." She leaned towards him, bumping shoulders. "And a good friend."

His eyes widened. "I'm your friend?"

"Not if you're going to make a big deal about it," she muttered.

The man smiled broadly. "How are you holding up? Really. I know you came back to work, but you get Holly tomorrow and... I'd be nervous."

Gail sighed. "It's been really hard, Ollie. Scary." She got nothing, no benefits at all, by lying to Oliver, or hiding her feelings. He was safe. She'd sat with him enough times in the last five years, when one or the other had a flashback or a really bad day. They were each other's support.

He draped an arm around her shoulders. "It's not supposed to happen like that, is it? You and me, we get to be the ones who are hurt and our wives have to wait it out and watch."

"Andy told me about the Anthrax scare thing," she muttered. Part of her wanted to squirm away from the hug. Part of her was trying to remember a dad hug like this. Bill was never much for hugs. The largest part of her appreciated the fact that Oliver was doing this.

"Well. That's Andy. She's a target for weird and stupid shit," sighed Oliver and Gail giggled. "You just... This was not on my radar, darlin'. You get political storms."

"And car bombs. And kidnapping."

Oliver sighed, "You're ruining my moment, Peck." Muttering an apology, Gail leaned against the man quietly. "This is the hard part about being a TO, you know. I wish I'd kept you another year, made you teach a couple more people. But it doesn't get better. You protect them and you teach them and then..."

Ah. He was talking about Snowflake. "Samantha did everything right," she told him. And funnily enough, Gail actually believed that.
"She did."

"I taught her everything I could, Ollie. That could have happened to anyone."

"Yeah," he sighed and let go of Gail's shoulders. "So hey, I saw your kid hugging. She hugged you. When'd that happen?"

Gail smiled softly. "Days and days ago. We had a talk about how bad all this was." She sipped her beer and explained how she was now calling the kid a monkey, which Oliver found appropriately Gail-esque. They worked their way down to the end of the beers and Gail added, "She told me about her parents."

Of course Oliver knew she knew, but that wasn't the point. "You need to stop calling yourself a fake mom, Gail," he said gently. "You do all the mom stuff. You put on bandaids, make lunch—"

"Deal with her biological grandparents arguing that they should have custody." She hadn't told Oliver about that. Hell, she and Holly hadn't really told anyone. Oliver, though, he lived in Gail's world too, and he knew what the courts liked in those cases. Family, biological family, was usually better than random strangers.

"They're alive?" When Gail nodded, he grunted and sipped his beer. "Shit, darlin', that's not easy."

That was pretty much how Gail felt. "My whole fucking life has been a big pile of 'wait and see' this month," she grumbled. She couldn't tell him yet about the adoption papers either. Not until she had an idea which way it would go.

Oliver nudged her with his elbow. "And you, my dear, are not patient," he teased.

The smile on her face was unbidden. "No, I'm really not."

Her oldest cop friend looked over the lawn. "What does Vivian want?"

"She doesn't want to go." And Oliver gently poked Gail's arm. "She asked me if we'd adopt her."

"You said yes, I hope."

Feeling embarrassed and awkward, Gail ducked her head. Okay. She had to tell him now. "Yeah." So she told him something she'd not told her mother or brother. "I started the paperwork. We're going to file it Monday."

Oliver smiled. "There you go. Look, I'll go to court and tell everyone you're amazing. Hell, everyone will."

Chewing her lip, Gail whispered, "I ... I fucked up adopting Sophie, Ollie. They saw the video with Perik and said I was too messed up."

A warm hand rested on her thigh. "That was years ago, darlin', and a different person."

"Yeah but-"

"But nothing. You've been fostering her for months, Gail. They know you're not too messed up."

But Gail did worry about ruining it again. She'd almost lost everything the last time she'd tried to adopt. That had been the darkest time in her early relationship with Holly. Well, maybe the roughest. It had been hard enough having to give up on Sophie, but to lose Vivian would cut both her and Holly to the bone. And she knew exactly how messed up she still was. Gail had blown her top, once,
at Vivian over the whole stupid shower thing. And she'd been a shitty mom the last weekend, not even knowing if her kid had eaten after sleeping on the couch in a horrible fit of depression, missing her wife.

It scared her. Sure, Gail had wanted to be a parent, but clearly she was an idiot and didn't know a fucking thing.

She didn't dump that on Oliver tonight, hugging him and even Celery, before going to her room saying she need to get some sleep. She did need the sleep. She was exhausted but Gail was unable to actually fall asleep. Everything was still just off. She lay and stared at the ceiling, contemplating the fact that she couldn't sleep, which wasn't any more fun that anything else. Around three, her door eased open. Gail had left it cracked open in case Vivian couldn't sleep.

"Come on up," Gail said, quietly. It was a new offer, one she'd never made before. She'd been sure it wouldn't have been accepted before now. After a moment's hesitation, the bed dipped a tiny bit as Vivian climbed in. "Can't sleep, Monkey?"

"Not a monkey," grumbled Vivian, worming her way under the covers.

They lay in the bed, not quiet close enough to be touching, but near enough to be supportive of each other. That was pretty easy, seeing as the bed was a king sized. Gail had picked it after the car bomb, saying she wanted more than just a corner when Holly sprawled over the mattress. Thinking of Holly, Gail closed her eyes, trying to convince her brain it was okay to sleep. "Tomorrow," she muttered to herself. "Tomorrow will be better."

Vivian muttered back, "It'll be better, 'cause Holly makes stuff better."

"You bet she does." Gail smiled.

The house was quiet for a little while. "Is your dad crazy too? Besides just being mean and stupid." Clearly the other day's conversation had stayed with the girl.

It was funny. Gail had spent hours worrying about how to explain to a kid that she didn't have a relationship with her mother, but here was other end, the one she'd ignored. The fact that she really didn't have a dad in her life anymore. "No, he's a bigot. Do you know what that means?"

"Means he doesn't like people for stupid reasons?"

Close enough, decided Gail. "He doesn't like that Steve married Traci, because she's black. And he doesn't like that I married Holly."

Vivian sounded confused, "But... Why not? Is it 'cause she's brown?"

Ah, children. She hadn't explained why Bill didn't approve of Gail being with Holly. "No, because she's a woman." She paused. "Well, maybe the brown thing too, but mostly he got really upset I'm a lesbian." Gail folded her arms under her head and looked at the ceiling. Holly wasn't really brown so much as Gail was incredibly pale.

Beside her, Vivian mirrored the pose and Gail tried not to smirk. "Did he hate all your girlfriends?"

Gail exhaled softly. "Holly's been my only girlfriend, kiddo." Vivian muttered an 'oh' and Gail smiled.

"What about boyfriends?"
Kids were too smart. "Some he liked more than others."

"Is Holly's dad not here because he doesn't like you?"

Gail laughed. "No, Brian likes me. He just doesn't like to fly. If Holly got real sick, he'd be here, though. He loves her a lot." Which did make the fact that her own father hadn't so much as texted after her car had been blown up rather painful. She needed to change the subject. "Listen, I have an idea. We should surprise Holly."

"With cookies?"

"With a vacation."

Vivian sat up. "On a plane? Can we go to Miss Lily's and meet Holly's dad?"

Gail laughed softly. That handled that worry. No fear of planes here. "No. In a car. I … we have a cottage up north." She'd signed the paperwork to make it half Holly's cottage too as a birthday present. "It's on a lake, with fish, and a boat, and a grill. And you can have your own room there with a view of the lake. But! You can't tell Holly. Otherwise it's not a surprise. Okay?"

"Okay!" Vivian bounced on the bed. "I've never been to a cottage!"

"Neither had Holly," smiled Gail, rolling to her side and relaxing.

Vivian was sitting up, excited. "What's it like?"

"I just told you," Gail laughed. "Lake, cottage, bedrooms."

"Is there a tree and a swing?"

"Two. There's a tire swing out back and a rope swing over the lake. You can swing off it into the water." With a loud exhale, Vivian announced that was cool and demanded to know if Gail had done that. "Sure did. Still do." Holly had laughed when Gail did it, and laughed more when Steve swung as well. His belly flop at the end may have been part of why.

There were a lot of fun moments at the cottage she wanted to share with Vivian. Like the fishing and swimming and s'mores and all the fun things. But she knew, right then, that when Vivian was twelve she would never have to find her way in from town. And when she was fifteen, she'd never spend a night out alone in the woods. Not even if she asked. Because she was not going to be that kind of Peck. Never.

Vivian bounced again. "And I get my own room?"

"You can have my old room, or Steve's."

She wrinkled her face. "Ew. I want yours. Can I have your room?"

Gail smiled. "Yes, you may."

The girl scowled at the grammatical correction. "Wait… where'll you sleep?"

"In the master suite with Holly. Come on, let's try to get some sleep, Monkey." Vivian gave Gail a look like she was stupid for thinking the girl was going to be able to sleep now. "Okay, how about I get your book and we read a bit?"

Like magic, the girl was sound asleep within half a chapter. Gail put the book down and looked at
the child, innocent and trusting. This wasn't the same feeling she had when she watched Holly sleep, but it felt related. Maybe this was empathy or caring or one of those things that the ice bitch of Fifteen was absolutely shitty at.

Maybe she was getting the hang of this mom thing after all.
The doctors poked and prodded her, asking her every question they’d asked repeatedly for the last eighteen days. Almost three freakin’ weeks. She'd been in a damn tent, unable to hug anyone or even hold hands for nearly three weeks. Holly was going mad for some physical contact that wasn't a doctor or a nurse, usually armed with a needle or a thermometer. But she didn't have a fever, she didn't have a single trace of Luongo River Fever in her blood, and she felt fine, if totally exhausted. She wanted a shower, a hug, and to sleep in her own damn bed for a change. And she didn't care what order that came in.

"Okay, Dr. Stewart," smiled Dr. Wainwright, walking into the room without a hazmat level suit on. He had a mask around his neck, and his hands were naked of latex protection. This was good. She wasn't a leper anymore!

"Okay?" She was shaking with nerves. She could leave? Finally she could go home, sleep in her own bed, feel Gail's arms around her?

He nodded. "Okay. Your blood work is maddeningly perfect. With the exception of the worst timing ever for a round of meningitis, you are healthy. You have amazing cholesterol levels, by the way."

Holly laughed. That was one of the most mundane comments she’d heard from anyone besides Gail for a week. It felt like forever. "I watch what I eat."

"I'm just saying, for someone who was as sick as you were, you're in very good health."

"And I haven't gone running for days," she joked, tying her hair back. "Can I get the hell out of here?"

The doctor laughed as well. "Please do not let me get between you and the lovely, if terrifying, young lady waiting for you."

Waiting? Wainwright gestured behind her so Holly turned around and looked at the door. She blinked at the form lingering just inside the doorframe, silent and smiling. Holding Holly's travel mug was a platinum blonde in tight black jeans, her favorite chunky boots that were falling apart and, of course, not tied, and an oversized sweater that Holly was pretty sure was hers… And the blonde had that haircut again.

"Hey," Holly smiled, feeling more awkward than she had after the first time they kissed in the interrogation room. She was crying already out of pure relief. Nearly three weeks of pure tension, wondering if she’d been infected by god knows what, wondering if other people were being infected, was absolutely draining. She pressed a hand to her mouth, trying to stop crying.

"Hey," smiled Gail. And just like that, Gail had her arms around her, pulling Holly close. Gail's hand was in her hair, drawing her head in so their cheeks were pressed against each other, and the other was on her shoulder, keeping her still and close. Holly had no idea where the coffee went and didn't actually care right then. She had Gail in her arms finally and it felt so wonderful. Finally, Holly was safe and right where she should be.

"Hey." Holly breathed softly, wrapping her arms around Gail's waist and squeezing her hard. She pressed her head against Gail's neck and sniffled into her shoulder. God. The hug felt phenomenal. Gail was good at hugs. No, Gail was great at hugs. Gail's hugs felt like home. When you got one, it was the best hug in the universe.
"You said that already," Gail replied, just as quietly.

"Sounded familiar." They both laughed softly, wetly, and Holly realized Gail was crying too. "I'm okay," she whispered.

Nodding, Gail let go and cupped Holly's face with her hands. "God, Holly, I was scared to death." And she leaned in to kiss Holly. The kiss was soft and tender, a gentle reminder of things between them.

They stood there, foreheads touching, for a long moment, just savoring being able to touch. Finally. "You cut your hair."

With a smile, Gail replied, "Your breath is nasty."

Holly started laughing and smothered her face in Gail's sweater. "I knew it. You just had to ruin this tender moment, too."

"Hey, I'm not the one who's been stuck inside for eighteen days," quipped Gail, kissing her forehead. "Come on, there's a shower and I brought you real clothes. Viv and your mom are waiting in the lobby."

"They can come in…" Holly let go of her death grip on Gail and settled for holding her hand.

"Really? Because Vivian wanted to see the space tent." Gail reached down and held up the coffee. It must have been on a table.

Holly smiled. "I'm sure it's a bit smelly in here."

"I thought it was just you," teased Gail dryly. "How about you take your coffee, shower, and I'll show Viv the tent and then we can wheel you the hell out of here."

Wheel? "You're kidding, right? I can walk."

Smiling ear to ear, Gail shook her head. "Hospital rules."

Annoying. Holly wasn't going to say no to the shower and let the nurse show her where it was, right after finishing the best coffee in her entire life. She had only had instant coffee, but only until she'd gotten sick. Then it was no coffee at all and it had sucked. As promised, Gail had brought her a change of clothes. Comfort clothes. Jeans, one of Gail's sweatshirts from the academy, and beat up sneakers Holly loved. She even brought Holly's shampoo, a soft towel, and a bar of real soap. Oh god, she loved that woman.

She washed herself twice. She scrubbed her skin until it tingled and dug her fingers into her hair to get down to the scalp. She took time to scrub between her toes. Not that she didn't always wash herself well, but this time she took extra care. Every inch of herself was washed throughly and carefully. In doing so, she found a few odd bruises and scrapes that she couldn't remember getting.

When Holly stepped out of the shower room, feeling nearly totally clean for the first time in weeks, Gail was leaning on the waiting wheelchair. "Come on," groaned Holly.

"Your chariot is a legal requirement. You know I wouldn't break the law for you." They both knew Gail damn well would, but Holly got into the chair. She didn't want to admit how damn tired she was and that just the shower made her want a nap. Meningitis sucked. "Ready to blow this joint?"

"You don't even know," Holly snarled and let Gail push her out into the hallway.
The hall was mostly empty, just having her mother and Vivian standing. Well. Her mother was standing. Vivian was practically vibrating, she was bouncing on her toes so much. Holly had never seen the girl look that happy before. Was it for her? "Holly!" The cheerful assault of sound preceded Vivian running full tilt up to the chair.

Every single worry Holly had about being left out of whatever closeness had transpired between Gail and Vivian vanished. Vivian was looking at her like just seeing Holly was as good as getting a pony for her birthday. When Gail cleared her throat, Vivian skidded to a stop and looked up. "Ask," Gail said, almost absently.

And Vivian asked very carefully. "Can I hug you?"

Her heart swelled and her eyes watered. Oh. This was what parenthood felt like. This was what it was like to have the trust and love of a child. Holly flipped the wheel locks on the chair and smiled, trying not to cry again. "Of course you can." She held her hands out and Vivian seemed to just fly into her lap, throwing her arms around Holly and squeezing her almost as much as Gail had.

It was the first time Vivian had hugged her.

There wasn't a word Holly could put on the feelings she had. She held on to the girl, eyes closed, trying to express everything in that hug. She felt Gail's hand on her shoulder, gently reminding her that they were both there. They were parents, fake or otherwise. "I missed you," sighed Vivian, letting go. "Can I ride with you in the chair? Please please?"

Looking up, Holly saw Gail smiling indulgently. Of course her wife was okay with it. "Only if you sit still," agreed Holly and she settled Vivian in her lap, both facing forward. "Hi, Mom."

"Hi, Holls," smiled her mother. Lily took the bag of Holly's crap from Gail and leaned down to briefly hug Holly about the shoulders and kiss her forehead. "It's nice to see you." The blasé simplicity of the statement made Holly laugh. "Your father wants you to call him later," she added and fell into step beside the wheelchair.

There were a lot of people to call after all this. "Can I call him tomorrow?"

"Whenever. You know he's probably forgotten to eat or shower," sighed Lily. "Obsessive workaholic."

"You're one to talk," laughed Gail.

"Yes, yes, I know. Pot, kettle."

Together, Vivian, Holly, and Gail replied, "Potato, tomato." When Lily looked surprised and confused, they all laughed.

They made it to the car and home, with Vivian filling in the awkward silence with news about everything Holly had missed in the last eighteen days. Including the part where she shoved one of her friends down the steps at school, but they made up so it was okay. Gail filled in a couple blanks, like how they'd painted the upstairs, including the master bedroom and hallway. It was the most Vivian had talked in one go, ever. Usually getting more than a couple sentences out in a row was like pulling teeth. Even so, this was just a recap and very little about how she actually felt about anything.

At the house was a small party. Barely a party, it was more an ongoing stream of people who wanted to stop in and check that Holly was, indeed, okay. Holly's coworkers, Gail's, and both their friends made quick visits. Lisa and Rachel were there first, actually waiting for them at the house, both
wanting to hug her and explain that they'd not been allowed to see her, but yes, Gail had kept them in the loop. Lisa was on her best behavior and Gail didn't even once call her Bitch' Tits.

Almost everyone brought food, too, which kept Gail and Vivian from smothering Holly with attention the entire time. Every new food had to have room found for it, but Gail had to sample everything, being Gail, and Vivian was almost like her sidekick. Still, Vivian wanted to sit beside Holly and lean against her, as if reassuring herself that Holly was, really, there. Similarly, every chance she got, Gail was with her, holding her hand or stealing kisses and just touching her. At one point, Andy warned Gail her reputation for being mean was shattered, so Gail told her at least Andy's rep for being an idiot was intact.

Surprising Holly, Elaine came over and stayed the entire time. She spooked every single police officer who stopped by, except for Uncle Al. The only good parts about that was Elaine's presence stopped Gail's friends from staying a long time, and watching Nick and Sam both visibly pale in front to Elaine seemed to make Vivian less nervous around them. Holly's friends from the lab, including Rodney, were also creeped by Elaine being there. Lisa found it hilarious, while Rachel teased John for calling Elaine 'ma'am' the whole time.

The last thing Holly wanted to admit was how tired she was, but Gail seemed to spot it and informed the last round of people that they were calling it an early night. Steve, who was less weirded out by his mother's presence than anyone besides Gail, used his talent for gossip to magically stop anyone else from coming by. He gave Holly a big hug before leaving, telling her he loved her more than Gail. Naturally Gail slugged him in the arm, but the Peck siblings shared an awkward sort of hug before the house was empty of everyone but them and their mothers.

"I want another shower," muttered Holly. "I know that's weird, but I just don't feel clean yet."

"Go for it." Gail had a laughing Vivian slung over her shoulder, having rescued her from the cookies. Or the cookies from Vivian. Or the cookies for Gail. Or all of the above. "I think tonight's a good night to call it in early."

"And get up early an' go to the cottage for a whole week," cheered Vivian, dangling happily.

Cottage? Holly arched her eyebrows at her wife. "We're going to the cottage tomorrow?" Gail had mentioned a vacation, but Holly assumed she meant a couple days off to rest. Not an entire week.

Gail rolled her eyes. "It was supposed to be a surprise, you monkey." She tickled Vivian, who squirmed and laughed. Happy laughter. Holly couldn't stop smiling if she tried. She had missed this so much. It had changed so much already.

"Gail, please put Vivian down before you drop her," admonished Elaine, taking the cookies away from both of them. "And no more cookies."

"Hey, this is my house, Mother." Gail didn't actually sound angry or annoyed. "If we want to have cookies all night, we will!"

"And stomach aches in the morning and no cottage." Elaine sounded like the voice of weary experience.

Mother and daughter shared a look and Gail sighed, putting Vivian down. "You know, you eat three boxes of Girl Guide cookies once and they never let you live it down." Vivian laughed and was drafted to help set the table for an actual dinner dinner, while Holly went to shower again. She just couldn't feel clean after that long with only the damn wipes.
When she got out of the shower, Gail was in the bedroom pulling out Holly's comfiest pajamas and a robe. "You don't have to do all this, Gail," sighed Holly.

"Are you saying that because my hovering is pissing you off or because you're supposed to say it?"

"Bit of both," she admitted and Gail nodded, stopping her fussing and leaning against the nightstand. "You're going to watch me change?"

Gail just smiled. "I'm pretty sure getting to see you naked is one of the bennies of being married."

It felt embarrassing, for reasons Holly wasn't entirely sure of. Maybe it was just days of changing in a stupid plastic tent, behind a curtain, knowing there were nurses outside. When Holly stalled, Gail held a hand out towards her.

"I'm not sure why I'm feeling so weird," sighed Holly, but she took Gail's hand and let herself be pulled into a loose hug.

At first, Gail didn't say anything. She just smiled at Holly, giving her that really soft, shy smile that was for her alone. The smile only Holly probably knew existed. Then they kissed. "Your breath smells better," noted Gail and Holly snickered. "I really, really missed this."

"My breath or the kissing?"

"Bit of both." Gail grinned, her eyes mostly closed, and it was that big, happy, toothy grin. Oh, how Holly loved that grin. "Mostly I missed getting to touch you. You're making me soft, Stewart."

Holly smiled and kissed Gail again, lingeringly. She was too tired to want to start anything, but kissing was good. "The cuddly Peck underbelly is all mine," she remarked. Holly rubbed her palms on Gail's upper arms. "You are amazing."

"I know," Gail replied as though that was the most obvious thing in the world. "So are you."

Normally Gail was flippant about that, but she had a crease between her eyebrows.

They kissed one more time before Holly went to pull on her pajamas. "I can tell you're thinking deep things, Detective."

Her wife sat on the edge of the bed and flopped onto her back to stare at the ceiling. "I feel a million years older than rookie me, y'know. Like ... Even if I screw up, it's okay because I know how to clean up and keep going. I used to be so freaked about messing up."

Digging out a pair of fuzzy socks, Holly pointed out, "Well you're not a pale fail anymore, but you sure still eat like a garbage pail. Did you really eat three boxes of mint cookies in one go?"

"And puked on the ride to the cottage," sighed Gail. "Puked on Steve, though, so that's okay. How'd you know it was mint?"

"I've seen our freezer." Holly smiled and tried to picture that event. She walked up to Gail and stood between her legs. "You going to lie there all night and miss dinner?"

The blonde propped herself up on her elbows. "No. You're too tired for me to try to get in your pants."

"Our mothers are downstairs. With our kid." Holly paused. "That video was really cute, by the way."
"She wants us to adopt her, Holly," Gail chewed her lip. "I mean, this is real now. You sign the papers, we can drop 'em off on the way out of town."

The face was one Holly knew, but it surprised her. "Hey, why are you scared? We've been talking about this, seriously, for a couple years, honey." Did Gail not want to be a permanent parent? Or was this just nerves... She leaned forward and touched Gail's face. "You want to be a mom," she reminded.

"I do," agreed Gail quickly. "I'm just ... It's real now. Like this is really going to happen, isn't it?" She grimaced. "This is part of why I hate weddings."

Holly arched her eyebrows. "Honey, you're going to have to unpack that one for me."

And Gail did. "It's the planning and the waiting and the talking. It's frustrating and it builds up all these expectations." She groaned and sat up, pulling herself towards Holly and pressing her face into her wife's stomach. "I just wish we could elope adopt."

She couldn't help but laugh. "Pretty sure it doesn't work that way." Holly smiled and stroked Gail's hair. It was so fine and soft right now, beautiful and platinum. "All this work'll make it worthwhile. Besides, if you were pregnant you'd have to hold out for ten months."

Gail leaned back. "Ten." She didn't ask it as a question.

"39 weeks is 9.75 months," Holly pointed out. "Factor in another week for insemination, assuming it took on the first try which-"

"Please stop," laughed Gail. "Oh my god, you made it sound so clinical."

Holly smiled and stepped back, taking Gail's hands off her waist and tugging her up. "Come on. I know you. You're still hungry, Garbage Pail."

They went back downstairs holding hands. Holly got a smile from her mother and a plea from Vivian to play Guess Who? with her after dinner.

Apparently Gail and Elaine cheated at the game by being able to guess who just by looking at Vivian's face.

After dinner and a game, Gail convinced Vivian that something quieter was in order. Grandly, Viv let Holly pick the movie and they ended up watching Frozen. That was how Gail found herself half-dozing on the couch with Holly curled up against her and Vivian's head in her lap.

She could hear Elaine and Lily in the kitchen, talking quietly. It was a moment of domesticity she'd never even seen before, let alone envisioned for her own life. They were heading up to the cottage tomorrow morning and they should really all get to bed so they could get up and load the car and go early Monday morning, but Gail was loathe to disturb their slice of quiet just now. Holly was here, home, with Gail's arm around her shoulders. Vivian's head was a comfortable weight on her leg.

Gail closed her eyes, smiling and savoring the moment. Domesticity. Was it supposed to be like this? Have a hard job you loved, a beautiful spouse who adored you, and a kid who trusted you? That seemed like everything her parents had demanded of her, but in a way that didn't hurt so much.

"They're talking about us," whispered Holly, shifting a little to settle her head on Gail a little more comfortably.
"Mm, yeah, they do that." Gail gently squeezed Holly's shoulders, drawing her closer.

"It's creepy. They sound like they like each other."

Gail tilted her head to listen better. Right then, Lily was telling Elaine about Holly playing basketball as a girl, as had Lily, and Gail was honestly surprised her mother hadn't said something snide. "The idea that straight women like sports may be surprising my mother," she noted and Holly giggled.

From the kitchen, Elaine's voice drifted over a little louder. "You should probably go to bed, sweetheart."

"My lap is a pillow," replied Gail as she smoothed Vivian's hair down.

The floor creaked and Elaine poked her head over. "You used to sleep like that on me all the time. Every time we watched The Great Escape she'd be asleep right after the Nazis found the prisoners escaping."

While Gail remembered always missing the second half of the movie, she didn't remember falling asleep on her mother's lap. "That's cute," smiled Holly, kissing her cheek. "I'm exhausted. Why am I so tired? I just sat in a room for a couple weeks..." It was closer to three weeks, when Gail thought about it.

As Holly sat up, Gail started the lengthy process of rousing Vivian enough to get her to bed. "Because you had meningitis and you spent almost three weeks in a constant state of terror," she explained. "Your dopamine receptors overloaded."

Holly poked Gail's arm. "That's not how dopamine works." She started to explain the actual science and Gail leaned over to kiss her before it got too deep.

"Stop talking, Doctor. Go to bed. I'll wrangle the kid." With a huff, Holly went upstairs and Gail grinned. "I'm going to get Viv into bed and crash," she told her mother. Wrangling Vivian was always a bit of a drama filled process. She just hated being woken up to go to bed.

Elaine nodded. "Lily can let me out. We're almost done cleaning."

It was still weird, having this new relationship with her mother. They didn't talk much about Gail's career, or the agony Elaine had caused her years ago. It was just... something that had happened and now they were starting over. After all, Holly gave Gail a second chance. This was totally different, but still something that felt right.

"Thanks," mumbled Gail, feeling incredibly awkward. She nudged Vivian into sitting up and then picked her up. "Come on, Monkey," she said to the girl who draped her arms over Gail's shoulders and whined she wasn't tired.

Her mother gave Gail an amused look. "Every child on the planet says that."

"Even Steve?"

"Your brother..." Elaine shook her head. "If you'd like, I can put her in bed."

"Nah, I got it." Gail hooked her hands under Vivian's tush, hitching her up a little. It had taken months for Vivian to get comfortable with Gail doing this and she had a feeling it would be little iffy even if Holly tried. Letting Elaine do it was out of the question. The shared insomnia with Gail and the last few weeks had made them much closer. Right now, though, Vivian was in the absolute boneless state that exhausted children had. She had quickly fallen soundly back asleep. Gail was
Nodding, Elaine looked hesitant, like she wanted to say something or hug Gail. In the end, she nodded again. "Gail… Be patient." What? Gail raised her eyebrows in question and her mother sighed. "With Holly. It's much harder to be on this side. She's going to be … fragile for a while."

It was likely her mother meant emotionally, not physically. "We'll be fine, Mother—"

But Elaine cut her off. "Gail, listen to me. She's never dealt with the possibility of her own death at work before. Do you remember the first time you were shot at?"

Gail blinked a little. It was years ago, over a decade. No... Two decades ago. She'd been a teenager, riding in Oliver's car for some experience bullshit not long after she'd been almost arrested for borrowing Steve's car. That was when a gang had taken pot shots at the patrol car. After a moment she nodded, "Yeah, I remember." She'd been terrified, though not as much as the year before sitting in a car with a fucking bomb under her. Still that moment where she realized her life was at risk when it hadn't been before had spooked her for weeks. It was the only time she'd had second thoughts about being a cop.

"That's what this is, for her. So be patient with her. She's just going to need you to be there, or not. Listen to what she doesn't say."

The bizarre sensation of having her mother give her relationship advice was tempered by the fact that Gail knew she was right. Ugh. "Okay," she said slowly. Gail was so used to the fact that her job was dangerous, she hardly thought about it anymore. You couldn't dwell on that and keep moving in most situations.

But that wasn't Holly's life. That wasn't her job, for damn sure. Holly, for the most part, stayed in a lab where it was nice and safe and people didn't generally try to kill you.

"And … if you need to talk about it, Gail…" Her mother hesitated. "I know you still see your therapist but you can talk to me."

And that was extra helpings of weird. "Okay," she repeated slowly. "Were— Were you freaked out when Dad was shot?"

Elaine startled. "You remember that? You were four." When Gail shrugged, her mother sighed. "I don't know why that surprises me. Yes, I was. It was very different than when he was hurt before you and Steven were born. After…" Elaine looked at Vivian. "Things change when you're a parent, Gail. You have to worry about bigger things. Different things."

Resisting the urge to hug Viv closer, Gail nodded. She didn't want to wake her up if the girl was still asleep, and she certainly felt asleep. "Few years ago, Holly got knocked out by Sam. We were playing softball." Elaine arched her eyebrows in amusement. "Ollie made me. Anyway, I was … I was really mad when it happened."

"That's normal, Gail," her mother said gently.

"Yeah, Holly said. But I had a hard time… In my head, I can't always tell if I'm being normal about it or not." She sighed. "Sometimes I get angry and it's not actually me feeling angry. It's like… I feel a lot of things and sometimes it comes out angry or bitchy or mean."

Her mother looked thoughtful and sad. It rather matched how Gail felt about the whole thing. There was a very uncomfortable sensation to not know if you were being reasonable and normal or if you were being irrational and feeling things that weren't really there. She'd masked it for years with
bitchiness and sarcasm. After that entire year of just *not* feeling a damn thing about anyone, she'd fallen in love and suddenly had a hard time coping with normal emotions. It was a whiplash effect she'd not expected. Gail felt like she was getting a little better about picking the moments out, about knowing when she was under or over reacting, and Holly certainly helped a lot.

"We should have come home," sighed Elaine at length.

She didn't have to say for what. Gail knew. "Can't change that," she pointed out. "It is what it is."

Elaine laughed a little. "If," she said and shook her head. "Ifs and maybe and should-haves. Go take care of Holly, she's really wonderful."

With a smile, Gail nodded. "I think so too, but I'm pretty biased." She turned to carry Vivian, who was still limp and heavy in the way dead asleep kids tended to be, and paused. "If you wanted to come up to the cottage, we'll be there through the weekend."

Her mother looked surprised and muttered that she'd see if she could take the time off. That made Gail realize she wasn't entirely sure what her mother was doing for work these days. She was on the board of that thing, but it didn't take up all her time. But that was also about as much mommy/daughter time as she was up for, so she nodded, said goodnight and carried Vivian upstairs.

How had she gone from having a comfortable relationship with her father and a painful one with her mother to a now awkward friendly one with her mother and none at all with her father? She kind of missed her father, but the gay was not negotiable. She was in love with Holly, irrevocably. If there was anything cemented by the ordeal of the last eighteen days, it was that she had more than just a passion for the doctor. She was invested in Holly as a part of her life.

Holly was lurking at the top of the stairs in a robe and pajamas, dark hair braided away from her face, looking adorable and tired. She'd clearly heard the whole conversation. "Your mother's making it very hard for me to hate her quite so much," sighed Holly, kissing Gail's cheek.

"Yeah, I'm not sure how I feel about that." They both walked down the hall to Vivian's room, Holly getting her first look at the stenciling while Gail woke up Vivian. Nothing good happened if she tried to help her change while asleep. "Come on, Monkey. You can go to bed without a shower," coaxed Gail.

Rubbing her eyes and scowling, Vivian muttered a no. "No you don't want to sleep without a shower?" Holly sounded entirely amused.

That got the girl to open her eyes and she looked at Holly as if she was a birthday surprise. As if she'd forgotten Holly was home. "If I shower, can I sleep in your room?"

Well that was a first. While Gail had told Holly about Vivian sleeping in their room the night before, she'd not expected the kid to actually ask about a repeat. Gail and Holly shared a brief look where they developed telepathy. "Yes you may," smiled Holly.

"Grammar snob," Gail sassed, getting a sleepy giggle from Vivian. "Okay, shower, brush your teeth, and you can sleep with us."

Holly picked up the book from the nightstand on her way to the master bedroom and was propped up reading it when Gail and Vivian came in. Quickly claiming the middle, Vivian curled up next to Holly and started sleepily telling her about the parts Gail had already read. By the time Gail was showered and changed, Vivian was mostly awake.

The negotiations as to who would read were short. Gail pointed out that Holly was tired too, having
been sick, and took control of the book, reading almost a full chapter before both brunettes were sound asleep.

Yeah, she could get used to this.
Late autumn mornings on the lake were fun, even for someone as tired as Holly. She felt guilty, practically sleeping away the first two days, but Gail pointed out that she'd been stressed and actually sick. The weather had taken pity on them, making a turn to perfection and giving them a wonderful gasp of an Indian Summer, so Gail took Vivian canoeing and swimming to wear her out and entertain. Lily did not brave the water but got out her camera and took a photo of first Gail and then Vivian flying off the rope swing into the lake.

There was grilling and s'mores and it was remarkably restorative, even if Holly found herself drifting off to sleep throughout the day. It wasn't fair to be that tired after sitting in a room doing nothing for days, but both Gail and Lily seemed to think it was perfectly reasonable and let her sleep inside or outside, checking on her now and then. After one nap, she woke up to find both Gail and Vivian sacked out on the big master bed with her, one on either side. Gail was the big spoon, an arm thrown across Holly's waist, while Vivian was apart, facing them but her hand was just touching one of Holly's hands.

It was a slice of a life Holly had thought would never be hers. Lesbians didn't get married, have kids, go up to a cottage and sit by a lake. Even before she knew she was gay, she'd never seen herself married with children. It never appealed to her and she never thought about it. And yet here she had just that. After dinner, Lily made a fire and they all sat and watched it, telling stories, as Holly dozed of in Gail's arms and had to nearly be carried upstairs herself.

On the third day, she finally felt somewhat normal and Gail took them to a fishing spot she knew about but had never been. Both Lily and Holly caught lake trout while Vivian declared the bait gross and Gail just took it easy with a book and watching everyone else cavort. Lunch was sandwiches on the lakeshore complete with beer for the grownups and a root beer for Vivian (something she enjoyed). Gail sat with Holly on a rock, fishing, but also stealing kisses every chance she got, until Vivian informed them that kissing was still gross.

That night they ate two of the fish and Lily offered to take over reading duties for Gail with a wink. Vivian's eyes widened, but she and Gail seemed to have some secret agreement going on as well.

Holly was suspicious, "Why is my mother winking at you?"

"Your mom's my wingman tonight," grinned Gail, tugging Holly upstairs by the hand.

"Where are we going, Gail?" But Gail just kept grinning and led her up to the master suite, where the door was open to the small balcony. Usually there was a pair of lounge chairs, but those had been folded up and shoved to the side to make room for a tiny iPhone stereo, the same as Holly had in the bathroom back at home.

Gail let go of Holly's hand and bounced outside. "I thought we could go dancing," she smiled and pressed the play button.

MS MR.

Of course it was MS MR's Dark Doo Wop.

And Holly laughed. "You are actually insane. You know that right?"

"I think the word is romantic. Now are you going to come here and dance with me, or do I have to be goofy on my own?"
Holly shook her head and stepped out onto the balcony, looping her arms around Gail's neck. "I'm sticking with insane." Gail's hands settled on Holly's waist, holding her close and they danced quietly, mostly swaying with the music and moving in a small circle.

The last time she'd danced like that, she'd been in junior high trying to pretend she didn't have a massive crush on her best friend. She'd agreed to dance with a nice, shy, boy, but balked when he tried to feel her up. Oh, she should have known years ago that she was gay. Holly pressed her cheek to Gail's and stopped moving though she still swayed a little with the music.

"You okay?" Gail's voice was a whisper. Holly didn't answer with words, kissing Gail's cheek instead.

They slowly stopped swaying and Holly moved to run her fingers through Gail's short hair. "I really like this haircut," she sighed, fondling the soft edges. "Color too."

Since the initial hair massacre, Gail's hair had never gotten longer than her chin, matching the photos Holly had seen of Gail fresh out of the academy. But it was the super short look that, yes, Holly herself had given Gail that Holly loved the best. There was just something about the way it framed her face that gave Holly the shivers in a good way. She really had a lady boner, as drunk Chloe said once, for women with short hair. Gail had not dignified that with a verbal response, though a beer pitcher had been upended over Chloe's head.

"I know," smiled Gail. She kissed Holly softly and tenderly.

Holly didn't really feel like a soft kiss. Sure, she'd loved the cuddles on the couch and the tender touches in public. And sitting with Gail and Vivian, or Lily or any of their friends and getting hugged felt absolutely wonderful. For far too many days she'd been isolated in a stupid tent, wondering if she'd live or die, and now she wanted something else.

She took a firm hold of Gail's shirt front and held her still to kiss with a different intention. "I'm not tired, Gail," she noted, lips brushing Gail's before easing back into a kiss. "I want you. I want ..."

The sentence was never finished. Gail smiled against her lips and pulled her closer, whispering that she loved Holly. Somehow they remembered to turn off the music and lock the doors before falling into bed. Holly knew she was needy, wanting to touch all of Gail at once and finding it hard to restrain herself. Even just taking the time to admire her skin color against Gail's (though the days without sun made her feel pale, nothing was as pale as Pecks) served to fuel the fire. Forcing herself to take it slow, to savor every moment like it was their first time, Holly reveled in every single touch. Unlike their first time, Gail took charge from the moment they landed on the bed, guiding Holly to a seemingly effortless high before joining her.

They dozed off later to the sounds of a quiet cottage, stirring in the middle of the night and resuming their reconnection twice more. Holly was impatient those times, she had to feel everything at once. Her demands made things inelegant and sloppy, but it still felt perfect when Gail's fingers dug into her hair and her name was groaned.

Finally they actually slept, waking up when the sun was up and a light tap was at the door. Holly had no intention of moving, her limbs still feeling pleasantly heavy and her mind empty. Actually, she wasn't sure she really could move. Damn, that had been perfect. Everything was wonderful and sore and perfect right now. The tap did not repeat and Holly smiled. Good. More sleep. Then she felt Gail get out of bed and heard the rustle of cloth before her wife opened the door.

"Can I come in?" Vivian's voice was soft and curious.

"Mmm not right now, Monkey."

"But I brought coffee."

The petulant whine was very much like Gail's and Holly laughed softly. She rooted around for something to wear besides the shirt she'd pulled on a few hours ago. "It's okay, I'm awake." The sheet was covering enough of her that neither Vivian nor her mother would get an eyeful if they looked in.

Vivian's head poked around Gail, though without glasses on, all Holly saw was a brown head against Gail's baby blue robe. "I need 'nother coffee." She held up what was presumably a mug for Gail and thudded down the stairs shouting that they were awake and needed food and coffee.

"Better put some pants on, Stewart, I think we're getting breakfast in bed." Gail sipped the coffee and tidied up the disarray of clothes from the night. She was wearing her favorite cottage robe, but even Gail took a moment to pull on some flannel pants.

Holly sat up after tugging on sweatpants and opened the window over the bed. While a kid may not sort out why the room smelled funny, a parent would. "What time is it anyway?"

The nightstand did not hold Gail's phone and she'd turned her smart watch off when they got to the cottage. After a moment of confusion, Gail opened the balcony doors and sighed, retrieving her phone from outside. "A little after eleven. And my mom's car is here." Gail came back and sat down beside Holly, smiling and stretching her legs out. "Morning."

They kissed softly, briefly, and Holly gently took hold of the coffee cup. "If you love me, Peck, you'll share before a six year-old jumps in bed with us."

"You're lucky I like you so much," grinned Gail, relinquishing her coffee. "Maybe Mother brought donuts."

The door opened all the way, this time letting in Lily and Vivian. They were both dressed in actual clothes. Vivian held a book while Lily carried a tray with more coffee and what looked like toast and English Muffins. And yes, a donut. Holly looked at the mug on the tray reading DAD and blinked. If that was the DAD mug, what did she have? Holly put her glasses on, though she could read the letters MOM just fine without them. When did they get those mugs?

"Where'd you get the mugs?" Gail was obviously sharing the same thought, though she took the DAD mug before Lily put the tray down.

"Your mother brought them. She said it was a present from Oliver."

Gail's eyes sparkled, which worried Holly a little. That meant Gail had some sort of odd plan. She'd have to ask later. "And donuts. Did you get one, Monkey?" The nickname was new and Holly had forgotten to ask where it came from, though she had a guess based on how Vivian hung on to Gail now.

Vivian nodded, climbing onto the bed and sitting in Gail's lap. "Miss Lily made me eggs. How come you don't make eggs, Gail?" The girl smiled a surprisingly gap toothed smile. Had Holly not noticed a missing tooth in the last few days? She abruptly felt like a bad mother.

"She hates eggs," smiled Holly. "Did you make the coffee, Mom?"
With a nod, her mother kissed her forehead. "I did. Your father wants you to call him later too, Holls." Lily gently reminded her of that promise, to communicate more, and made herself comfortable in the easy chair. "This is really a wonderful retreat, Gail. It makes my guest house positively shabby."

Propped up by the headboard, Gail shook her head. "I like your guest house. It's compact."

"Think you'll make it out for the holidays?" Lily glanced at Vivian rather unsubtly.

"We'll see," mused Holly, reaching over to ruffle Vivian's hair. "Hey, when did you become a monkey, Viv?"

Of course Vivian pointed at Gail. "She called me that when you were in the bubble tent, cause I wouldn't let go." In the not-at-all-quiet whisper of a child, she added, "Gail was scared."

Gail put her mug down and tickled Vivian's ribs, getting a squeal out of her. "You were scared." Her tone was clearly teasing, however.

"Nuh uh! You were scared!" Vivian was laughing cheerfully, which lifted weights off of Holly's shoulders. She'd felt like Atlas lately, weighed down by a fear she was destroying Gail and Vivian by being sick. That she might break them. Seeing the girl at ease, a laughing child who trusted them to keep her safe, made her feel like the world wasn't evil. They were doing something very right.

Watching Gail and Vivian tussle, Holly was surprised that she didn't feel left out. In three weeks, there had been a clear breakthrough with Vivian and them. The painful awkwardness, where Vivian didn't want to share her feelings seemed to be gone and she let her guard down. Gail was very much a parent now, but the moments where Vivian wanted to be with Holly too had grown and they were clearly a family unit.

Thinking of family… "Mom, where's Elaine?"

"Dishes. And she's making lunch for the rest of us."

Gail looked surprised and stopped messing with Vivian for a moment. "My mother cooks?"

Pursing her lips in an amused smile, Lily shook her head. "I believe she picked it up from town."

"Thank god, I thought the world was ending." Gail let go of Vivian, who promptly latched on to Holly's arm and stuck her tongue out through the gap in her teeth. With a grin, Gail took her coffee back. "Thanks, Lily."

Holly smiled and wrapped an arm around Vivian's shoulders and was rewarded with a six year old leaning up against her. Whatever the breakthrough was, it seemed that Vivian wanted to be with Holly as much as Gail. That was a good thing. "Where'd your tooth go?" Oh good, it was new.

"I fell off the tire swing this morning. Miss Elaine fixed it up!" She opened her mouth wide and Holly checked to make sure nothing was horribly amiss. It had been a baby tooth so she wasn't terribly worried.

Gail looked perturbed, "Was that the loose one?" When Vivian nodded, Holly felt more at ease though Gail did not. "What'd Miss Elaine tell you?"

Taking a donut hole, Vivian frowned. "She said I was real brave, but it was okay to cry when she pulled it out. Then she made me rinse my mouth out with something ..."
"Hydrogen peroxide?" Holly had a pretty good guess.

"I knew you'd know," grinned Vivian and Holly got another hug. The hugs felt amazing. They were like the nuggets of affection Gail had granted her when they were just friends and, later, early lovers. Like she was privy to the greatest secret of them all.

Both of Gail's eyebrows lifted into her hairline. "Huh. You know, Steve broke his arm on that swing when he was fourteen." Holly had not known that story and asked how it happened. "He was trying to teach me how to jump off it mid swing. Mother told him to tough it out on the drive to the ER."

"Steve's silly," Vivian stated firmly and shoved her donut hole into her mouth.

After the breakfast, Gail and Holly showered and came downstairs. Gail, with her insane metabolism, ate the lunch too. There was a brief conversation where Gail awkwardly thanked her mother for helping Vivian with her lost tooth and Elaine acknowledged it while being exceptionally flustered. As much as Holly wanted to hate the woman, Elaine wasn't just giving lip service to the idea of making up to them, she was doing it.

"I think," said Elaine carefully as she and Holly washed up the dishes. "I think that I was more scared for you than I was when Gail was in the hospital."

A strange confession. Holly brought over the last cups. "Well Gail only broke her ribs," she offered. It was much less terrifying, though the moment where she heard that explosion would stay with her forever.

Elaine shook her head. "No. No, not that." She frowned. "Gail said you had a thing? Parlay?"

Well that was unexpected. "We do," confirmed Holly. "I promise to listen and not judge."

Her mother-in-law exhaled. "I don't think Gail would be able to succeed on her own. Certainly not five years ago. Maybe now. But... when you were in the hospital, I was terrified for her, Holly. Because she needs you. And the last thing I want to do is put pressure on you like I did to her, but she really does. She— I didn't teach her how to be anything but a cop, Holly."

Holly was surprised at how regretful and sorry Elaine sounded. But Parlay had been called and that meant she needed to listen and think about it seriously, taking the words for what they were meant and not necessarily how they were phrased. "She's a good, um, parent, Elaine," offered Holly carefully.

"Thanks to you." Elaine leant back against the counter. "Successful's the wrong word. But she couldn't do this, be a parent, on her own. She'd burn herself out trying to be everything Bill and I weren't. She needs you to remind her to turn it down and rely on other people. It's not natural for her."

That made sense in a way. In many ways, Gail didn't always remember that she didn't have to survive on her own. She still often expected the world to crap on her and abandon her. Gail also had a tendency to edit her thoughts for the audience, not dumping her crap on others, not even Holly. Looking at Elaine, Holly wondered if it was the same and, if so, what would she be keeping back right now?

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The thought clarified itself in that moment. "You didn't mess up Visa because you wanted me to stop Gail from adopting," Holly said, surprised. "You wanted me to be here for her."

The mother of her wife nodded slowly. Her face was the same as Gail's in the moments when Gail was certain the conversation was about to collapse like a house of cards. Elaine was afraid of how
this would make Holly feel.

How did it make her feel? Angry, definitely. She knew she was still upset about the whole thing. But at the same time, Holly recognized that she'd be hard pressed not to do something equally stupid and damning if she thought it would protect Vivian or Gail. Oh. That was parenthood, wasn't it? The part of you that you'd willingly sacrifice, without a thought, for them?

Holly's anger washed itself away with that understanding. Oh she was still mad about the right things, but she saw it's heart now. "You lied to Gail?"

Elaine hesitated a moment. "Semantically no. I did not see *this* happening. I really didn't think you'd take her back and I did not think you'd last. I underestimated both of you." She chewed her lip for a moment. "I actually was going to talk to you about it before…"

The way Elaine trailed off gave Holly another clue. "You didn't have anything to do with the adoption. Sophie's." Again, Elaine nodded. "Christ. No wonder you divorced him," she groaned.

"Oh, Holly," laughed Elaine in a way that wasn't funny at all. It was Gail's self-deprecating laugh. "It was so much more complicated than that."

Putting the last dish on the rack, Holly asked, "Can I think about this more?" Elaine nodded right away. "I'm still mad, it was a stupid thing, it was reckless, and it was mean. Just because it all worked out doesn't make that go away. But… I see why Gail says she can't hate you, even after all of that. And I don't hate you entirely either."

All the parenting conversations made the gaping hole of Bill Peck's absence larger when Holly called her father to talk about the ordeal and how she was doing. Brian had been worried and offered to fly out and help with the house when Lily was ready to go, but Holly promised everything was fine. She understood her father's hatred of travel. He was the only person who hated it more than Gail, and her wife was willing to go almost anywhere with Holly. Brian, like Gail, suffered from a well founded and rational fear. When he'd been in the army, he'd been in a plane crash followed by a car accident in the taxi leaving the hospital. Any time he, or someone he knew, wasn't driving a vehicle, he was surly and nervous.

When she finished promising her father she was fine and that they'd try to come out for Christmas if he could promise no all night parties, she found her family arguing about whether or not Elaine was spending the night. Gail's argument was practical, it was a long drive and it was late. Vivian was just being six and wanted Elaine to teach her how to play Spades, since they'd mentioned it was a family game Gail had played at that age. Lily took no sides.

"Holly, please tell my mother she's spending the night."

Those were words Holly never expected to hear from Gail. "I think that's up to Elaine," she demurred and sat beside Gail.

Gail pulled Holly into her lap as she grumbled a 'fine', seeming not at all phased by PDA in front of her mother. "Mother, I'd like it if you stayed and left in the morning. I would ... I'd feel better."

A peculiarly Peck heartfelt moment. Gail didn't even hide too much behind Holly to deliver the statement.

"Alright," capitulated Elaine, clearly at a loss as to any other way to reply.

And that was how they found themselves playing Spades in the living room until Vivian finally won a game. Then, knowing Steve and Traci were coming for the day tomorrow with Leo, it was bedtime
for small children and pseudo-grandmothers, the latter of whom decided to share Steve's room (Vivian had demanded Gail's for her own), and Holly and Gail retreated to the master suite where they watched the stars, snuggled side by side in the lounge chair on their balcony.

They watched the moon rise and the constellations slowly move across the sky in silence. Gail gently ran her hand across Holly's side, caressing in a comforting way. From the cottage, with all the lights off, you could see the edge of the Galaxy with your naked eye, just like they could on that camping trip.

"I want to get a telescope for the cottage," Holly said quietly, her head resting on Gail's shoulder.

"Okay." Gail pressed her cheek to Holly's head. "Portable. So we can put it on the dock."

Holly squinted up. "No, I want a permanent observatory." She poked Gail's leg. "Goof, yes of course portable. With wheels too." Laughing, Gail poked Holly back. "What were you thinking?"

"Those weird bulb telescopes! They get real large."

"We don't need one that big and powerful."

The moment the words left Holly's mouth, she knew she'd set herself up. "That's what she said."

Yep.

Holly turned and sat in Gail's lap, knees against her wife's sides. "Stop it," she smirked. Murmuring an okay, Gail reached up and brushed Holly's hair back. The look in Gail's eyes in private, when it was just them in a quiet place, were different than the ones Holly saw outside. The look was soft and shy, the Peck beyond the walls, where she wanted Holly with her.

Sometimes, like now, there was also a look of amazement. Almost as if Gail couldn't quite believe she had Holly in her life, in her arms, and she was more reverent. Gail's hands bracketed Holly's face. She said nothing, just drew Holly's face closer until there was a thin layer of air between their lips. Eyes drifting closed, Gail's lips ghosted over Holly's before actually touching. Wildfire grew in Holly's chest and stomach, heating and tingling her entire body.

God, Gail could kiss.

Falling into Gail's orbit had been terrifying and daunting. Holly had fallen for her, for the pain and bitterness and jaded personality long before she fell for Gail physically. Well, not entirely, but she fell for the mind while certain the body was entirely unavailable. They had so much more than just sex between them, though the sex was absolutely amazing. Holly pulled Gail's shirt up a little, sliding her hands across the blonde's stomach and then higher.

"Yes," sighed Gail, arching her back slightly.

The lounger was not conducive to sex as it didn't lie back enough, though they did get pretty far before retreating to the bed. As much as Holly tried to keep it down, to not alert the mothers or the child downstairs as to what was going on, she was pretty sure they'd know anyways. Well... The mothers knew. The child didn't really and that was fine. Thankfully one of Gail's hang ups was not a fear of being heard having sex, though, as she wasn't much quieter.

Gail fell asleep first, drifting off in Holly's arms with a beatific smile on her face. It was a little while before Holly gave in to being tired, wanting to watch her wife sleep for a time. When she slept, she dreamed of her life, her job, and her family.
"Peck, you have a fax!"

Gail squinted across the office floor. A fax? Who would fax her. Who the hell used a fax anymore? "John?" She eyed her partner and gestured to the phone, where she was talking to an airline mechanic. "Yeah, no, I'm here. Sorry. So the repo was legit."

The mysterious airline repossession case was the weirdest theft Gail had ever worked on. It was also painfully simple. Or maybe she was just good. She really reveled and loved working on the crimes that were weird. This case, Vivian had been interested in and noted she'd never been on a plane. At her age, Gail had been to the States and France. Holly expressed jealousy about France, and Gail started to wonder if maybe they could go to Europe. Hell, she'd been to pretty much every country in Europe before she was eighteen. There was a reason she was good at languages.

"I understand planes," grumbled the man on the phone. "But it's the seventeen crates of wild and exotic animals. I mean, I have a fucking alligator."

Gail covered her mouth, encouraging the repo man to continue his story. The man had, legally, repossessed a plane, only to find it filled with illegal animals. Then in a fantastic twist, both he and the plane's original owner had filed complaints with the police. She'd started the case looking for a plane and was ending it by filling in the Crowne's office regarding the contents.

The stack of papers John dropped on her desk surprised her and she eyes the fax cover sheet. "Shit," muttered Gail, recognizing the name right away. "No, no, not you, but I think I have enough. Would you be willing to come in for a deposition?"

"Back to Toronto?"

"If not, I can coordinate with someone local."

"Yeah, that'd be better."

Gail took down the information and called the local PD first before allowing herself to really look at the fax papers. Her hand shook as she took off the cover sheet and read the first page. She had to read it twice. "Holy shit," she muttered.

Across the desks, John looked curious. "What's up?"

There was no way she could tell him first and Gail schooled her face into a calm, poker face. "Lawyer crap," she said honestly. It made her day jittery though. She wanted to call Holly now and get it over with, but at the same time it was better to wait until everyone was home. Holly had been back to work for three weeks, she finally had her energy back and her stamina. They even went running again in the mornings.

But now it was going to change again.

Pushing herself to finish early, Gail rushed through her plans, picking up Vivian at school and going shopping. She checked to make sure Holly would be home for dinner and left a folder with the papers on the kitchen table. Vivian knew not to open the blue folders, that they were work, and cheerfully ignored it while Gail helped her with homework. They were finished with everything but math when Holly got home.

She hated waiting, though. It was horrible and frustrating to be at the behest of someone else like that. That was why she hadn't really liked being a TO at all. She had to wait on someone to catch clues that were obvious to her. Some things were just easy, like memorizing the plate of a speeding car or acing competition shoots. Waiting was never easy. That was also part of why she hated
baseball. Too much waiting.

Holly eyed the folder. "Did I leave that out?"

Gail had gone to the effort of putting Holly's name on it, printing up a fake label with a fake case number. "Must have." She leant back to the task of word problems about how many apples someone had.

Through the reflection in the window, Gail watched her wife pick up the folder and study it curiously. Then Holly opened it and read the coversheet, straight from the fax. "Gail," Holly said slowly, flipping pages.

"For the record, Holly, that is how you make a fake case folder to use when you want to surprise your girlfriend with some lame excuse." She grinned and looked up, watching her wife keep reading.

Vivian tugged Gail's shirt. "It's not a case?"

"Not a work one," smiled Gail. "Hey, you're not going to school next Friday, by the way." Both Vivian and Holly looked at her, confused. "Last page, baby. We have an appointment with the judge to sign papers."

"Gail," Holly said warningly. "Adoption can take a year or more."

"Can," agreed the blonde, beaming. "We have a few angels in our corner."

The grandparents had dropped their case, conceding that Gail and Holly would be better parents.

That may have had something to do with some of her Peck relatives, stepping up and digging into their past without being asked. They were doing the things Pecks always did, but without the backbiting and infighting Gail had associated with her name. There weren't a lot of Pecks who sided with Gail, but they were slowly coming out of the woodworks. Only a handful of them, the cool Pecks. Who knew? That list even included her mother who spoke up on her behalf.

More than that was the impact that Gail's division and Holly's friends had on the courts. Their friends had their backs. After she'd talked to Oliver, the whole of Fifteen jumped in to help. They all spoke up for her, for Holly, and they all helped make sure the world saw what they did. Even Lisa was in on it, wrangling Holly's med school friends, while the entire med lab was led by Rodney. And when they'd filed paperwork and taken a week off, the masses of people who were involved in their lives had made sure this was going to happen. When the court saw that, indeed, there was a history of abuse going back generations, and how Gail and Holly had a massive support structure, it was simple.

Three people, three last names, one family, one rather quick adoption. Because, as the letter said, the only living family had no complaints. It seemed obvious.

Suffice to say, dinner was a little rowdy. They played a loud game of Sorry! and Vivian won by teaming up with Gail and double crossing her at the end. After, Holly had been embarrassed and flattered that Vivian wanted her to read as a just them thing. For Holly it was new and a little wonderful. Once Lily had gone home, Vivian slowly started asking if Holly would do some of the various mom-jobs Gail had picked up during their hellish weeks. It constantly made Holly blush when Vivian asked for her and not Gail. The reveal that she too was as much a part of the new attitude as Gail made Holly feel much better.

Finishing loading the last dishes into the machine and pressing start, Gail stretched her arms up over her head and exhaled slowly. Her lower back popped softly and she sighed. Way better. Holly was
right. This getting older shit was for the birds. It was nice having the house back on a normal routine, though. Gail and Holly were back to normal cases and Vivian was back to school. It was how things should be.

A pair of hands settled on her waist, startling Gail. "Sneaky ninja better be my wife."

Holly made a noise and kissed the back of Gail's neck. "¿Por que no los dos?"

"I knew you were a serial killer," teased Gail, turning around to get a proper kiss. "Viv in bed?"

"Conked out." Holly grinned and kissed Gail's neck again. That felt nice and Gail sighed, leaning back against the counter and tilting her head. It wasn't terribly surprising that Holly had been more amorous since getting out of isolation. Pent up fear did odd things to a person. Fear of death did it more. Her therapist had even reminded her, though Gail knew it beforehand.

Gail didn't mind. She'd been keyed up herself, tense and scared for far too long. Not having anyone to touch or hold like this was painful when you desperately wanted an escape. And Holly was definitely holding and touching her the way she liked to be touched. Fingers slid under the back of her shirt, brushing Gail's back, the dip in her spine. It felt so good and a little daring.

Since Vivian had entered their lives, they hadn't really gotten hot and heavy anywhere but the bedroom, for obvious reasons. Comments to McNally that six-year-olds understood the basic premise of sex aside, they didn't try to push it too much. That concern did not stop them now from pushing each other a little, Holly pressing her thigh between Gail's, Gail running her hands up Holly's arms to her shoulders and then face to hold her close for a kiss. She felt Holly's hand gripping her tighter, guiding Gail's pace against her leg. Gail felt herself whimper and caught Holly's lips with her own. Yes. A million times yes.

And of course, a small voice from the stairs announced her view of the subject. "Ew, gross. Kissing."

After a heartbeat, Holly started laughing, her face pressed into Gail's neck. "Hey, Vivian, you're supposed to be asleep," sighed Gail, her voice higher than she would have liked. All the feelings pounding in her body had to take a moment, a back seat to the duties of parenthood.

"Obviously," replied the child. She was getting quite sassy.

Untangling themselves, Gail took Holly's hand in her own. "What's up?"

Vivian shrugged. "It's quiet upstairs."

Twenty plus days of people being over and everyone going to bed around the same time had done a number on the kid's schedule. "Yeah? You're supposed to sleep when it's quiet."

"Will you both tuck me in?"

See, you couldn't really argue when a kid was that cute. Even when she ordered her de facto parents to close their bedroom door.

Gail shook her head and asked, "Does it bother you that she's clearly in charge?"

"No, she's a benevolent dictator," grinned Holly. "I'll go finish downstairs if you want to grab a shower?" She did. She'd been running around all day. "I'll be up soon." They kissed briefly and Gail went into the master bedroom, closing the door.
She didn't care if Vivian saw her changing for a shower, though Holly was a little shy about it. They ended up chatting once about people having issues and how nudity really didn't need to be something to get wound up about, especially with kids who were going to be curious about things anyway. One more hurdle to face as they got there. Holly still wasn't keen on the idea of it and teased Gail about being a nudist. One time you walk naked from the shower at Andy's and you never live it down.

Taking a long shower, Gail just stepped out when Holly came back into their bedroom. Having their little session interrupted didn't do much to squash the mood. Holly's shower was much faster, landing them into bed and each other's arms rather quickly. Without needing to say a word, they found the place they'd been at in the kitchen. But there was no interruption when Holly made Gail whimper and shudder. The only content in Gail's thoughts was that Holly could do amazing things with her tongue. And then she thought about nothing at all.

Some time later, Gail lay on the bed with her eyes closed, smiling and feeling the world sway just a little. Holly was stretched alongside her, one hand languidly tracing lines on Gail's stomach. "I'm quite fond of you," Holly remarked quietly.

"This would be awkward otherwise," sighed Gail. Her limbs refused to move and that was okay right now.

"And having a six year old catch us in the kitchen isn't?"

Gail cracked one eye open. "Well. It's been a weird month for her too." With effort, Gail managed to get an arm around her wife and pull her closer, resting Holly's head on her shoulder. That felt nice.

Settling down, Holly's weight on Gail grew as she relaxed. "What was the weirdest?"

"My mother showing up," Gail said firmly. Her wife laughed a little. " Seriously, she came and we played Scrabble."

Holly kissed Gail's chin, her free hand caressing down the valley between Gail's breasts. "You totally blissed out," she teased. "That was the easy answer."

Closing her eyes, Gail sighed. "I'm not entirely sure I have legs right now, baby."

One of Holly's legs rubbed up along Gail's, making her shudder. "Pretty sure you do." The leg was thrown over Gail's and Holly snuggled up close, inhaling deeply. They lay there quietly, breathing and enjoying the quiet. "I was wrong," Holly said softly.

Gail had nearly fallen asleep. "Wrong?"

Her wife made a noise of agreement. "Remember when I was sick and in isolation?" Gail snorted and Holly poked her ribs gently. "When I said we were screwing up Vivian?"

"I remember." She remembered all of it far more clearly than she wanted to.

"I was wrong. We're pretty good parents."

Gail laughed, knowing it was too loud and too bright, but she had to laugh. "Better get used to it, baby. This is it."
Santa Claus Is Coming To Town

Chapter Summary

Part Nine: Detect This (aka Motive)

The Green/Peck/Stewart Family is back. It's been a short time since the last case. In fact, it's only been two months! Because it's Christmas time. This is a crossover arc with a smattering of the characters from Motive. Just enough for some fun. For those who watch both shows, this happens at some nebulous point in time when Boyd is no longer the head of the Motive gang, but before the whole shooting and trial happens.

"So then the kid says, with just this total, all out seriousness, 'I'll see you in forty-two days' to the guy," sighed Gail, shaking her head and handing the coffee to her partner. She'd been telling him the story of her family encounter a few weeks back with a gentleman who looked like Santa. They'd been at the grocery store and the man had been checking out in front of them. A young girl, about Vivian's age, had been absolutely entranced by him, whispering loudly if he was Santa. When the man had, kindly, just smiled and held a finger to his lips, that had been her reply.

John laughed softly. "Kid knew exactly how many days... Nothing wrong with that. Everyone believes in Santa for a while." Snapping her partner a foul look, Gail shook her head. Neither she nor Steve had ever been told that Santa was real, but they'd also known that other children believed in things to make them feel safer. "Is that a Peck thing?"

After a moment, she nodded. "Yeah, probably."

Her partner's face dipped into the disappointed range. "Did you ruin Santa for your daughter?"

"No!" Gail sighed. "That little monkey... We got into the car and as soon as the doors closed, she says 'Santa isn't real!' at the top of her lungs." Staring at her, John started laughing in earnest. "God, you're as bad as Holly."

But her partner laughed and shoved her arm, walking through the slush to their crime scene. "Come on, that's totally something you'd tell your kid right away. I bet you'd tell her only losers believe in Santa."

Gail shoved John back. "Teaching kids to believe in lies doesn't help them," she pointed out. She honestly couldn't ever remember think that Santa was a real thing. Her whole life, she knew Santa was a made up entity to make children feel precious. Even now as an adult she didn't understand why people did it. Vivian's reasons... well, they hadn't asked how she knew.

"You're such a hoser," grinned John.

She grimaced. "Come on. It's not like I'm telling Olivia about it." John opened his mouth in sudden worry. "No! I told Viv not to tell her classmates about it."

John snorted. "Don't tell the losers about Santa being fake."

Actually, Vivian had already known not to tell other kids, and didn't need to be warned, but she'd tried to explain that it wasn't their place to try and tell other people how to be parents. Vivian had
called the parents losers, much to Gail's amusement. "Don't make other parents look foolish," corrected Gail.

The smile from her partner was almost embarrassing. "You're doing good. First Christmas as a mom."

"Yeah, it's weird." Gail shook her head.

"And Holly's back in the field. How's she holding up?"

That had been interesting. "I think she's a freaking rock star. It's like nothing happened."

That wasn't entirely true, but Holly had not been afraid of going back to work in the slightest. If anything, she saw it as validation that she was absolutely the best pathologist. She'd done everything right, everything carefully, everything by the book. The only thing that had really changed was she'd been a bit twitchier about guns, and asked Gail to take her shooting, saying she wouldn't get over it until she reminded herself they were tools.

For all Elaine had told Gail to be supportive and helpful, Holly was just mostly okay. There had been a joint therapy session where Gail outright asked why Holly was okay. Her wife had looked seriously thoughtful and finally said that danger was not her middle name. Gail wondered if Holly was just internalizing or ignoring it all, but they actually did talk about it. Holly remained more worried about Gail, who regularly ran headlong into dangerous situations, than she was for her own safety. After all, it remained more likely that she'd hit a moose with her car than get Ebola or Luongo or anything at all like that.

Sometimes it sucked having an awesome wife.

"Your wife has superpowers. And I don't just mean the one where she makes you behave."

Gail narrowed her eyes. "Bite me."

"That's my Peck," he grinned. "Congratulations, by the way, Mom Peck."

Gail smiled, feeling a little sheepish. The tail end of the year was completing itself with paperwork being signed and Gail and Holly were officially parents. About the only thing that had changed was Vivian calling them both 'mom' some of the time. Only some of the time. They tried not to make a fuss about it. Similarly, at their workplaces they hadn't had a party... Oliver had a banner made and hung it up at the station because he was Oliver. Since it came with donuts, it was alright.

And now they planned to go to Vancouver next week for actual Christmas, only two weeks away, and Gail was hoping this case didn't turn out to be something major. It was already looking grim, forcing her to be up and out of the house before the sun was up and in a smelly warehouse that had a car burnt to a crisp. "Hi, Rodney," she greeted the lead pathologist for the night shift.

"Oh, thank god," sighed Rodney. "You guys solve things fast." He opened the passenger door and started taking samples.

John looked surprised and turned towards Gail. "We have a reputation? A good one?"

"Apparently." Gail sipped her coffee and eyed their victim through the smudged windshield. "Why didn't they call homicide?"

"Arson, drugs, and a murder," explained Rodney. "Also Collins said your unit would want in." Gail frowned and looked over at where her ex-fiancé was talking to another uniformed officer.
Not waiting for Nick, John asked, "Well, what's special about this guy?"

"Show 'em, Krakowski," said Rodney, his head bent to his work.

And Crater Face Krakowski, Rodney's assistant, held up a wallet. Pulling on a glove, Gail picked it up. "Aston Forsyth Rose... No shit?" She stared at the charred face and tried to recognize someone within. Just around the edges maybe... "Aston Rose. Crap." She hadn't thought about him in a million years.

"Care to unpack for the class?" asked John, sounding absolutely mystified.

Gail handed over the wallet. "The Rose family are shipping magnates. They pretty much control the ports on Lake Ontario. That would be their younger son."

Her partner eyed her and checked on his phone. "How the hell do you know that he's one of them?"

"She knows them," explained Nick. She shot her ex a quelling look, hoping he'd not go any further with that. Hoping he wouldn't mention her connection to Aston's older brother. "I didn't think they'd call you, sorry." Gail shrugged. It was her last day on call for cases too, but what could you do? When your number came up, you went.

Looking between the two, John shook his head. "I still think you two being engaged was a hoax."

Gail held up her hands. "I was drunk when he proposed." She paused. "Props for remembering this, though."

And Nick tapped his jaw. "Hard to forget."

Oh, right. Gail chuckled. She had dated Donal Rose off and on for half a year, but dumped him the month before meeting Nick, right before her last year in university. That had been a hell of a year. Unwilling to accept the breakup, Donal had followed her to work every day. She'd been more than prepared to handle it, packing her taser and planning to shock him by her car, when stupid Nick (aka the asshole who left a crappy tip the week before) had stepped in to 'help' her.

That day had ended with Nick being introduced to Donal's fist, Donal being introduced to Gail's taser, and when Nick tried to wheedle some sympathy out of Gail the next day, coffee being introduced to Nick's lap. It was a miracle Gail hadn't gotten fired, she thought later, though the restaurant owner being a tough and independent woman who owed Elaine a favor had helped.

If the ID was right, this was Donal's younger brother. She tried to find his face in the charred remains and failed. He hadn't stuck in her mind, except as an annoying pothead. Her father called him a 'long haired hippy' if she recalled right.

When her partner cleared his throat, she sighed, "This'll be all over the papers, John. If that's Aston, his parents are pretty well off."

"Cheerful," sighed the other man.

"Isn't it always?" Gail sipped her coffee and squinted as the sun started to peek over the edge of the buildings. "Drugs?"

Beaming like a dog with a pheasant, Nick bounded over to the trunk of the car. "Baboom."

Gail rolled her eyes. "It's early, Nicholas. Don't start." She walked around more calmly and glanced in. "You didn't say high grade pharmaceuticals," she muttered. While the car was burnt, some of the
boxes had managed to resist being destroyed. They really made those crates out of high end stuff. Also still visible was the company name. GeoDrug.

"High end?" Nick looked surprised.

After the misadventures earlier that year, Gail had inadvertently memorized all the major players in medical drugs in the area. She'd wanted to know how fast they could make any possible antidotes or treatments for her wife. "High grade," corrected Gail. "These guys make experimental drugs for obscure diseases. Like CF."

John's head snapped up. His girlfriend Rachel, also one of Holly's best friends, was a CF researcher. But there was something a little odd about his facial expression. "He stole CF drugs? What the hell?"

"Probably painkillers or psychotropics. It'll give the lab something fun to process," mused Gail. "Hey, Rodney, why'd you call it a murder?"

Rodney smiled and opened the car door on the driver's side. "It's a visual."

The door opened and the arm was visible. It was also dangling by a handcuff to the steering wheel. "Woah," muttered Gail, walking back around. "Both of them?" Someone cuffed him to the car and lit him on fire?

"Yikes," agreed John, taking a photo with his phone. "Can we put a rush on the DNA for verification?"

Rodney gave John a look implying stupidity. "We have nothing to compare it to."

Rubbing his chin, John asked, "Rose family in town? We can get family DNA and compare it to him, look for... Whatever it is."

Gail smiled thinly. "Genetic markers. It's December. The family house is up in Lawrence Park North." Thankfully that was not where Gail had grown up, but she knew things never changed. Everyone came home for the holidays when you lived in those houses.

Both of John's eyebrows had lifted to his hairline. "Those houses…"

"Cost about $2.8 million," shrugged Gail.

John blinked. "That was oddly specific, Peck."

"Some of us study demographics," she snapped at him with her usual bite. "God knows I don't live there."

Her house was in a nice, family friendly part of the city that didn't scream suburbia. She might have killed someone if Holly had gone through on her suggestion to move them there. Instead they were in the Garden District, nearly in Cabbagetown, but of course by Church and Wellesley. They'd have to take Vivian to the Parade this next summer. They'd skipped it as a unit since Vivian had just moved in with them, though Gail had done her stint on the float, per usual. Stupid float. It was decidedly less fun without Holly around, though BitchTits had shown up to root Gail on, saying the baby lesbian needed encouragement.

John eyed the address again. "Neither does he. Our possible Rose lives in Montreal."

"Unlike my family, Johnny, most people like to come home for the holidays. Come on, let's go get a sample." She clapped him on the shoulder, "Rodney, I need to borrow a nerd for the day. Collins,
stay here and protect the crime scene. Everything goes back to the lab."

With Crater Face Krakowski in the back of John's car, they drove out to a part of town Gail hadn't willingly gone to in years. Her lack of needing a GPS did impress John, who muttered noises about how damn much the houses cost as he drove. He also gave Gail a side-eye, telling her he was picking up on the clues.

As the houses got bigger, John got quieter. "Jesus, Peck, how did you end up knowing someone from here? These people are Toronto Royalty."

Flicking her glance to the pimpled nerd in the backseat, Gail sighed. "Long story, John."

John made a soft 'huh' noise and was silent as they pulled up to the gate. Flashing his badge, John smiled. "Detectives Simmons and Peck. We need to speak with the Roses."

The guard frowned. "Warrant?"

Good lord. Gail rolled her eyes as John tried to explain they weren't hear for that, but the guard stood firm. She knew she really only had one card to play here, as little as she wanted to. "Hey, chuckles," sighed Gail as she leaned across. "Is Donal home?"

That caught his attention. "Master Donal is in residence …"

"Tell him Detective Gail Peck's here, would ya? And it's a police thing." She leaned back and inspected her nails while the guard proceeded to ring the house. It was entertaining to watch his face pale. Gail smirked, "Wanna open the gate now?"

"Sorry, ma'am, I didn't… I mean——" Gail fixed him with a glare and the gate opened while he gibbered. "You can park in the roundabout, ma'am. Sir."

John frowned as they drove in. "Okay, what the hell was that all about? You know the shipping magnates?"

Gail managed not to wince. "Yep."

"You gonna explain this mystery?"

"Nope," Gail sighed, popping the P loudly. John scowled at her. "I was really hoping to avoid this," she added as they pulled into the roundabout and John stopped the car. Few things were as annoying as running into your ex on a case. This would be worse because she knew what was coming next, even from someone as cool as John tended to be.

"I think I should know what I'm getting into, is all."

He was right, too. Gail grimaced. Fine, the short version. "I went out with Donal in college."

That seemed to appease him, even if it wasn't the full story. It was all John needed to know. John opened the door and remarked, "Donal lives at home still?" His tone was disparaging.

Yeah, this was going to be fun. "John, don't."

Again, John looked surprised. He knew Gail loved to give shit to her exes. She'd never defended any of them before, not with that tone. "He's family. You know he has to be a suspect."

"He's not," Gail said firmly. She adjusted her badge on her belt, absentely touched the ring hidden under her shirt, and started for the front door. As she expected, the door opened before she could ring
the doorbell. This was the rich part of town, and some people actually lived like it.

"Madam," greeted the butler.

She pushed her blazer to the side, mildly grateful that she'd tossed it on and not her leather jacket that morning, and flashed her badge at the butler. "Detectives Peck and Simmons." Gail gestured at John and, as an afterthought, added, "And Krakowski from the crime lab." She waited a moment, not asking where Donal was. He'd be there soon enough.

The butler coughed. "My apologies, Detective." Good. They were all on the same script now. "Master Donal is on his way down. Mr. and Mrs. Rose will be home late tonight. Can this wait?"

Before Gail could answer, the sound of a motor rumbled into the room. It was a softer motor than a car, electric and meant for inside. She caught John's muttered 'son of a bitch' behind her and smiled a little.

Donal's voice was pitched low, "It's okay, Thomas. I've got this."

Gail turned her head to see the handsome face she remembered. Gone was the boyish, impish college student. The man there was careworn and tired. Still impish though, and surprisingly youthful. "You could have mentioned," grumbled John, as they watched Donal use the sip-and-puff in his wheelchair.

"Where's the fun in that?" Gail rested her hand on her belt, beside the badge, where Donal was clear to see it. "Mr. Rose."

"Detective Peck," smiled Donal. "Nice haircut."

"You could use a trim," she smirked back. His hair was tied back in a ponytail, which was a drastic change from the crewcut he'd worn when they'd dated.

"It's just hair, right?" He pulled up just far enough away that he didn't have to strain his neck. "Hey, you'll like this one." Turning his left hand, Donal flipped her off.

That was an improvement since she'd last seen him. Gail grinned. "Good to see you too, Donny." It had been years, some function or another, and Donal had only control of his left ring finger. Now he had the whole left hand.

There was an awkward pause. "This is where I'd try to hug you and you'd tell me you don't communicate that way." He looked at John. "The last time she hugged me was when I got out of surgery. She was all cute in her uniform too." To Gail, Donal added, "You're damn sexy in that uniform."

"So I'm told." She hadn't remembered hugging him, but assumed her mother forced her to do so.

John cleared his throat. "I'm sorry this isn't a social call, Mr. Rose."


"That's guns and gangs, you moron," laughed Gail. "No, we're from the organized crimes department. Major crimes." She'd given up a long time ago, trying to explain the semantics, but it worked out the same. People understood 'major crimes' like the TV show, where as 'organized crimes' made them think the mob. She paused. "Is Aston home?"
There was a heartbeat pause and Donal frowned. "Astie? He went out last night to some party."
Turning his chair to look at the butler, Donal asked, "Did he come home yet?"

Thomas shook his head. "Master Aston's car was not in the garage this morning, sir."

"There you go. If Thomas doesn't know, he's not here. Why? He a suspect?" When Gail shook her
head minutely, Donal froze. "Oh. Shit."

"A body was found with his ID," John explained.

Donal swallowed, his face getting red. "Did it look like him?"

"We couldn't make a positive match at the scene—"

But Donal cut John off. "Gail. Please. Was it Astie?"

She shrugged. "I couldn't tell. That's why we need a DNA sample. Hairbrush, toothbrush…"

Donal nodded, his pale skin looking a little worse. "Yeah, yeah, of course. Thomas, will you take
them to Astie's room?"

With a head nod, John and Crater Face Krakowski went with the butler upstairs to collect the
evidence, leaving Gail and Donal alone for a moment. She sat on the bench to be at eye level with
him. "I'm really sorry about this, Donny," she began.

"Oh god, don't do sympathy. You're really crap at it, Gail," laughed the man, morbidly.

"God gave me a lot of other gifts to make up for that."

"Including atheism." They shared the awkward smile of people who, once, knew each other fairly
well. "So. Detective. Wow. I thought you were going to piss off your folks forever."

That felt like a million years ago. "A lot has changed in … what, ten years?"

Donal tilted his head. When they'd dated, this was where he'd have scratched his face, just below the
cheekbone. Now he just looked up. "Well let's see. You dumped me our second to last year in
college. So … yeah. Decade sounds right." He looked back at her and smiled. "It's really great to see
you. You look fantastic."

A warning bell went off in Gail's head. Was Donal hitting on her again? She didn't rise to the
question. "What've you and Aston been up to? Still working for your old man?"

If Donal noticed she was carefully milking him for information, he didn't react. "I am. Astie's been
… well. Astie. Stupid second son and all that shit." Donal huffed, "I keep trying to get him to join in
for real, but he's screwing around. You can't call it work, but he's at the Montréal office, helps handle
Quebec supposedly."

"People've got to come around on their own," she noted.

"I guess. Took a long drive off a tall cliff for me to do it, didn't it?"

The accident hadn't been anything to do with Gail, or their relationship. Shortly after she'd joined the
academy, Donal had been in a car accident on a ski trip. Like everyone else, she'd visited him in the
hospital, wished him well, and moved on. At least she'd had the excuse of being in the academy to
avoid the quadriplegic. Sick people, hurt people, still gave her the creeps. Except for Holly.
"Didn't make you any smarter," smiled Gail. "What was it? 2.3 GPA? And that was after a professional tutor?"

"Shut up, Miss 3.8."

"That's Detective 3.8, thank you." Gail had been on the Dean's List to boot, all four years. When Holly found that out, she'd been delighted and framed the award in their office. Gail didn't see how it was that much if an accomplishment, but then again, it was a Peckspection. Shit she had to do, because if she didn't she was a disappointment, but if she did it was no big deal because she was supposed to.

"Snob." Donal smiled. "It's really good to see you."

Oh, yes, he was hitting on her. Gail sighed as faintly as she could and looked up at the stairs. Where the hell was John? "Astie wasn't doing anything I should know about, was he?"

Donal's left middle finger twitched, and Gail realized that was his equivalent of a shrug. "Depends what you care about dope, I guess. He's probably got a joint in his room."

"Still?" She sighed. Aston had been a slacker pothead in school. Not shocked he still was, though, just disappointed.

Smiling up at Gail, Donal pointed out, "I've changed a lot, Gail. Some of us do."

"Some of us do a lot," Gail replied. She smiled absently, thinking about her own life.

The motor whirred and Donal used his wheelchair to nudge Gail's foot. For a quadriplegic, he was pretty down with his moves, she had to give him that. Instead of kicking his tire back like she might have done outside of the job, she leaned back and rested her hand on her belt, by her badge.

His eyes tracked the motion and Donal sighed. "Do you really think this is Astie?"

"I really don't know, but you deserve an answer, Donnie."

He dipped his head slightly, as much of a nod as he could do easily. "If it is… You'll find out who killed him?"

There was a creak at the stairway and Gail glanced up. Thank god, there was John. "I promise, you've got the best working the case. Your parents are home tonight?"

Donal frowned and looked at Gail curiously. "Yeah. Their plane gets in at six. Should I … do you want me to tell them?"

"No, no, we'll call them." She met John's eyes and he nodded. He would call them. "If he shows up, though, please call us right away." Gail pulled out her card and could have kicked herself when she held it out to him. They both looked at the card silently. Finally Gail snapped in her best 'I don't give a damn' voice, "Really? No telepathy yet?"

"Telekinesis," corrected Donal, smirking. One of the few things she'd really liked about him was his humor. The possessive streak had been a big turn off. "Thomas?" The butler took the card silently and they made their farewells and thanks.

At the car, John grunted. "That is one creepy ass mansion. You wanna tell me why you slum it with us?"
Gail sighed. "I am you. Us. Whatever." She opened the door and dropped into the seat. John's new car wasn't quite as nice as Gail's, and she could see him studying the interior thoughtfully. A lot of small things were probably making more sense to him now, like how Gail and Holly afforded the expensive school Vivian went to. Or their house.

The joke was on him, though. None of that had to do with the gobs of Armstrong money. Gail barely touched the comparatively meager amount she did have, using it once to buy her first car outright and once to put in for the down payment on the new house. Besides, she wasn't anywhere near as well off as the family her mother left behind to become a Peck.

Usually Gail forgot about having access to that kind of life. She'd grown up a Peck, after all. Visiting her mother's family was such a rare event, she could list all the times it happened without worrying too much. No wonder her mother had easily fallen into step with the Pecks. Her own family wasn't much for warmth. How dreadful.

They got to the lab before Holly was there. Her wife was 'stuck' with the duty of dropping Vivian off at school, would not make it to work until nine. It was rather galling that it was only eight in the damn morning. After they dropped off Krakowski and the sample at the lab, John asked the question burning inside the way only a cop who was your friend and partner could. "Give."

"You know the Armstrong family?" When he nodded, she explained, "Elaine Marie Peck né Armstrong. AKA Mother."

John blinked a few times. It sunk in. "Your mother threw away that to be a cop? Is she insane?" He knew the name and clearly made the connection. Surprisingly few people did. After all, it could be a common name.

Smiling, Gail looked out the window. "I try not to think about that too much." The real answer was that Elaine was the youngest daughter of a younger son of a younger son, and they just had some of the money without any of the real inheritance. Her uncle, Elaine's older brother, worked for the family in security. Some of her cousins were disgustingly rich. Gail's part of the family lived pretty much upper middle class. Of course, she was well traveled and educated, even if she sucked at spelling. "Look, it's not like I grew up in Forest Hill."

Her partner shook his head. "Did Steve go to UCC?"

Upper Canada College. Gail sighed. "He did on scholarship." John sighed loudly. He was uncomfortable. "It's not my life, John. Don't make it a thing."

As they eased into Fifteen, he asked, "What happened to Donal?"

"Car accident. About 8 years ago."

"Wish you'd told me before I tried to make myself look like an ass."

Gail smirked. "Where's the fun in that, John?" She held the door open. "It's possible Donal set it up, but I kinda doubt it."

John snorted. "You never believe the family."

About to reply it wasn't true, Gail paused. She really didn't. "I'm fine treating him like any other suspect, John, if that's actually his brother. Speaking of…"

"I'm calling the parents, you check his alibi?"
Gail paused. "I didn't ask him for one, John." She winced at the galled look from her partner. "Come on, it's not like he can drive the car or light the fucking fire, John. Even if he did it, he had to have an accomplice."

After a moment, John sighed. "Fine. You're right. Call the lab to push the DNA results?"

"Sure," drawled Gail. "I'll just ask them to rush the polymerse chain reaction. Not like it's important or anything." John paused mid-step and eyed her. "Maybe you can chip in. How are you at identifying short tandem repeats?"

"Really, Peck?" John scowled.

Gail shook her head, walking past John to their desks, "Really, Simmons, I'm married to the Medical Director. Can't speed DNA. It'll be 3 hours, if it's fast."

She was sure Holly would smile when this conversation was repeated.
There was a bakery box on her office desk when she rolled in, from her second favorite coffee shop, and Holly smiled. While Gail loved the sweet treats from Bita's Bakery, Holly refused to tell her where it actually was, knowing that she'd end up putting Bita's children through college if Gail was unleashed on the store. Gail had narrowed her eyes at that declaration and pointed out she was a cop and could look up people's addresses whenever she wanted. So Holly had just smiled and Gail folded. That meant any time Gail wanted to send a small apology, she used the corner bakery store nearish their old condo. Holly picked up the note and glanced at Rodney lingering nearby. "Why is my wife sending me apology baked goods?"

Her former assistant frowned. "How do you know that's from Detective Peck?"

Holly opened up the card and read aloud. "Sorry about the BBQ, babe." She paused. "Unless someone else would call me babe."

Rodney smiled tiredly. "And risk the Wrath of Peck? I doubt it. Can I have a scone?"

"Please." She waved a hand at the box of goodies, taking her favorite for herself. "Arson case?"

"And I have to hand it over to you," he sighed. Holding out a stack of papers, Rodney went on. "Apparently the dead guy might be some Toronto shipping scion, or whatever, but between that and the crate of drugs in the car, they're bumping the case up the food chain."

This might be interesting. Holly sighed and took the papers, freeing Rodney for his beloved cranberry scone. "Want to give me the run down?"

They had a surprising amount of information already on the case, which didn't shock Holly when she saw her wife was on it. Gail and John had a tendency to be very thorough and a bit over-document their cases, which Gail said was Holly's influence. It was greatly appreciated, but it meant it took Holly until lunch to get her feet under her with it. As she picked up a salad for lunch, Holly called her wife's desk phone.


"Did I dial wrong?" Holly blinked. The numbers were one off and the names were right beside each other in her desk-phone's favorites, but Holly thought she'd pressed the Gail button on her desk phone. Unless someone switched the tags. Again. Steven. Gail wasn't the only one prone to stupid jokes on siblings, and apparently Holly counted.

"Oh, hey Doc. No, Gail's talking to a medical lab up north. Do you have DNA results? Short tandem repeats done?"

Why was she surprised that they answered each other's phones? "I do have your DNA, but no the full scan isn't done. The preliminary results are a match for your samples. I'll email you both the full results when I get them. We're still going over all the samples from that box, but I can tell you they're not CF drugs."

John sighed. "Damn it, Gail's batting a thousand on this so far."

"Dare I ask?"

"I would hate to spoil her fun," laughed John. "Anything else for us?"
Holly looked at her schedule. "If you need the autopsy today, I can squeeze it in, but I'd rather do it tomorrow."

"Tomorrow works if it doesn't put you in a pinch. I don't want to get between you two and your trip." He paused. "Congratulations, by the way, Doctor Mom."

Blushing, Holly smiled. "Thank you." All the paperwork was finally done, all the t's were crossed, the i's dotted, and Gail and she were finally, officially, irrevocably, parents. Maybe not irrevocably, but they'd signed off the last paperwork to excise Vivian's grandparents from her life. They could contact the lawyer if they wanted to send a message to their grandchild, and Vivian had been told as much. The girl asked if she had to talk to them, and looked very relieved when she'd been assured she did not. "Can I call you back when I can schedule it?"

There was the sound of typing and clicking before John replied. "That's fine. I know it's top of your pile. Want me to have Gail call you back?"

"No, I'll see her tonight." They hung up and Holly went back to reviewing the results from the drugs in the box. She'd been surprised to see the box hadn't destroyed all the samples. While the MassSpec ran the samples, she cut part of the box away to play with.

After her little dance with danger, Holly knew Gail (and oddly Elaine) had been worried about psychological repercussions when Holly went back into the field. She wished she could explain why she was so alright in better terms, but weirdly it was because of Gail. Holly knew someone had her back. Someone cared about her and would do anything for her. She was safe. Poor Gail. For so long, Gail didn't have that. She just couldn't understand it.

Primarily a forensic pathologist, Holly found all aspects of forensics to be fascinating. When there was something new to her, something totally out of the ordinary, she could get lost for days. A couple exes had found it maddening, while Gail called it understandable and made sure Holly was fed and watered. Gail also was considerate enough to keep Vivian occupied when that was needed at home. The reverse was also true when Gail was mired in the details of a complex case.

At the office, there was nothing to rip her out of her work except maybe an emergency, and today this case was top of the pile. The only person with the courage to bother her was also the only person who would cheerfully say she had brass balls. Which was why when Gail called her at two, Holly actually answered the phone instead of letting it go to voicemail like everything else. "You can stop trying to figure out the mystery of the unburning box."

Her wife knew her too well. "Stop being psychic."

"Stop being predictable," sassed Gail.

Holly rolled her eyes. "Educate me please, Detective."

"Well, Doctor," drawled Gail so amusingly, Holly could hear the smirk. "Did you know they make boxes that can withstand fire?"

"Of course. You line a safe with gypsum and it can withstand a house fire. I believe your gun safe is made out of that."

"Smart ass," Gail laughed. "They're heavy as all get out, though, right?"

"Can be..." The movers had bitched about the gun safe. Holly trailed off and looked at her notes. "So you want me to compare the box to the knowns for fireproof safes?" That was going to take a while.
And her wife did the annoying thing. "Nope!" She popped the P loudly. Holly hated that sometimes. "I am happily reporting to you that I got a hold of the medical company the logo matched, they were testing that new briefcase for shipping possible dangerous viruses."

"Oh god no," groaned Holly. "If the word 'Ebola' comes out of your mouth, you can sleep at your brother's." She'd only been back at work a short while since her scare and while everyone wanted to nanny her on the scene, Gail had apparently threatened the patrol cops to do what the doctor said in the field, or they could have a medical jurisprudence lecture. Her therapist thought it was interesting, but not abnormal, that Holly was just fine going back to work.

"Fine," chirped Gail. "Point is, that box is experimental. It's not supposed to be out of the lab, but they'd like to have the MassSpec results to confirm."

Holly frowned. "Seriously? No, that's not even remotely alright, Gail!"

"Which is whhhhhhy I had someone pick up two unburnt boxes for you and I'm sending Dov over with them. You can fricassee one and use it as a comparison or baseline or whatever. Thus I retire, Champion of the Universe. Thank you!"

She was quite sure Gail had a fist raised above her head. "You are such a child," laughed Holly. "When will Dov be here?"

"He just left when I called, so ten minutes? I'll pick up Vivian, no worries."

"You don't need to chase down whomever busted out the briefcase?"

"Nah, John's gonna worry that bone to the nub. He loves hunting people." Gail had more fun with the motives and breaking perps. "I'm just following the paper trails for the drugs. Or I will if this totally lame ass lab ever gets done matching chains of blah blah science things you can't rush."

Holly smiled. "About another hour. I'll email it to you."

"Sounds good. Try not to stay at work all night, lighting a safe on fire. Love you," sang Gail and she hung up without waiting for an answer. So annoying.

Still, Holly smiled. There were many things to love about her wife. The grumpy, pained, practically tortured Gail she'd met had given way to someone with the same dark humor but a much more open heart. And for all Gail swore she didn't communicate with hugs, Dov and Chris and even Traci all confessed that Gail had hugged them when they needed it most. Frank said she hugged them when he proposed to Noelle. Nick though... Nick said she decked him when he came back from six months undercover.

Cuddly Peck underbelly.

She liked the Gail was spontaneously announced her love, in and out of work. The Gail who sent her breakfast on a morning they'd both been rushed after she'd left the house before five. And especially, Holly found herself enamored with the Gail Peck who solved half of her scientific mystery with good, old fashioned police work, and still made sure Holly would have some sciency fun melting down a fireproof briefcase.

When Dov dropped off the cases, she took sample of the control case and then asked him, as impishly as Gail might, "Want to watch me try to set this one on fire?"

He did. It was awesome.
"Your wife is the coolest," Dov told her.

Gail barely looked up from her pouring coffee. "Seeing as I'm absolutely awesome, duh."

"Did she show you video of the briefcase?" He was positively bouncing, looking just like Vivian when Gail said she could try the rope swing. Absently, Gail wondered what the girl would look like hopped up on sugar, but thus far she seemed to have her own limits to that. Two cookies. Maybe four. It bothered Gail to see the kid had that much self-control.

"Yep, they're in the case notes. Nice job." Holly had also shown Vivian the video over breakfast, explaining why she'd been home so late the night before. Their daughter had found it far more fascinating than Gail had.

Their daughter had also whined when being dropped off at school, pleading for Gail to pick her up at five so she, Christine, and Olivia could finish making Matty a present. When Gail pointed out most kids wanted their parents to pick them up on time, Vivian had drawn the word 'Mom' out for so long, Gail capitulated with an embarrassed smile. Having someone call her mom was almost as odd as the first few months calling Holly her wife. It warmed her inside.

Her kid called her 'Mom' and had made friends with Frank and Noelle's daughter. It helped that Vivian and Olivia were in the same class, but the friendship had been very slow to start. Both girls having cops for parents should have been something to help them bond. At least, that was what Frank thought. Gail, umpteenth generation police, knew better and told both girls that just because their parents were friends did not mean they had to be. That gave the girls the freedom to decide, when one of their classmates made a rude comment about cops, that they were a team and friends and that was that.

Dov, ignorant of Gail's private thoughts, carried on. "She let me help her. It was so awesome."


"Gail... You know... Um. Holly's really great. I mean, good for you." She narrowed her eyes at her friend. "I don't like her like that. She's not... She's way not my type. And I love Chloe."

Pausing, she squinted at her former roommate again. He was acting very, very weird. "Dov, are you on painkillers again?"

"What? No! I'm just... I'm just thinking about uh..." He trailed off and Gail blinked. "Look, after what happened to Holly, I got thinking I should be serious about things." Oh. She smirked and opened her mouth to harass him about telling Chloe he loved her, only to have Dov surprise her. "I told Chloe I love you."

Oh. Fuck no. "Jesus, Dov, are you insane?" What the hell was it with men coming out of the woodworks and giving her the eye? Did motherhood suddenly make you mega attractable? Was that why Traci had to beat the boys off with sticks? She shoved Dov in the chest, a little harder than she should have.

"Like Oliver! And Chris!" Gail froze and eyed Dov. "Sorry, I just... I want her to know you guys are my family. And I love-"

Gail snorted. "Don't." She held up a hand. "Dov, I'm on my second cup of coffee. I am not prepared for this conversation. The only reason I'm even talking to you is we're working on the same case."

"We are?" Dov startled. "I'm working with Major Crimes?"
"Not if you're going to spaz out the whole time. You're acting as useful as Gerald."

That knocked Dov out of his head, thank god. They went upstairs, after parade, and she set Dov to work going over the lists of people who had access to the new fireproof briefcases, while she tracked down the various drugs and their sources. Then she sent Dov off to collect samples, with a minion from the lab.

"You just like bossing him around," smiled John.

"He's reliable," muttered Gail, opening her email. "Crap."

John frowned and looked at his own mail. "Those the DNA results? Why didn't we get those yesterday?" He closed his laptop.

Closing her own, Gail sighed. "I asked them to do the full check, and the samples from the body were pretty degraded." Holly had complained a little about that, how getting a good sample at all was hard.

But double checking didn't change the fact that Aston Forsyth Rose was dead. John had called the parents the afternoon before, explaining the situation, and promising to contact them as soon as they knew. In these situations, you knew where the parents would be. They'd have gotten home and stayed, waiting for the call.

This was not something you called in.

Gail drove them back over the hill, silent and brooding about the last time she'd made a drive like this. Her classmates had called her, late one night, asking if she'd heard about Donal. The next morning, her mother informed her she was going to see him, to give respects to him and his family, and she could shut up about hating hospitals for a day. It wasn't until fairly recently that she'd figured out why she hated hospitals quite so much. Long before seeing Donal there in that bed, she had seen her brother in the hospital. While Gail had never forgotten that, she'd never matched it up to her absolute hatred of hospitals until after Holly had spent a few weeks in isolation.

But the stupid Luongo River Fever experience gave her another brick in her wall of understanding herself, just like her own overnight experience as a possible patient zero. She could handle these things now. She hoped she'd never have to do it again.

Pulling up at the gate, she rolled down the window and held up her badge. The guard was the same as the day before and waved them in. "Well at least he learned."

"I'm betting old Thomas gave him an earful about screwing with the cops."

"No bet," smiled John.

She parked in the roundabout and they were not surprised when the door opened for them. "Detectives," greeted Thomas. "The family is in the sitting room." His eyes met Gail's and she nodded slightly. He'd handle telling the staff.

The family also knew. They knew the moment Gail and John walked in. First there was the flicker of recognition, Harrison and Beverly Rose looking at her in unveiled surprise, looking at Donal, and then back to Gail. Then their expressions fell into the overly controlled stiff upper lip, on par with the British. They were the same expressions Gail remembered from when Donal was in the hospital. She used to see that kind of look from Elaine, before her mother got her head out of her ass. Mostly she saw her mother make that face around her parents, or around Grandpa Harold. Gail caught Donal's eye and was not surprised to see a droll expression.
John took the lead, in deference to Gail's personal connection. He told them the simple truth. The body had been confirmed as being Aston's, but that they had yet to perform an autopsy. That was a risk, as the parents might balk and protest their son being cut up. He explained where Aston had been found, though not the details of him being cuffed to the steering wheel, and that they did not know how he died.

The mother spoke up first. "Are we permitted to see the body?" Beverly looked tired and sad.

John hesitated. "The body was burned, ma'am. We had to ask your son, Donal, for DNA samples just to be sure it was him." He was trying to couch the fact that Aston looked horrible in very generic terms.

That spurred Harrison back into life. "He was burned to death in the car. That's murder."

Pitching his voice to be soothing, John shook his head. "He was found burned, sir, but that doesn't mean that's where he died. They may have staged the arson, which is why we need to do a full autopsy."

Beverly shook her head, dabbing a pocket square to her eye as if she was trying to convince them she'd been crying. "We have enough enemies, Harry," she pointed out. "Gail, dear, do you think that it's really necessary?"

The first name drop got a side-eye from John. It wasn't like they'd ever been that close, so Gail knew they were just trying to sucker her over to their side. "I do, Mrs. Rose. If you want us to find out how he died." Of course they had the blood-work, what little you could get from a charred body, and Gail had no worry that they'd find out how he died. Her real concern was figuring out why he was killed.

The parents looked at each other, frowning. "It seems excessive," muttered Beverly, speaking for both.

"The Medical Director of the city will perform the autopsy," Gail pointed out. The title had the magic effect Gail had hoped. Both Roses looked surprised and impressed.

"Not the chief coroner?" Harrison was sulky and petulant, like a child. It was easier to deal with surly Vivian in the mornings, realized Gail with a sigh.

Smoothly, John slid in a comment, "Dr. Stewart will be the next chief." Probably. Gail gave her partner a side eye and caught the slight eye-widening from him in return. Okay. Fine. Holly was a shoe-in.

"Mom, come on, Detective Peck wouldn't ask us if it want right." He put a soft emphasis on Gail's title.

It was Donal's gentle reminder that nudged his parents over the edge. Harrison slowly asked, "Can we see the body? Before..."

John hesitated. "You may not want to," he said slowly. "Your son was..." John trailed off and flicked a glance at Gail. She could be more blunt.

"He was burnt to a crisp, Mr. Rose. We couldn't even identify the body without DNA."

The Rose family all looked at each other. "We want the best coroner."

It was reflex, but Gail corrected them. "Medical Examiner." Even John gave her a dirty look. "I promise, we have the best forensic pathologist in the territory assigned to the case." That seemed to
tip them over and they agreed to the autopsy, but they did want to see the body beforehand. Since Holly hadn't yet scheduled the autopsy, she suggested they come by that afternoon.

The air felt heavy as they walked out of the house. "That place is creepy," muttered John. "It doesn't feel like people live there. Are all those houses like that?"

Gail eyed her partner. "How the hell would I know?" She slammed the buckle into place. That was the problem with people knowing her mother's family was rich. It did no good to try to explain they weren't close since Elaine had been all but cut off for marrying into the 'blue collar' world of the Pecks.

That had been hard to explain to Holly even, and Gail still hadn't really explained the whole story. Part of why Gail over reacted when BitchTits said she was blue collar was a bit of an inherited chip on her shoulder from her mother. Every fucking holiday dinner with the Armstrongs was on par with the Peck ones, being belittled for not being who they wanted to see. No wonder her mother had fallen for the Peck bullshit so easily. Gail sighed and fought the impulse to floor it out of the driveway.

Thankfully, John noticed her mood and said nothing more. It was a measure of trust between them, the faith you put in the person who had your back every day, that they didn't have to explain things right away. How many times had Gail and Steve heard their parents lecture them about the importance of that partner, of bonding with them and treating them like family.

Gail snorted a laugh.

"Hm?" John glanced over.

"Sorry, I was thinking ... My parents used to stress how important it was to treat your partner like family."

John said nothing for a moment, but then he too laughed. "Wow. That is actually terrifying."

Smiling, Gail slowed down on the slick road. The snow that year had been brutal and started in November. Their trip up to the cottage for a week had been the last warm days of the year. If they got too much snow, they wouldn't be able to make it up there at all again until spring. But really today wasn't the time to be thinking about a vacation (and by the way, who would have thought a Peck would be excited about that?) but a case.

"I wonder if he was burned before or after he was killed," she mused, thinking aloud.

"After," John said firmly. "The way the cuffs were on his wrist, he would have thrashed if he'd still been alive. Bashed his head into the window, all sorts of crazy things. Humans'll chew a leg off to get out of a death trap."

Gail scoffed, "Humans will lie in wait and kill you for trying to kill them."

"Pecks maybe."

"No, I read this in one of Holly's journals. Humans are more likely to wait in the bear trap." She caught John's look. "What? I read!" She was certain that was right, though she rarely remembered Holly's books as much as the files she needed for work. While Holly teased her (with veiled admiration) about her memorization skills, they weren't infallible. Gail could prioritize what she wanted to memorize and retain for considerable length of times, and the journals were mostly white noise. Anything that could shut up the nagging voice of inferiority in her head was relatively welcome to her. Anything that got her to sleep on nights when memories spiraled out of control were
swallowed whole.

But memorized? Not so much. So she only had a vague memory of the details regarding the study. Still. She knew she was right.

"You read your wife's medical journals?"

Rolling her eyes, Gail pulled off the main road to head to the lab. "I have insomnia. It's that or reading the latest Game of Thrones book." Her smart watch beeped as she nearing the garage and Gail checked it. "Results on the blood work."

John pulled his phone out. "Yikes. Cocaine and ketamine?" An involuntary shudder ran through Gail. Damn it, there was just never going to be a time where that didn't bother her, was there? Thankfully John didn't seem to notice. "Was he always in to drugs?"

"He was a pothead in school, and Donal said he was still into weed," dismissed Gail. That was a far cry from the hard stuff. "That's a hell of a mix. Tranquilizers and coke." She rubbed the side of her neck, trying not to remember what that crap felt like. Uppers and downers at once had to be a special kind of high, though she couldn't fathom why anyone would take ketamine recreationally. It had been two days before she'd stopped hallucinating entirely on her dose, which had made her first few conversations with Luke about the events pretty disjointed.

Best not to think about those things. Gail parked and did what her therapist frowned upon, but helped her from over reacting. She started thinking about the song Vivian had been singing in the car that morning. The child had been singing songs from Disney's latest movie "Prince and Prince," based on the Dutch book "King and King." One of the songs, a take off on "Someday My Prince Will Come," was downright hilarious in Gail's opinion, and she'd taken to singing it to Holly off and on.

They went inside and warned the guards that the family was coming. Oddly, only the mother actually showed up. Holly, already set up for the autopsy, was clearly surprised to see that and gave Gail a confused look. They'd told her the family was coming. Normally people brought someone for moral support. Beverly studied her son's body and grimly thanked them, confirming she thought it was her son, and then left.

"Okay, is it just me or is that creepy?" Holly pulled her gloves on.

"Not you," John agreed. "But I'm finding this whole thing creep central." Gail didn't say anything, wondering what her mother would look like if it were her or Steve on the table, kicking a stool over to perch and watch the autopsy. She'd not seen one done on a fully burnt body before. "I have a theory for you, Doc," offered John, moving on and changing the subject.

Holly eyed him with a smirk. "Oh?" And John laid out his proof as to why the body was burnt after death. "Huh, that's a good one. You happen to be right."

Watching her generally mellow partner fist pump was amusing. "Science backs him up?" Gail spun the stool seat around in a circle.

"No soot in his nose or throat, so he didn't inhale it. Your fellow was definitely dead before he was set on fire. Did you read the lab results?"

Gail flashed a thumbs up and let her spin come to a natural end. "Still running the accelerants?"

"Diesel. Cheap. Also common."
Can't win 'em all, sighed Gail. "Mystery killer, didn't take the drugs in the car either. Do we know what those are?"

Holly nodded, "Same as he was on. Same batch too. It's possible he was sampling, but the evidence is too degraded to be sure." Picking up her scalpel, Holly grinned with barely tamped down delight. She clearly liked this particular autopsy.

And Gail had to admit it was pretty cool to watch. Once the chest was cut open, Holly and her assistant (Greg the backup pathologist, as Gail thought of him) picked it up to expose surprisingly normal insides. Except for the part where Aston was cooked. The smell was interesting.

"Is it weird seeing an autopsy of someone you know?" John looked a little green at the gills. Fire seemed to bug him, though not as much as Noelle.

"I don't really know him," Gail pointed out. She knew Donal. Aston was just the smarmy younger brother who smoked dope and was annoying. "But no, not really." Long ago, Gail had given up trying to sort out how many autopsies she'd seen. The number of them for people she'd known was smaller, but still uncountable.

Letting it go, John watched the autopsy confirm what they'd thought. The cuffs had burnt the skin before the fire had set in enough to char the body, and there were no marks that indicating a struggle. There was also nothing besides the amount of drugs in his system to point to cause of death.

"He could have slept through it," mused John. "Couldn't he?"

Gail eyed the tox report. "Depends on body fat," she muttered, trying to math out how much ketamine he had in his larger system than she had. Then she looked at the numbers again. "I think he could have slept through it on half that dose, Jesus. Strong stuff. But no nasal sooting, so ..." She shrugged.

Leaning over, Holly squinted at the arms. "Thats odd," she said absently, and probed the crisp skin. It crunched. "Was Aston left or right handed?"

The detectives blinked. "Left," Gail said after a moment. "Well... He wrote with his left." Holly glanced at her, clearly waiting to see if anything else poked Gail's memory.

When it didn't, Holly cleared her throat. "Secondary injection site. Makes sense to use the left arm," she pointed out. Most people were right handed, after all, and would shoot their own left. But not a leftie.

Which meant this was not just a cover up but an honest to god murder of a drugged out Toronto Scion. Well. That would be fun.
There was something about the case that was nagging her. Ketamine was pretty common, especially for wealthy kids. It was easy to acquire, easy to use, and generally safe in small doses. And Holly understood the desire to disconnect your brain sometimes. She had dabbled in illicit drugs in college, like most people, as a stress reliever. Once she started prepping for med school, she'd stopped since she had drug tests to worry about.

The worst Holly had done was some Ecstasy, which she'd promptly regretted and stuck with nothing stronger than alcohol and marijuana. But drugs like that, with someone tied up and killed, was weird. She'd seen it before, but she couldn't remember where.

Drugs. Tied. Off arm.

Holly frowned and pulled up the list of cases she'd worked on. Tabbing back she paused on Luongo River Fever. What a cluster fuck that had been. She still didn't feel totally normal, like the old Holly, after that ordeal. Of course, she was older and didn't bounce back. Maybe if she'd been younger it would have been easier, but probably not. If she'd been too much younger, she'd have been sans Gail's support and help.

Then her eyes went one more case back. Daniel Peck. She was about to tab past it, since she'd handed the case over, when she remembered it had to do with drugs. What had Gail said? Danny had owed someone money. She clicked the case file. Danny the drug mule. Danny had been supplying his firehouse, and others, with drugs.

If the cases were related, would they pull Gail off the case?

She read further, somewhat relieved that Guns and Gangs had found the killer for Daniel Peck. But it was a similar idea. Drug someone up and then leave them for dead, faking the cause and hiding it. Could Aston's killer have learned it from someone else? Was it common?

Holly ran two searches. First she checked for anyone else who died with a similar cover up. That was a weird search, looking for ODs with a secondary attack, postmortem. It took her an hour to get the parameters right, and even then Holly ran it again, a couple different ways, to be sure. There were a few, but nothing that made a pattern. Drugging someone and then staging them to look like an even more violent crime was both common and uncommon. It happened often enough with drug gangs, just not with any regularity.

The second search was the meat of her curiosity. The drugs. What matched that brand and make of ketamine? While she'd speculated that Aston had intentionally sampled the drugs, she doubted it. He'd clearly been about to drive somewhere. But those drugs didn't match anything in the database. They were clearly new or from outside Toronto, which meant Gail would have to talk to Blackstone, and Holly scowled.

Annoyed and frustrated, she looked back at Danny Peck. How many cases like that might have been missed? Not all pathologists were as exact as others. She re-ran the search for suspicious homicides, drug related, involving ketamine. When a blonde woman's face popped up, Holly frowned. Her eyes skirted pasted the name Nicole Marshall. Why was that familiar? She opened the file and saw the name Perik. Holly closed the window immediately.

Shit. Maybe tracking that down was a bad idea. Intellectually, she was aware of everything Perik had
done, and how it really was going to keep coming back to him over and over. It was a seminal point for Gail's life. A continual one. Holly sighed. The nightmares came and went, still, though Gail seemed to be getting a grip on understanding what she was feeling and what it meant. She admitted to Holly that she'd thrown a medical tome across the room after finding out Holly had been exposed to Luongo, and Holly promised that she'd have done the same.

And all that was doing now was distracting her from solving a case. How did Gail always fight through and appear normal? Well, bitchy but normal. Hot and cold sometimes, but normal. Now, what would Gail do in this moment? She would push her feelings of Perik to the side, ignore the memory of the world's worst trip ever, and look at the facts, because Traci and Gail and Steve and John and all the detectives looked at the facts.

What were her facts?

Fact one: The drugs were common. Ketamine of this quality was pretty readily available. Gail had been right that the drugs involved were not related to CF research. She and Gail both listened to Rachel drone on enough to remember that. But Special K, as the kids called it, had the downside of a K-Hole. When you took too much, more than a doctor would ever give you, you fell into a self-contained dream state that was impossible to shake until the drugs wore off. It was like waking up, still being in the dream, and the outside world was influencing what you think, but how you feel it, how you experience and interpret, was surreal and not understandable or even enjoyable. You wouldn't take that and then drive somewhere.

Fact two: Aston was a coke head. Long term abuse of injected drugs was also verified, but after being cooked, the samples drawn from his muscles and hair were severely compromised. The best Holly could do was use the hair from the brush John and Jones had collected from his home, and determine he'd been using for years. The traces of Ketamine was non-existent. He was not a long term user, if he'd used it at all. Another mark against the drug sampling.

Fact three: Someone had shot up Aston in his off arm. He'd been forcibly drugged- no. No, he'd been intentionally drugged. Maybe willingly, but that wasn't a fact right now not was it likely. There was a dearth of other off-hand injection sites, so like most addicts, Aston self dosed regularly. That made it unlikely, but not impossible, that he had been doped by choice. The odds were he was drugged up as a cover.

Fact four: Official cause of death was cardiovascular collapse. In layman's terms, his heart and lungs had stopped working from too much of the Ketamine, which was really intended to relax and act as a low grade anesthesia. Gail had been accurate, saying half the dose would have made him sleep through anything. She'd had the equivalent of half the dose Aston had (once you adjusted for weight) and it had taken almost three days for the crap to clear out of her system. That was with medical care, too.

Fact five: Someone had cuffed Aston to the steering wheel, and he hadn't fought back. See the aforementioned Ketamine. He was not quiet dead when cuffed, based on the antemortem bruising. Clearly he was doped out of his mind but alive, which implied the subsequent arson was always intended as a coverup. They knew he was going to die, or they didn't care if he died when on fire, but the obvious end result was a dead guy.

Five facts. Precious little.

Holly did not envy her wife in any of this.

With her headphones screwed in, trying to listen to the 911 calls Gerald found that might be related
to her case, Gail totally missed John coming up to her side of the desks until he dropped a notebook on her desk. Then she jumped and swore at him. "Son of a bitch, John don't do that you asshole!"

But her partner had a shit eating grin on his face. "You know I love technology," he told her. Gail narrowed her eyes. "And I love rich people and their toys."

"Seriously, John, I will get my taser." She reached for her drawer and he laughed.

"I talked to our buddies at Mercedes," he said, perching on her desk. "My buddies. They don't like you very much."

Gail pulled her headphones out of her ears. "They tried to bribe me with a car after mine blew up, I think they like me a lot," she countered.

"I think you scare them," retorted John.

"Potato, tomato."

"They call me back when I ask them if their new GPS contract backs up to the cloud." He held up his iPad, smirking. Aston's car had been burnt so badly, the black box wasn't recoverable. None of the GPS data was salvageable, so they'd had no idea where he'd gone.

Blinking a little, Gail hadn't even thought about asking for a remote backup. Hell, she didn't know you could do that, but it made sense. "Nice. How's that work?"

"Google. You hook your account up in the car, it remembers what you do and blah blah tracking shit. I got a warrant for his info and Google coughed it up." John smiled broadly. "Our little Aston had been driving to the shipping company a lot since he started his holiday vacation. A big a lot."

Gail snorted. "Jesus, John, it's his family's company. He probably works there." She glanced at the dates and was surprised Aston had been 'home' for two months.

Nodding, John still had his shit eating smile on. "He does. But not at those locations." Okay. Now he had Gail's attention. "We need to get at their records, Peck. I bet you anything he was using his company as a cover for shipping drugs."

"I would," mused Gail. Then she realized John was still eying her, speculatively. "Oh. By we you mean me?"

"In direct contrast to how most people react to your bitchy Peck-i-tude, they seem to listen to you. You've charmed them," he reflected, trying to appear innocent. "You take forensics and they'll just let it go."

Gail sighed and typed up the paperwork for the warrant she'd need. "And while I am dealing with people, at the end of my fucking shift thanks, what will you be doing, Boy Genius?"

John held up his phone, "Getting you your warrant. Following the drugs for you. The lab sent us a CoD and a list of possible sources, so I'll take care of that boring stuff." There was a way he said it that caught Gail's ear. She reached for her mouse to open the email from the lab. "Gail, I got this."

Her eyes landed on the cause of death and she sighed. It really just confirmed what they knew. "Heart attack caused by respiratory failure, overuse of ketamine." And John flinched. Yeah. He'd figured that out. "Fine, whatever. I'll talk to the family. Call my brother, he'll help you with the drugs." Gail grabbed her things and went out.
It wasn't like either end of this case was going to be gentle or easy right now. She'd actually rather deal with people since it would keep her brain from running in circles. Leaning against her car, Gail called her wife and hit voicemail. "Hey, I have to run out to talk to the vic's family, so I'm gonna be home late. I'll text when I'm on my way home. Love you." Then she called the dispatch and asked for a patrol car and a forensics crew to be sent to the Roses.

At the Rose house, the gate guard waved her in right away. The family was home. They were going to be home for a long time. People did that with a death, they all tightened the ranks. "Hi, Thomas. I need to talk to the family."

"Yes ma'am. Detective. All of them?"

"It'd be better." She noticed his nervous look. "What?"

Thomas cleared his throat. "Master Donal... Master Donal and Mr. Rose have begun the grieving process."

Gail felt lost and had no idea what the hell he was talking about. Wait, no. She knew those words. That's what her mother said at the funeral of Grandpa Harold, when Bill Peck had gone and gotten plastered. They were drunk. How the hell did you let a quadriplegic get drunk? "Cut 'em off. They'll want to hear it from me, Thomas."

The butler sighed, nodded, and led Gail into the waiting room. She looked around at the books. No one read those books, she suspected, and was unimpressed. They had a massive tree up, decorated like fucking Martha Stewart. No relation to Holly, who last year had dug out some handmade ornaments and they were dead embarrassing. Then she'd made Gail make some and they were worse.

But here was a perfect house, with a perfect tree, in a perfect room that no one used. When she'd been suspended, nearly eight years ago, she'd considered what to do with her life if she couldn't be a cop. Her mother had floated the idea of being a lawyer, or joining her family's business. This life could have been hers. Gail gagged a little.

Living in the frat house with Dov and Chris had been better. She'd finally made it out on her own, made a life and gotten an idea of who she was. And damn it, Gail liked who she was. She liked her job, her family, her friends. God, she even had her mother back in her life, which was weird. And she loved being who she was now.

"Detective Peck," sighed Beverly Rose. I trust the autopsy was conclusive?"

The other family members had not arrived. "Mrs. Rose, I'd rather wait until your husband and son are here."

"You can just repeat-" Beverly stopped when Gail scowled. Then the Rose matron sighed. "They're in..." Waving a hand, Beverly sat down. "Detective," she exhaled, looking up at Gail.

Gail tilted her head slightly. "Yes, ma'am." Waiting, patience, was never her strong suit, but maybe if she kept forcing herself to do it, it would become natural.

"I remember, you know. When you dated Donal."

Ah, Gail ducked her head for a moment. "That was a long time ago," she pointed out. "But if you'd like another detective assigned to the case-"

"Heavens, no." Beverly had the same, unfunny, disparaging laugh that Elaine had. Actually, Gail
was pretty sure Grandma Armstrong did that too. "As you said, a long time ago. I recall you broke up to join the force? Which worked out well for you." Beverly looked amused.

"Among other reasons," sighed Gail. She broke up because Donal wasn't that good in bed, but you couldn't tell someone's mother that when you were talking about how her other son died.

She was rescued from further conversational awkwardness by the drunkard male Roses appearing. Both had washed faces and damp hair, implying a fast freshen up. Absently, Gail wondered who had helped Donal. "Detective, sorry we took so long." Harrison tripped, nearly plowing into his son. "Sorry," he winced.

Donal looked up at Gail, beseechingly. "We're drunk," he announced. "Do you know who killed Astie?"

While the mother hissed at her son, Gail replied honestly. "No. But we're certain it was a murder. Was Aston actually working for the family business?" Donal said he was but not really.

Harrison sat down heavily. "One could hardly call it working."

Neither the brother nor mother refuted that statement. Awesome. "Dad, I can help them," coughed Donal. "At the company, I mean."

That was quickly agreed to by all. "Before we do that, I have a warrant to search Aston's room," Gail explained. "Forensics will be here soon. We're going to look for anything that can explain why this would happen."

As John predicted, the family let her do everything she needed. They even said they would help with going through things at the company. She let Dov run the scene, keeping to the doorway and supervising. Dov was shooting for shift supervisor, a smaller stepping stone than sergeant, and needed the accolades. And honestly, the over eager puppy wasn't bad at it, not at all. Gail still wasn't sure why he'd been skipped over on sergeant. She should ask Steve if he'd heard gossip, but in a way Gail was afraid of the answers. Weirdly, with Chloe's step up to detective Dov had settled and stopped being so reckless.

There was a possibility that the room had been scrubbed of evidence, in the period of time where they'd not been sure if it was Aston, or after when they'd done the autopsy before searching the room. Those were the risks you took sometimes. Gail hoped trusting her gut and the family wasn't going to bite her in the ass. Her phone pinged a few times, texts from John about how the drug hunt was going slowly, but he was pretty sure it really was all from the same research facility. Also he was still there. The other texts were from her family, letting her know they missed her and saved her dinner.

When forensics wrapped up, Dov lingered with Gail. "You going to tell them now?" They'd found a great deal of narcotics in Aston's room. Weed, but also some hard stuff that was going back to the lab for comparison with what they'd found in Aston's hair and blood samples.

"Already did. Mrs. Rose has the vapors and has taken to her room. Mr. Rose is in the den, drinking, and I think Donal's hiding downstairs." She shook her head. "They knew he did weed, but the hard stuff is a surprise."

"So they're coping by drinking," Dov said dryly. There was pain there.

Gail glanced at him and winced. She'd forgotten about his brother. "Sorry," she muttered.

"It's funny, my mom did the same thing when Adam died. Crawled into a bottle for weeks. Probably
why they split up." He was clearly thinking aloud. "Need me to stick around?"

Shaking her head, Gail walked with Dov to the door. "Stick with forensics, will you? Make sure nothing goes missing. I'm going to check with the family again and then get home."

Dov nodded. "You got it." He puffed up at the responsibility, even if they both knew it was a bit of a dump. He needed the work on his record, she wanted to get home to her family, hopefully before it got too late.

As soon as she found Donal to arrange times to talk tomorrow at his office, and hopefully get him sober by then, her plan to get home before it was late flew out the window.

"You know this is kismet, right?" He was slurring his words.

"Donnie," grimaced Gail. "You're way too drunk, okay. I'm cutting you off."

"Come on, I got no arms and my fucking brother is dead." He used his finger to steer the wheelchair closer to Gail. "Please? Gaily?"

God, how she'd hated that nickname. "Donnie, knock it off." She reached over and plucked the covered tumbler out of its holder and sniffed it. Brandy. Probably shit that cost more than her car.

"You're always so mean," he whinged.

Gail scoffed. "Like I haven't heard that before."

"Don't you want to be nicer me? Hell, I'll take sympathy sex right now."

She laughed and shook her head. He was giving her the smile that, in their youth, actually got him laid the first time. "Jesus you're an ass, Donal."

"You broke up with that Nick guy, right?"

Eyeing Donal, Gail nodded. She put the sippy cup of brandy on a shelf. "Years ago."

The man sighed, loudly. "Would you go out with me if I was a cop?"

"No," laughed Gail. There was no point letting him think he had a chance. "Don, I'm married."

He looked like he'd be slapped. "You got married?" Sobriety came on him fast. "You hate weddings."

That had always been true. "We eloped." She leaned against the bookcase and looked at him. "Don, even if I was married, we're long over. And-"

"And I'm a cripple. I know," he snapped, angrily tossing his head to the side, as much as he could. "You don't have to make shit up, Gail. Come on, I know I'm broken and fucked up and-"

"And I'm a lesbian, Don." And broken and fucked up too, but that wasn't his business any more. As Don turned around, Gail pulled out her phone and held up a picture from their recent trip to the cottage. She was on the outdoor couch, leaning up against Holly and kissing her cheek, with Vivian squeezed in the middle making a grossed out face. "That's my wife, she's the medical director of the city."

"She did... Wait, your wife did the autopsy on Astie?" Even drunk Donnie wasn't stupid.
"She's the best, Donnie. I'm not just saying that because I married her. Holly reports directly to the chief medical examiner, so she's kind of a big deal."

He looked confused and pained, but asked, "Who's the kid? Hers?"

"Ours," corrected Gail. "We adopted together."

The expressions that crossed Donal's face were subdued compared to Nick's. "You're... You're really gay." He screwed his face up. "Jesus, I made such an ass of myself..."

"Yes, you did."

"You let me."

"I'm a bitch," smiled Gail. She swiped through a few pictures, showing him a few more of Holly and Vivian, both with and without Gail.

Finally, Donal sighed. "You know, I can see it. The gay. It makes sense." He glanced at the brandy. "Can I have my booze back?"

"No. You drink too much, you're at higher risk for dysreflexia." When Don startled, Gail pointed out, "My wife's a doctor."

"No, no. You told her about us?"

Why were all the men in her life surprised about the honesty with Holly? No wonder Ollie and Frank were divorcees. "She knows everything about me, Don." He eyed her. "Come on. I'll call your nanny and get you to bed."

She walked beside him, slowly, back to the front room. Thomas took charge of Master Donal, getting him taken upstairs, but asked Gail to please wait. She didn't mind the wait. It had been a long time since she'd been in a house like this. Even at their worst, the Armstrongs lived frugally. None of them were ostentatious, except her distant cousins who actually did live in the richest part of town. Forest Hill. Unbidden, she remembered Winston and giggled. He'd called his father her mother's boss, but that was only in terms of a charity group her mother had worked with. Ironically, raising money for cystic fibrosis.

Layers on layers of connections.

"Miss- excuse me, Detective Peck. Thank you for waiting," said Thomas as he walked back in.

"Sure. Oh, I left Don's brandy in the sitting room. He'd had enough."

Thomas sighed. "The younger staff always fall for his smile. Pity the poor cripple. And they will."

"He always had a great smile," agreed Gail. She knew the butler had something to say, but she waited him out.

Like magic, he cleared his throat. "Master Aston..." She arched her eyebrows and waited. "I overheard him, more than once, talking to someone about drugs." Gail tilted her head, looking curious but staying silent. "I assumed it was for the drugs in which he was imbibing. I suspect now... Not."

Gail pulled out her logbook and flipped it open. "Did you happen to hear any names? Locations?"

And Thomas nodded. "Places. Vancouver." He held out an envelope, much to Gail's surprise. "I
wrote everything I could remember." Gail took it, surprised more by the heft. It was a number of papers.

"I may need you to come in, make an official statement, Mr. Thomas."

He nodded. "If I can be of use. I've known the boys since they were toddlers, detective. I can't help Master Aston, but if I can give Master Donal some closure..."

Holding out her card, Gail nodded. "I understand."

The drive home was dark and quiet, spurring Gail to swing past her childhood home. It hadn't changed, the upper middle class hell hole was still the same soul sucking lack of light it had always been, even with the new owners decorating it for the holidays. But her parents, in their own stupid way, had tried to do what they thought was best for her. Best for them as well, but her too. They were wrong, of course. They'd never understood her back then.

She sighed and worried a little about how she was raising her own daughter. It was after bedtime when Gail pulled into the house, even for Holly, so Gail walked quietly through her home. Holly had left out some food, none of which Gail had the stomach for, but she knew she had to eat. The downside to her metabolism, if she didn't eat now she'd wake up starving and with a migraine.

Pulling out the envelope from Thomas, Gail turned it around in the evidence bag she'd shoved it in to. She wanted to read it now, but that was something best left for the office. Not that the chain of evidence wouldn't make it inadmissible anyway. Weird shit people handed you was always odd. Hopefully this wasn't a prelude to a suicide. Too many people did weird shit like that.

Feeding accomplished. Gail yawned and went up to put away her gun and badge. She really should do that first thing, but at least she still had it on her person. The story about Luke being shot because the crazy guy picked his gun off the table had stuck with a lot of rookies, but Gail remembered thinking how stupid Luke was. Was. She'd gone to his funeral with her brother. Luke and Steve had been at the academy together. They, like Andy and Gail, were a few years apart because Steve was a college graduate, just like Gail.

Some things were not options for their family. But if Gail had gone straight to the academy, she'd have been right behind Luke's class. How weird. Would she have been friends with Sam? Slept with Luke instead of Chris? That might have been an upgrade, unless you thought about Rosati. She and McNally still hated each other. They were both moved on, married even. Jo's husband was a boring guy. Andy's husband was Sam. They both sucked. Gail always thought Andy and Nick were better for each other, but that wasn't her damn business.

Gail paused at the door to Vivian's room. Once again, the blankets were kicked off and the girl was balled up in a corner of the bed. She smiled and eased in, covering her daughter back up. "Gail?" Vivian blearily looked up, eyes not really open or focusing.

"Hey, Monkey. Go back to sleep." She brushed Vivian's hair out of her face and lingered until she was sure the girl was falling back to sleep. Her girl would be seven in February. They weren't even parents a year, but it was a part of her life Gail enjoyed as much as she thought she would.

It was seven or eight years ago that Traci had joked that God would have to help any child that was Gail's. It was a surprise to Traci how good Gail actually was with children, disparaging comments aside. And stepping into parenthood with a six year old meant she missed most of the weird puking and diaper crap. The only time she had to deal with babies was when one of her friends had one. Now, even Olivia was Vivian's age.
Gail smiled and held back a yawn as she bumped her bedroom door open with her hip. Her wife was sprawled over the middle of the bed, her hair fanned out over Gail's pillow. Five years together and Holly still defaulted to sleeping in the middle of the bed. After a shower, Gail was not surprised to see Holly half awake, curled up under the blanket with her eyes fixed on the bathroom door.

"Time?"

"One something." Gail pulled on a nightgown and got under the covers where it was nicely pre-warmed. "Go back to sleep, baby."

Holly made a noise and snuggled up next to Gail. "Thought you were just delivering notice or something."

"Had to search the room. Forensics hates me," sighed Gail, kissing Holly's forehead and welcoming her body heat. Stupid December was damn cold, even with socks on. Her brain wasn't turning off, and she was stuck thinking about the case. She'd told Holly she'd dated Donal. Hell, she'd actually let Butler know, in the event he wanted to yank her off the case. But after the last year, he trusted her judgment.

Her wife did too, and just burrowed up against Gail. "Sorry." Holly pressed her forehead to Gail's shoulder, her arm snug across Gail's waist.

They lay quietly in bed, listening to the settling of the house and each other breathe. Holly drifted off quickly, her hold on Gail slackening as she faded into a sound sleep. Gail envied that ability. Holly could sleep and wake up easily, while both were always a struggle for her. At least five years with Holly and her grumpy morning nature meant Holly was prepped for Vivian and her surly mornings. Gail smiled and looked at the head on the pillow beside her.

Later, it was still dark when she heard Holly's voice calling her name. "Gail, honey, wake up."

"I'm up," she groaned, swimming out from a thick haze of sleep that felt heavy and deadly. "What's wrong?" Except she knew. As soon as she said it, she felt relief in a way she was far too familiar with. "Ugh," groaned Gail, squeezing her eyes closed. She couldn't remember what she'd been dreaming about, but there was a faint tingle on her neck.

When she started to rub the side of her neck, Holly caught her hand and kissed it. "Sorry," muttered the other woman.

"Better than the alternative," Gail pointed out, closing her eyes and concentrating on the feeling of Holly rubbing her hand. "What time is it?"

Holly shifted away for a moment, letting go of Gail's hand. "Half past five. Go back to sleep."

It was a Thursday. "I have to go in and log some evidence." Gail reached over for her iPad and opened up her stupid nightmare journal writing in the date and the fact that she couldn't remember this one because Holly had woken her up early. Was it related to delivering the bad news the night before and talking to Donal? Or was it because ketamine was involved? Rubbing her neck, Gail decided it was the drugs.

Used to the journaling, Holly didn't say anything until Gail put the iPad back down. Then she asked, "Do we need to cancel the trip?"

"No," Gail said firmly. "Viv's way too excited."

Holly smiled and settled with her weight on Gail. "You like my family."
"Your mom took a red eye just to make sure *I* was okay, baby. Your dad offered to get on a plane. I think they're almost as cool as you." It was still strange that Holly’s parents were that cool. They got mad with Holly when she left them out of her life, nagged her when she got too distracted, and encouraged her to do things even when they didn't really understand it.

If Gail and Holly could be half the parents the Stewarts were, they'd do okay.
There had to be a reason Gail was watching *Alaska's Last Frontier* while working on her laptop, but if so it was beyond Holly's ken. Instead of asking her wife, who was looking very seriously at the laptop screen, Holly walked around to where Vivian was curled up on the couch. "Hey, what's up with Gail?"

Her daughter looked up from her book, somewhat grumpy. "She can't find the bad guy and won't let me watch the news." Holly and Vivian shared a look of understanding. Their Peck could be frustrating when she couldn't solve a case. The news thing was still weird, but Vivian had started watching it that school year and was quickly becoming a news junkie. "Can we make pizza tonight?"

"Sure," smiled Holly. They busied themselves with the makings of dinner, only the smell of which brought Gail out of her obsessed haze. When Gail asked if that was pizza, Holly rolled her eyes, "Turn off the TV, Peck." A pause and the television was off.

A moment later, Gail was in the kitchen, one hand on the small of Holly's back, reaching for a glass. "Sorry. It actually has to do with the case." Gail sounded distracted.

This would be interesting. "Reality TV? Is your killer a 'star' of one of those jungle mining shows?" While Gail enjoyed watching reality TV, Holly had been appalled at the strip mining techniques used on the show *Jungle Gold*. Beside the fact that all that stuff was faker than Gail's hair color, it was setting terrible standards for what was acceptable behavior to the planet. All that said, Holly was fascinated by *Deadliest Catch*.

Gail scoffed, "Rumble in the Canada Jungle? Donal was telling me how they've been adding overland transportation to the company lately, since crazy crap like *Ice Road Truckers* was piquing everyone's interest in the great white north.” She glanced over at the table and got two more glasses.

"Are you gonna be on TV?" Vivian looked interested and carefully put the plates on the table.

"Not me," Gail said firmly. "What kind of pizza did you make?" That Gail changed the topic this fast meant it was not for little ears to hear.

"Sauce an' basil an' cheese an' cheese puffs," announced Vivian.

Gail looked at Holly, impressed. "I love you guys."

Dinner became as mild as talking about Gail's tomato allergy, which quickly turned into explaining how you could be allergic to raw food but not cooked, and vice versa. Gail was lucky, as she didn't share the common cousin allergies to potatoes and eggplants. For a moment, Holly tried to picture Gail never eating another french fry and smirked. Vivian wanted to know how come Gail didn't eat ketchup much, since it was cooked, and Gail admitted she just didn't like it. That took them around to eggs.

Her wife was a very picky eater and Holly teased Gail about how she couldn't possibly be a garbage pail.

After dinner, Gail took her laptop into the office with apologies. "She's working real hard," sighed Vivian, sitting with Holly on the couch.

Holly sighed too. "She really wants to wrap up her case so we can go to Vancouver."
"Olivia's jealous 'cause I already got a vacation." Vivian opened her book and curled up so she was snuggled up against Holly's side.

"I don't know if that was a vacation," laughed Holly. "But boy, did we need it, huh?" The girl agreed, falling into her clearly very interesting book. Peeking at the book, Holly was amused to see Vivian reading the same magic books she'd loved as a child. Her parents had sent them along as early not-a-fake-mom-anymore gifts.

Since Vivian was wrapped up in her book, Holly turned the football game on at a low volume and half-watched as she read a medical journal. Occasionally Vivian would ask for a definition of a word, or how to pronounce one, but the majority of the evening was quiet.

Thus it was Holly alone who wrangled Vivian through the process of showers, pajamas, and a read of a chapter from their night time book. She didn't mind at all, enjoying the time spent. Oliver and Traci kept telling her to hold on to it as long as she could because, soon enough, they'd lose her to 'being cool.' As they got settled with Vivian in the bed and Holly in the chair beside her, Vivian asked, "What kinda books did you read when you were my age?"

"These." She held up the E. Nesbit book in her hands. "I love these and Eddy Eager. Read 'em till they fell apart."

Vivian looked a little sad. "These aren't your books?"

"Alas, those did not survive my childhood, Monkey." Holly smiled and was rewarded with the gap-toothed grin of a response. She opened the book to the marked place. "Let's see... Where did we leave those Railway children."

After Vivian was asleep, Holly went to check on Gail. "Almost done," was Gail's immediate comment, upon the door opening. Her head was down and she was typing furiously.

Since Gail didn't chase her off, Holly leaned against the door jam and watched. This was not her favorite Gail, but there was something inherently pleasing about watching her wife work. Holly was highly opinionated, of course. She harbored the unshakable belief that Gail was pretty much crème de la crème of policing. This was not true, and she knew it, but being in love with someone really did blind you to their faults. Not enough that Holly would ever think Gail was a good softball player. That was clearly done under duress, and her one fantastic catch remained a fluke. An awesome photo, but a fluke none the less.

"The Roses own some of the trucks on Ice Road Truckers," Gail remarked as she closed her laptop. Holly frowned. "They're shipping magnates with actual ships, I thought."

Nodding, Gail shoved her laptop into her bag and locked it in the case with her guns. It was clearly that kind of case. "They are. They branched into trucks when the whole 'chocolate diamond' craze hit marketing." Gail made a face and Holly laughed.

"Care to unpack that, honey?"

Gail gently pushed Holly towards the bedroom. "Which part? Why they branched out or why I think those shit diamonds are a waste of space?"

"Diamonds for $200, please," smirked Holly.

Gruffly, Gail explained. "They're the most common diamonds, they're not clear at all compared to, y'know, clear ones, and they've got inclusions." She scowled. "Trying to tell people they're pretty
when the whole freakin' point of a diamond is the damn sparkle is just ripping off the masses."

Moments like this, when Gail absently revealed a hitherto unknown depth of information, were always fun. "I'm almost afraid to ask your opinion on synthetic diamonds." Gail's only reply was a glare and Holly shook her head. "How come you know all that?"

"Doesn't everyone?"

"I doubt Andy does," mused Holly, thinking about the engagement ring Sam had gotten, and remembering Gail's snide remark about it being a cubic zirconium. "I know because science, but I'm not as invested in that as you seem to be." She was amused at her wife's ferocity.

"My mother's family," Gail finally said. "Armstrong Diamonds."

The word 'diamonds' had not been said in conjunction with Elaine Peck's family before. The words 'diamonds' and 'Armstrong' were closely tied together. Everyone knew that and Holly felt a little stunned. Did Gail say what she thought she said? "Wait a second, you're related to those Armstrongs? The 'make it Armstrong' diamond commercial people?"

Warily, Gail nodded. "They aren't gemstone diamonds, they're ... y'know functional ones."

Armstrong Industrial Diamonds. Holly remembered them from med school, when one of her teachers was showing off a diamond scalpel for microsurgery. She never used them in her day to day life, but the amusement factor of teeny tiny scalpels had been pretty big. And her wife was related to those Armstrongs.

Taking a deep breath, Holly asked the reasonable question. "Okay, how did I not know that, honey?"

Gail hung up her jacket and shrugged. "I told you the money came from the Armstrongs," she pointed out. Accurately too, Holly had to admit, though incomplete.

"Wait a second... Just ... wait, you never talk about them." That was saying something when Holly considered how little Gail talked about her Peck family, except to punctuate something or another. Preferably to puncture their tires.

"Why would I? I don't think I've talked to them since Grandma Antonia died." Gail sat down in the window bench, pulling off her shoes.

Hence Gail's middle name, secret revealed. Holly filed that away for later. She shook her head, as if to clear it, and started changing to shower. "That's... Okay, it's just weird." That meant Gail probably hadn't been joking when she said she'd been to pretty much every major European city before she was eighteen. Holly was abruptly jealous. "Why?"

Her shirt half off, Gail looked puzzled. "Why don't I talk to them?" When Holly nodded, Gail aggressively threw her shirt at the laundry hamper and missed. "They don't talk to me. Mom... She married below her stature or whatever. Wrong kind of blue bloods."

Holly thought about that for a moment before the weight of the comment made the right sense. "Ugh," said Holly emphatically, picking up Gail's shirt and tossing it into the hamper. Stupid Lisa. Blue collar blue bloods ... And now things made a lot more sense thinking about that totally terrible night at the Penny. "Your family is very frustrating. Are any of them decent people besides you and Steve?"

"That's giving Captain Awesome a lot more credit than he deserves," quipped Gail. Her hands were
on her jeans, preparatory to tugging them off for a shower, and Holly crossed the room to catch her by the belt loops. "Hey, it's not a big deal."

"No, this is you deciding you don't want it to be a big deal," corrected Holly. "Which is fine, but I feel like I should apologize. About the Penny."

Gail shook her head and kissed Holly softly. "I wasn't mad about that, you idiot. It's not like you knew I was an overeducated snob like Lisa. I was pissed you didn't defend me. And I will hold that over your head for years 'cause you broke my fragile baby lesbian heart." But Gail was smiling that gentle, warm smile that Holly loved.

It was fair, though. "Hush, I know where you keep your taser," smiled Holly. You could joke about stupid things, once you were well and truly past the damage they'd caused. Especially when you'd used the damage to repair and rebuild and move forward. Accepting that everyone was imperfect went a long way to helping that heal. Yes, Holly should have defended her girlfriend to her friends that night. She'd learned, though, and did as much when her mother had once expressed worry about their relationship.

Tugging at Holly's hands, Gail cleared her throat. "I really wanna shower, baby," she pointed out.

"Oh fine," sighed Holly, as overly dramatic as she could. She watched Gail toss her jeans and other clothes into the hamper and hop into the shower. "Okay, I think I'm following this part of the case. They're shipping overland, Aston was working on that, and using it to … transport drugs?"

From the shower, Gail laughed. "Close! Looks like he was using the boats. Also I'm not sure what he was shipping. John's flipping that rock. All I found were a couple extra shipments that didn't quite match the original manifest."

Holly huffed. "I do not envy you that angle, honey. The facts are pretty slim."

"No kidding," agreed Gail. "You want in right away?"

"Please." Holly tossed her clothes into the hamper and, when Gail popped out of the shower, stole a fast kiss before getting in. The water was hotter than she liked, per usual. "I have to ask, you know. What happens if you don't close the case in two days?" Two days from now, they had plane tickets.

"Not sure." Gail toweled her hair off and sighed. "Butler was hemming and hawing when I asked the other day. There's a chance I'll have to meet you guys out there."

Glancing over, Holly saw Gail gnawing her lip. "I really hope not," she admitted. She had more worries about Vivian meeting her family than anything else. It had taken so long to get her used to just the friends who always showed up, she didn't want to cause the girl to retreat without that friendly backup.

Hesitantly, Gail offered, "We could put it off." They both smirked. Vivian had been so damn excited. "Let's ask her, in the morning, if she'd rather wait."

"Fine, but I predict a six-year-old meltdown."

"What if we don't close the case by tomorrow?"

It was John who dared to ask, not Gail. She didn't want to even consider it. Holly had predicted their daughter would have a meltdown if the trip was postponed. That had not exactly happened, but Gail had been the recipient of baleful looks all through breakfast and the drive to school.
Their boss scowled. "What do we have now?" Butler did not want to commit to this one either.

John grimaced and leaned back in his chair. "The drugs that killed him are still a dead end. Nothing traces to nothing, or to crap that's too generic. It could match what they have at GeoDrug."

"GeoDrug? Where the briefcase is from?"

"Yes," nodded John. "The lab said it was inconclusive but it didn't not match. I hit up Guns & Gangs about it, see if they had anything similar, but even they said it's too broad. Now… I did get a hit on anyone employed at GeoDrug with a record and a connection to Aston, and got Phillip Latz. Went to the same high school." John looked at Gail, expectantly.

"What? I went to an all girls school." She smirked and held up the letter from Thomas. "That matches with what the butler said. He'd asked Mr. Latz to please leave a couple times. Apparently as soon as Aston came home for the holidays, Latz started showing up and he worried Aston was slipping. He also gave us a list of a dozen other 'known associates' from Aston's more unsavory days."

Butler looked amused. "More unsavory? The guy was on coke."

"Used to be crystal meth," John pointed out. "Everyone else on the list checked out. Either out of town or cleaned up. The lab pulled that from the hairs on the brush. Looks like he stopped, which matches his stint in rehab—Excuse me, his time away at a health spa." Shaking his head, John tossed that report onto the desk in front of him.

"Okay, pick up Latz and make him fold," agreed Butler. And then he looked at Gail. "You had the transport?"

Gail tapped her laptop, calling up her own files. "The Roses have been shipping north, land based, for the oil and diamond mining expansion. Aston was supposed to be learning that, take over ice shipping and help Donal with the boats. He worked out of the Montréal offices, god knows why, and since he's a moron, was stuck handling east/west shipments."

Smirking, Butler leaned over to look at the information. "You have a point with this, I trust."

Oh did she. Gail tapped the mouse button and pulled up a chart. "These are all the shipments Aston touched in the last two years. The ones in blue are water based, the brown is land asked. Looks normal, right? Good 80/20, mostly brown. But. Here's what happens when I list only the ones based in Toronto." The chart became solid blue.

"Hey yo," muttered Butler. "What was the wild son shipping?"

Gail smiled. "Ah, I said touched." Both her boss and her partner looked startled. "One crate, one container at most per shipment. All from Vancouver."

Now her boss glared. "Is this your plan to get a paid vacation?" Gail held up her hands innocently and Butler looked annoyed. "How long are you there for?"

"Week and a half."

"Weren't you taking three weeks off?"

"I was, but then I took that week in October." Gail paused and Inspector Butler winced. She'd taken the week, after being mostly off work for three, because of Holly and the Luongo River Fever. There was no arguing she needed that break, up at the cottage, when Holly was released. She'd done some
paperwork for the team while she was out, but technically she'd been out of the office for October. Taking *more* time off after that felt weird, even if she really didn't feel like any of that had been time off, or restful.

Butler looked like he was warring with multiple emotions. "It's been a fucking hell of a year on you, Peck." He grimaced. "If, *if*, we get a connection in Vancouver PD, you work with them. If they want to handle it on their own, you take your goddamned vacation with your in-laws."

"Yes sir," muttered Gail.

"Now go get me this Latz guy and make him cry."

They called in for a warrant before heading down to John's car. "Working vacation, huh? Your wife's gonna kill you."

Gail shook her head. "Maybe. Better than not going." She opened the door to the main floor. "Wanna uni?"

"Think he'll be trouble?" John pulled up Phil's photo on his phone and Gail looked over his shoulder. She'd developed a knack for knowing what kind of meltdown people would have.

"He's a runner," she said firmly. He looked skittish, like a street rat. "Don't these people do background checks?"

John laughed. "It was all juvie shit. Hey, Epstein! Grab your partner, we're going out to GeoDrug."

Pausing, John looked at Gail. "Is it just me, or is that a shitty name for a drug company?"

Gail shrugged. "They hired a guy who looks like a drowned rat. I'm hoping they don't make any drugs I use." She pulled her keys out of her pocket. "I'm driving," she announced.

As Gail predicted, Phil tried to run.

"Phil?" His manager came in with Gail and John. "The police are here. They want to talk to you."

The man, the junkie clearly, shook a little. He nodded and stepped out of the lab. "About- about what?"

The manager looked back at them and John smiled easily. "A friend of yours from school. Aston Rose?"

"Oh! Yeah, yeah, sure sure," he bobbed his head. Then he shoved John hard, sending her partner into a table, and bolted.

Gail snarled and took off down the hall after him. "I hate when they make me run," she snapped. "Dov! Stop him!"

The security guard at the company actually made the collar, as it were, expertly clotheslining Latz as he made a break for the elevator. It was, in a word, epic. While Dov and his rookie took Phil back to the station, John and Gail took statements and interviewed his coworkers. They were uniformly useless, in Gail's opinion, though John said that their lack of information was telling.

Mind, she was in a terrible mood anyway, having had to chase. She hated the running. "They don't know him," pointed out John, rubbing his side.

"It's not a crime to keep to yourself."
"Theft, on the other hand."

They both looked over at the manager. He was trying to act cool. Gail nodded and gestured for the manager to come over. "Are you going to press charges for Mr. Latz's theft?" They already had the logs for access, though Gail had been disturbed to see how lax they were for that part of the building. Apparently no one thought stealing from that part of R&D was important. Now, stealing the drugs...

"I, we, yes." The little manager bobbed his head, not at all like Latz who had looked like he was about to vomit. "I'm waiting on legal," he finally explained.

Which was not a fun wait. And legal was slow and annoying and wanted to go over everything, including the warrant, multiple times. Finally Gail remarked to John that she'd contemplated becoming a lawyer, which had the desired effect of speeding up processes. Putting the fear of Peck into random people was the best game ever. They didn't even have to know what Peck meant to get scared.

The only upside to how long it took them to interview everyone was that when they finally got back to the station, Latz had been in lockup for well over two hours. One of the new kids, Sweeney, was at booking and had tossed him in his own cell where he was twitching like mad.

"Someone needs a fix," muttered Gail. She turned to the desk rookie. "Go get Diaz to take him to interrogation." When John gave her a look, she shrugged. "He's good with druggies." The secret that Chris had been addicted, twice, was still a secret. Gail and Dov knew, and Gail had told Holly at one point, but Chris had been sober since his epic year of crap. Sometimes Gail looked at him, his loss of Christian, and tried to think how she'd feel if she lost Vivian... You got attached to certain people really easily.

Joining them in the observation was Butler, carrying three coffees. "What happened to his neck?"

The bruise was starting to show up on Latz's neck and chin. "He ran. Rent-a-guard clotheslined him." Gail took the coffee. "How are your ribs, John?"

Her partner stretched and grimaced. "Sore." Oddly there was no mention of Rachel or sympathy, making Gail wonder if something was going on there. But that was for later. They watched Latz squirming even more. He shifted in the seat, scooting the chair around. Then he scratched his hairline, fingers digging into his scalp, before jumping up and pacing.

All three cops sipped their coffees, taking their time. Butler asked, "What was he working on?"

"New vials for transporting something something acid or base," yawned Gail. That had been the uninteresting part of the interviews and questioning at the lab. Holly would probably love to know about it, and Gail would tell her later, but seeing as there had been no weird glass at the scene, not even shards, there was not much point in tying it to the case.

"Also the briefcase. Both cases, he was testing them out. Trying to light them on fire," John leaned against the wall. "Basically he was pretty reliable at that. Didn't talk to people didn't hang out or anything."

Listening to her partner, Gail caught the edge in his voice. That tone reminded her of something odd. She flashed to Dov announcing his love for her. "John..."

They looked at each other seriously. "Not broken. I caught the edge of the cart under the ribs," sighed John. "I took some ibuprofen."

Poor Inspector Butler looked between them, confused. "Simmons, if you're hurt, you sit out."
Gail sipped her coffee, thinking about that. "Actually, I think that'll help." She smiled the grin that made Dov and Chris run for cover. "Play it up in there. Make him think he really hurt a cop. Hell, Butler, after half an hour, get a uni to pull him out saying the doctor's here."

And her boss and partner understood. Amp up the pressure. "Provided you have a doctor check you out after," grumbled Butler. "And your girlfriend doesn't count," he added, as John opened his mouth. "I never have that trouble with Peck."

"Holly's a forensic pathologist," Gail noted, watching John's face tighten a little. Interesting. "Last I checked, I'm not dead." She thought of her wife as a scientist more than a doctor, even if she was board certified. Dr. Holly was good for band-aids and the flu and stitching up Steve's back.

"No asking Dr. Stewart," confirmed John in his remarkable deadpan. Gail could never hold on to that as long as he could. Silently, John loosened his tie a little and mussed his shirt. He ran his fingers through his hair, making it not disheveled but depressed. Then he took a deep breath and relaxed his face, eyes drooping slightly.

It was fucking impressive how he went from looking neat as a pin to mildly beaten down in seconds. Gail shook her head and went to the locker room to pull off the reverse. There was an art to looking right for an interrogation and she'd watched her mother do for years. She'd seen detectives fail at it and others succeed. Some, like Sam, could get away with looking a little end-of-day seedy. Others, like her and Jo Rosatti, needed to put on the right armor for the right perp.

Everyone Latz worked with was impeccably groomed. They were all business casual, except for the managers who were strict business. The question was to whom Latz would talk. Gail looked at herself in the mirror. She looked like it had been a full day, tiring but not exhausting. Causal or corporate. She was in the midst of taking off her leather jacket and changing her shirt when Noelle walked in.

"Aren't you on vacation?" Noelle's locker was at the other end of the row, making it easier to talk.

"As of tomorrow, if I can break this guy," explained Gail. She took the time to reapply deodorant before buttoning the olive green shirt. Pondering over the buttons, she ended up leaving two undone and tucked the shirt in.

Noelle hung up her uniform. "He get spooked by yuppies?"

Smirking, Gail nodded. "He works with them. Kinda sleazy guy, druggie and everything. Figured I'd put the professional pressure on his ass." She pulled on the dark jacket, not a blazer, and brushed her hair back.

"Sounds like a good plan," agreed Noelle. "You're getting good at that, Gail."

Gail closed her locker. "Good at what?"

"The pretend part of being a cop." Noelle looked amused. "You were awkward at it your first couple times."

"Isn't everyone?"

"Sure," agreed the veteran cop. "But. You're good now. Bet you'd be great at UC too."

Gail laughed, unkindly, and spot checked her makeup. "Not gonna happen. I'd rather break the losers in interrogation."
"To each their own," smiled Noelle. "Olivia's getting a new sled for Christmas, by the way. She's gonna want to drag Vivian sledding."

"Sounds like fun. Can we make Frank take them?" They exchanged smirks and Gail went into interrogation with John. Latz was still pacing the room and jumped, clearly surprised when someone finally came in.

"You gotta let me out," he pleaded, his voice thin and high pitched.

"Calm your tits," snapped Gail.

Pulling out the chair for Latz, Gail walked around and leaned against the mirrored window, carefully positioned to give the camera and anyone inside the observation room a clear view. John stiffly took the chair. The motion was noticed by Latz, who flinched.

John cleared his throat. "Sit," he said flatly.

And Lazt sat. "Please, you gotta. I gotta be somewhere. I'm supposed to meet someone."

"Who?" Gail smile ear to ear in her most vicious smile. "We can call them for you. Give you a cop's note that you're helping us solve a crime." She positively dripped facetiousness. Another skill learned at her parents' knees.

The look on Latz's face, envisioning the police talking to his dealer (probably) about how Latz was cooperating with the police, was priceless. Gail might have to save the video and play it on rainy days when she had loser perps to work with.

"No!" He squeaked, he actually squeaked.

John flipped open the file and pulled out a photo of the dead Aston Rose. He slid a photo of the charred body towards Latz. "Recognize this man?" Leaning forward, Latz shook his head, so John slid over a second photo. This one was a headshot from the Rose Company's website.

Blinking furiously, Latz looked from photo to photo, his eyes widening. "Aston?"

It was the tone that convinced Gail he wasn't the killer. There was a way people acted, talked, that could sway you. As skittish as Latz was, he didn't have it in him to lie unless this was all an act. She kept quiet, observing as John talked to Latz about Aston.

Sure, Latz knew Aston, they'd gone to school together. Unlike Donal and Steve who had gone to UCC, Aston had gone to a less exacting private school with Latz. Obviously Latz wasn't a total waste of oxygen to have graduated from it, though. They'd all gone to UofT, like Gail and curiously enough Holly. Briefly Gail pondered her life if she'd met Holly in university and not Donal... No. The age difference would have been against them, then. Gail's 19 to Holly's 26? They would have had nothing in common.

"Look man, I'm clean," twitched Latz. "I mean, yeah, me and Aston screwed around in school but that was a long time ago. Like years." Latz sniffled wetly, wiping his nose with his hand.

Gail tossed a packet of Kleenex of and when John reached over for it, he winced. Well played, thought Gail. Taking a breath, John asked, "So why'd we find the case you're helping prototype in Aston's car?"

"Case?" The twitchy ferret twitched some more. Silently, John moved another photo over. The case in question, much worse for the wear, sat between them. "Oh. That case. Um. I may have told him
about it," muttered Latz, but he was clamming up.

Absently reaching behind her as if to scratch her back, Gail flashed the agreed upon signal to Butler. "Why would you tell him," she pondered aloud.

He squirmed in his seat. "Well, you know. Bragging. Like, he was a fuckup, right? Snorting."

"Aston was clean," noted John. It was a lie, but they wanted to judge Latz's reaction. The payoff was right.

"Then that ain't Aston," he said firmly.

As the slow realization of what he'd said hit him, Latz paled. Gail had to fight down the smile.

The door buzzed and the men looked over. Keeping her eyes on Latz, Gail listened as Diaz said the doctor was there, and could the detectives please come. Their junkie loser got a little green. Excellent. The fear was amping up.

Closing the door on Latz's protests no to leave him, Gail patted John's shoulder. "We'll give it ... Twenty? Then I'll take Diaz in with me."

Chris blinked. "Me?"

"You were watching, right?" She tilted her head at her ex-boyfriend and ex-roommate. When he nodded, she nodded back. "You know these guys. You're good with these guys." She knew that Chris' stint in rehab had been a slip, that he'd done coke in school, and Gail had kept his secret. It was the least she could do, knowing her own family was probably why he never got much by way of promotions.

While Chris pondered the compliment, Gail turned to John who was putting an ice pack on his ribs. Not as much faking as he'd have liked. "Give it half an hour. I need dinner."

Checking her watch, Gail winced. "Chris, can you get us some dinner? Chinese?"

"Japanese place down the street loves unis," Butler noted. "Udon."

"Thai," suggested John. "They have some spring rolls and noodles."

"Done." Butler and Gail said at once, sending a bewildered Chris out with an order to get the 'Butler Special' for four.

They ate, watching Latz fuss more and more. "Okay," sighed Gail. "Gimmie the leftover rolls. Chrisikins, grab a water. We're going in." Running a hand through her hair, Gail made sure to look just a touch disheveled. She walked in first, Diaz following.

"Where's, uh, where's the other guy?" Latz craned his neck to look past Chris, but the door closed on an empty appearing room.

Gail ignored the question, putting the food down. Following her lead, Chris put down the water and took a position by the door, behind Latz, looming. "When was your last fix, Phil?"

"What? What- no. No man, I told you, I'm clean."

"And I'm the Virgin Mary," sighed Gail, sitting down. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a box of mini Smarties. Shaking them once, she tossed them over and Latz snatched it up, chugging them right away.
Yeah. Clean her ass.

Leaning back, Gail pulled out a small box of Mack toffee from her jacket, popping one. Latz followed her motions and she tamped down a smile. Looking over Latz's shoulder, she thought about how long Aston and Latz had known each other. Why would Aston keep him around if he couldn't use him. What good would a guy like Phil Latz be? Sucking on the toffee, Gail studied Latz's face and waited a long time. She waited well past the time people started talking to fill the silence.

Behind Latz, Chris opened his mouth and Gail shook her head lightly. "Officer Diaz. Do you remember the case from couple months ago," she asked, absently.

"Uh no, no detective." He shook his head firmly.

"Ended up over in Drugs," Gail went on. "Donovan Boyd's group." As soon as she said 'Don,' she caught Latz's attention. "Guy killed with a similar MO to Aston. Shot up with drugs, then cover it up with something else. Of course, they used a knife." She leaned forward, lowering her voice. "That's a man's killing, Phil. Can I call you Phil?" Latz bobbed his head, unsure what to do. "They used a knife, Phil. Sliced him from ear to ear." Gail sighed. "That guy, fireman, he was my cousin Dannie." Again, the name sound had Latz's attention. Interesting. "We never caught the guys who did it."

Wisely, Chris was silent. So was Latz. And Gail waited again. Patiently. Something which she'd never been able to do before in her life actually came naturally to her in this room. You waited. You waited and you watched and you never cracked or broke a smile and then, then finally they would break.

And so did Latz. "I didn't mean to," he whispered. Gail arched her eyebrows. "It was an accident. I wasn't even driving."

Driving? Gail frowned slightly. "Why not?" Don't ask the obvious question. Ask around it.

"I was fucked up, man. So was Aston, but man I was so, so fucked up." Aston was fucked up?
Leaning back, Gail studied Latz's face again, having a feeling where this was going and not liking it at all. "I wasn't driving. He did it, I didn't, but it was my car. And if anyone, if you ever found it, he swore he'd tell them I drove. I did it." Latz started crying. "We didn't know it was Donal."

Woah. That was unexpected. "But you were loaded," Gail said softly. "It was snowing."

"It was snowing," repeated Latz, wet and thick and sad. "I didn't kill him. Astie. Thought about it, a lot, cause he's been holding this shit over me for ever. He kept on me. Made me hook him up with weed, coke..."

"Meth?" Chris finally spoke.

Latz nodded. "I didn't kill him. He made me give him the case. I wasn't lying. I was bragging about how I finally worked on a good one, a great one, and ... He made me. He made me get him one. But I don't know why! I don't know what he was doing, and I ... really don't know."

But it was drugs. "Give us your dealer," she said quietly, sliding the legal notepad over.

"He's, um. I told you, I'm clean." But Latz wrote down a name. "I don't buy anymore. But Astie had a guy. In Vancouver. And I kinda introduced them."

Vancouver. That was shipments and now a name.

Christmas had come early.
A Holly Jolly Christmas

Vivian stayed awake the entire flight. Gail slept pretty much from the moment they sat down. Holly was stuck sitting between them, reading. She tried to get Vivian to sleep, telling her that she'd be too tired that night, but there was nothing for it. The girl was on her first plane ride and was excited. So a five hour flight was spent with Vivian staring out the window in awe of being on a plane and Gail snoring away.

At least she wasn't afraid, Holly mused, fighting back a yawn.

They'd wisely caught a noon flight, making the morning hustle no more or less frantic than normal. Holly had barely slept the night before, though that was entirely Gail's fault. When her wife had gotten home from her interrogation, which went well if taking her a long time, she'd had ideas other than helping Holly finish the packing. Gail's reasoning was that they wouldn't have as much privacy with Vivian in the guest house with them and they had some time in the morning.

There was enough truth in it that Holly didn't protest when Gail undid her pajama shirt, running pale hands over Holly's available skin. Okay, she did protest a little that they should pack and sleep, but Gail didn't agree. She could sleep on the plane, Gail explained, and Holly wasn't saying 'no' to any of it. It was very hard to say no when you wanted the same thing. That was when Gail replaced her hands with her mouth and, at that point, Holly lost the ability to use complete sentences. Gail was really good at that. She smiled at the memory.

Perhaps that was why when she woke up at four, wound up from having fallen asleep naked, Holly retaliated by making sure Gail both woke up and was quickly only capable of monosyllables. Mostly the words 'yes' and 'please' were used. After five years together, they knew a lot about each other. They knew how to get things firing on all pistons for each other really fast, which was useful when you had a kid due home soon. They also knew what each other liked, what each other loved, and what was going to send the other over the edge fast. Holly skipped fast this time, savoring every inch of her wife until Gail was begging.

Of course, it meant neither of them got a lot of sleep.

In the aisle seat, Gail snored softly. Her head was propped up on the side of Holly's seat, arms tucked in on herself, crossed on themselves. Where Holly's part of the case was over relatively quickly, Gail had carried the workhorse's share of the load, digging for motives and suspects. And as of last night (or early this morning, depending on your point of view) Gail had to work while they were on vacation, because her guy had a drug connection there. It was no wonder she dropped off so quickly on the plane. Well. That and the sex.

Holly smiled sheepishly and looked at her wife fondly.

Her lovely wife had been working hard enough for three people, let alone two. If she wasn't working on cases, she was being a mom. If she wasn't being a mom, she was making sure Holly was really okay. If she wasn't doing that, it probably meant she was sound asleep. There were things about dating men that Holly remembered with not so much a bad memory but a distinct distaste. Chivalry, the way a lot of men did it, was annoying and oppressive and everything it wasn't supposed to be. They hovered. They smothered. They tried to take care of everything. Gail was very much not that. She seemed to be able to tell when Holly wanted her there and when she needed some space. And when Holly was wrong to want the space. Holly could get cats out of trees, but that cat would sit where she fit, and make you feel better. Yeah. Gail was good.
Once the initial shock of everything had passed, once Holly had gotten back to normal life and normal parenting and normal work, it all felt... normal. Part of it felt like it had happened to someone else. Most of it was something that had reshaped her much the way the realization that she was a lesbian had. This insane, hard to comprehend, thing had happened. Someone died. Maybe if she spent her days in a similar place, like a hospital, it would be different. But she didn't. There wasn't anything to remind Holly of Andrea or isolation in her normal life. Holly suspected that, should she ever be in a hospital again for any length of time, she might panic or have a flashback. Or maybe not.

She knew it worried Gail. But Gail was an expert at knowing how messed up your brain could be about trauma. That was why she worried so much about Vivian.

Holly glanced at Vivian, forehead pressed to the window, and then back at her wife. Gail's mouth had fallen open, making her youthful face look even more childlike. Very carefully, Holly turned her iPad to take a photo of Gail. She wasn't really jealous that Gail was asleep, even if she was tired. Possibly she was envious of Gail's ability to sleep with light and sound, but then she remembered just why those things were true and felt guilty. Shaking her head, Holly turned and took a photo of Vivian staring out the window.

"Holly," whinged Vivian, turning to look. "I mean Mom. Can I have some cookies?"

"Yes you may." Holly couldn't help but smile when Vivian called her 'mom.' They both agreed not to press the matter if and when Vivian started calling them both mom. When it happened, it happened, and when she called them by their names, that happened too. Surprising to Holly, Vivian had decided to call them both 'Mom' right away. She just wasn't exactly consistent about it. She was also six and still prone to getting other words confused. "I think they're in Gail's bag." Holly put her iPad down and carefully slid Gail's bag out from the seat in front of them. As expected, her wife had multiple types of cookies in her bag.

Vivian leaned over to see. "Oatmeal, please." The kid just didn't have a sweet tooth.

Handing it over, Holly left out a peanut butter and a double chocolate just in case. She went back to reading quietly until Vivian flipped up the armrest and squirmed around, leaning against Holly and still watching out the window. Holly smiled and brushed Vivian's bangs out of her face. "You okay, honey?"

"Is it really true Gail went to all the European countries before she was eighteen?"

"Yep," smiled Holly. She'd asked Elaine about that and had it confirmed. Gail had also taken off for a few months between university and the academy. Between the wedding and the academy.

Vivian tilted her head to look up at Holly. "Have you been there?" Her socked feet were in the window. It was a position only a child would find comfortable.

For a moment, Holly thought about telling Vivian to get into a less weird position. But her feet weren't in anyone's face or back and she wasn't kicking the seats around her. It was possibly the least annoying thing for everyone else. "No. I've been to America and Cancun."

The Misadventures of BitchTits actually started in Cancun. They had pooled their money and managed to all go for spring break, which had been fantastic and crazy and fun. A very drunk Lisa had hit on a girl and her girlfriend, one of whom shouted that the other was a slut for making out with that bitchy titty woman. Lisa, for God knew what reason, thought the best thing was to point out they both had made out with her. The night ended with Lisa holding a cold beer to her face to keep the swelling down.
Satisfied by the answer, Vivian wriggled back to her knees and pressed her face against the window. Except for a few questions about where they were flying over and what were those things on the ground, they didn't talk much. Holly pulled up the plane tracker on her iPad to show Vivian where they were and how she could math out how fast the plane was going based on distance. In the middle of Holly explaining about the parabola needed to fly around the curvature of the earth, and that was why they couldn't see the edge, Gail woke up.

"Seriously? Math?" She stretched her arms up, straining until she finally ahhhhed softly.

"Math's better than French," Vivian informed her. "We saved you a cookie."

Holly held them up and Gail made a face, pulling a Zone bar out instead. So she lightly kissed Gail's cheek, "How did you wake up in time?"

"I set a buzzy alarm," yawned Gail, wagging her wrist and taking the cookies back. "Enjoy the flight?"

The new smart-watch been a success. Gail had complained about it being too fancy for a cop, but Holly had made sure to pick out the more plain looking one, non-reflective, and basically totally watch-looking. The silent alarm feature was one of Gail's favorites. She used it regularly for alert herself to all sorts of things, and apparently as a nap breaker.

"I did. You slept the whole way." Holly leaned over and kissed Gail again, still softly. "I need to pee," she added and scooted out past her wife.

One of the flight attendants caught her eye as she left the lavatory. "Excuse me, I couldn't help but overhear. This was your daughter's first flight?" When Holly confirmed it was, the flight attendant smiled. "Do you think she'd like a set of wings?" He held up a plastic set of wings.

"She would. And if not, I'm sure my wife would." Holly paused, envisioning Gail's face when Vivian had one and she did not. Her wife was remarkably childish. "Actually..."

The flight attendant laughed and pulled three pairs out, and Holly had been right that Gail wanted her own pair to wear.

All three were still wearing the wings when Gail pulled up at the house. "Wow," whispered Vivian. "Holly did you grow up here?"

"No, honey, I'm from Toronto. My dad grew up in Vancouver. He and Mom moved here when I was in college." Holly grinned and popped the door open. Her parents, and only her parents, came out to the front deck. No cousin cars were in sight either. This was a good sign.

"We thought you'd never get here," complained her father. Brian was his usual faux-grumpy self, in jeans and a sweatshirt, with his hair sticking up as if he'd spent the last four hours pouring over notes and complaining about the lack of intelligence in his students.

Her mother slapped his shoulder. "Liar. You were working." Lily was still dressed for her work day in suit pants and a dress shirt. With a big smile, Lily rushed down the steps and pulled Holly into a hug. "You look better, baby girl. You have that glow back."

"Thanks, Mom." They shifted their weight side to side, standing on one foot and then the other, like they always did for big, long, hugs. It was lovely to have a real hug from her mother, not the tentative ones she'd had when Lily was in town. Even though Holly had felt fine, if exhausted, Lily had been careful. The hug was big and wonderful, as if it had been a year since they'd seen each other in the flesh and not just a couple months. Mom hugs. They were special.
"You are all so very weird," laughed Gail, getting Vivian out. She'd finally gotten big enough for the largest of the booster seats instead of the evil carseat. One of Elaine's presents had been a car seat that converted from infant size all the way through too-big-for-carseats. Naturally Vivian still hated it. She was exceptionally displeased to have it brought along as one of her carry-ons.

Vivian rolled her eyes. "You like her weird. Hi, Miss Lily."

"Hello, Vivian," smiled Lily. "How was your first plane ride?"

The girl grinned. "Cool. Holly told me about parabolas and arcs and why we don't fly in a straight line."

Gail rolled her eyes at Holly and slid two fingers up the bridge of her nose, signing 'nerd' at her. "I see I don't even rate a hello, Lily," sassed the blonde.

So Lily took a moment to give Gail a quick hug hello. "Hello to you too, Gail. I'm glad you made it."

"Me too," admitted Gail. "I slept through the science class."

"Brian used to skip gym," stage whispered Lily. Holly laughed as her father yelped. She knew what Gail was doing. Making the family seem perfectly normal. Lily let go of Gail and took a half-step towards Vivian. When Lily hesitated, Vivian kicked the snowy dirt. Then she held her hands out, awkwardly, and Lily very briefly hugged her too.

It was like watching Gail get hugged when she wasn't ready or expecting it. Holly grinned. "You ready to meet my dad, Viv?" Nodding, Vivian took hold of Holly's hand and looked at Gail for backup. They walked over to the front steps, where Brian was standing looking like his usual nerdy self.

"Hey, Brian," smiled Gail. Strategically, she stepped up first to hug him as he called her his favorite daughter-in-law. The hug was friendlier than normal, tighter, and Holly heard her father say they'd talk later. Then Gail stepped to the side, holding out a hand for Vivian.

They traded protection duty so Holly could hug her father. "Hi, Daddy." It was so much easier to call her parents and tell them she was not just gay, but in love with a woman. It had been so much easier to tell them she was moving in with Gail. It was so terribly, terribly hard to manage the next five, simple, words. "This is our daughter, Vivian."

Her father tilted his head, the same way Holly knew she did when being cautious or weighing her options, and then he smiled at the young girl. "Hello, Vivian."

Vivian looked at Gail and then Holly. "What do I call him?" Her voice was not quiet, though it was clear she was trying to be polite.

"I call him Brian," offered Gail, steadfastly not smiling.

Nodding, Vivian looked at Brian again. "Hi, Mr. Brian." And she held out one hand.

Her father shook her daughter's hand solemnly. "It's nice to meet you," he said. "I hope you have better holiday traditions than your mother there."

Gail groaned. "It's a perfectly reasonable thing to do." When Vivian looked confused, Gail explained. "Kind of like my birthday."

"Oh! But that was okay," she muttered. Surprising everyone, Vivian had begged to come watch Gail
shoot on her birthday as soon as Gail explained about it and why they were getting a baby sitter. Sitting in Holly's lap the whole time, Vivian had watched the target competition with a serious expression and made no comments for days. Holly still wasn't sure what that meant. "And you brought your gun so..."

Both Holly and Gail winced. They had not warned the Stewarts that Gail would be working. "Well. There's a reason for that," mumbled Gail. "I'm actually working."

And Holly watched her parents' faces fall. Surprisingly her father recovered first. "Well. Good. Now I can finish my paper!" Holly covered her face with one hand. Of course her father was working.

"Come on, Monkey," whispered Gail. "Help me with the bags while Holly saves my ass." Vivian giggled and they scampered back to the car.

Lily was disappointed. She wore it on her face with clear frustration. "Honey, you both need a real vacation where you're not recovering and she's not supermom'ing."

"It's not her fault, Mom," sighed Holly. "She almost didn't get to come."

"I just don't understand," Lily sighed. "Elaine tried to explain it to me, but both of you just give yourself to people all the time. You need to take time for yourself."

Beside her, Brian scoffed. "Lily flower," he sighed dramatically. "You clearly did not notice the lovely hickey on our daughter-in-law's neck." Brian kissed Lily's cheek and trotted down to help Gail with the luggage.

It was remarkable how your parents never ceased making you feel like a child. "I don't like having a gun in the house," Lily said quietly.

"I married a police officer, Mom." That had been an issue way back in the beginning. Gail was a cop and a newly discovered lesbian. These were things that Lily was sure would end badly. Holly would break Gail's heart or Gail would change her mind and it would hurt. None of those things had happened. Oh, sure they fought. Everyone fought now and then. But they also stood with each other, supported each other, and as Holly had told her mother five years ago, she sided with Gail right now. She still did.

Lily watched Brian, Gail, and Vivian haul things out back. "You know. I am very proud of you, Holls."

Blinking, Holly nodded. "I know, Mom," she replied, not sure where this was going.

"I mean it. You are amazing, smart, skilled. I read all your articles." Now Holly was blushing. "And you were right about Gail. But I really hate that she has her gun."

"Mom, she has a case of them in the office."

Her mother blinked a few times. "A case? Is that what the locker was?" When Holly nodded, Lily exhaled, surprised. "Wow. How many- no, never mind. I just... I thought you hated guns too."

At one point that was true. "Oh, God, I work with cops all the time, I'm past that. They're just a tool." Holly shook her head. "She took me shooting once. It's horrible. But it's part of who she is, Mom. Like Dad and that squalor he calls an office." Her mother laughed. "She knows you and Dad hate them. It's locked up in a case, she doesn't leave guns lying around."
Looping an arm through Holly's, Lily shook her head. "How does she have a case here? Isn't this outside her jurisdiction a little?"

Holly smiled as her mother screwed up her face in confusion. "It is. She doesn't know if she'll be working or liaising or being really grumpy that she can't do anything."

"And how is that different from her the rest of the time," joked Lily.

There was an unspoken agreement that they were going to help with the bags and to get everyone settled in the guest house. Vivian was clearly delighted by it, taking a load off Holly's heart and shoulders. Sleepovers hadn't happened yet and she'd worried that Vivian would have problems even sleeping over with Gail and Holly in the same little house. This boded well for future school sleepovers, perhaps if one or both of them came with.

The daybed had sheets on it and Gail and Vivian were engaged in an very exuberant discussion about the bed. Gail argued that it should be made back into a couch every day, while Vivian said it was her bed and should be a bed. They both clearly expected Holly to serve as arbitrator, ceasing their argument as she walked in. "Bed," she said simply, tossing Gail her purse.

"You always side with her," muttered Gail. It wasn't true.

Holly smiled and teased, "She's cuter." Gail stuck her tongue out and announced she was hungry. "Oh please," laughed Holly. "Tell me something I don't know."

"You're always hungry," agreed Vivian. That was totally true.

Gail held the door open. "I have a very active metabolism. Can you feed me, Lily? Your daughter starves me."

"Far be it from me to get between your wife and her voracious appetite," sighed Lily.

There was a collective pause from the adults before Gail and Brian broke down laughing.

Gail found the steel and wood in the division actually appealing. The open, clean lines were something she liked in general, even if her home was a little more cluttered right now. Everyone and their mother had gotten them presents for Vivian's adoption. The Legos were the biggest hit so far, followed by the books and the winter sports equipment. Speaking of winter sports, Holly and Vivian had plans to go skating and sledding with some of Holly's cousins while Gail was at the station.

It wasn't like Fifteen was a dark and dingy division, but there was something more oceanic about Vancouver in general. She could work here. It was quiet and peaceful. The secretary cleared her throat and Gail bent her head to the paperwork. She scribbled her signature on the last of the paperwork and tossed the pen down. Supposedly a detective was going to meet her down there and co-sign her release to use a gun.

While she waited, Gail texted Holly to ask how skating was going. Holly sent back a photo of her steering Vivian around. Gail smiled, feeling odd that she wanted to be there doing sports. No. She wanted to be there with hot cocoa, or a hot rum toddy.

"Detective Peck?" The rough voice of a former smoker caught her attention and Gail turned around to see a blond with shaggy hair, about her height.

"You must be Detective Flynn," decided Gail. Oscar Vega and Angelika Flynn. Odds were for this being Flynn. "Gail Peck." And she extended a hand.

"Oh. Sorry we have a Donovan Boyd, but he's a dick." Boyd used to work with her brother and Gail made sure to avoid the hell out of him. He was the dipstick that nearly got Sam killed. Of course, Andy visiting Sam while he was undercover didn't help that fuck up. "I don't know yours. Our commissioner does, though. Chief Santana and your Superintendent Bloom are old friends." And Uncle Al was more than happy to ask a friend for a favor in this case.

Flynn muttered a huh and gestured for Gail to follow her. "And they just sent you?"

"Actually, I'm here on vacation." Gail watched as Flynn signed the paperwork, allowing Gail to carry her gun and badge in the Territory, and dropped it into a basket as they went to the elevator.

As she followed Flynn through the hallways, Gail offered up nothing more about her personal life. She had no doubt the detectives wouldn't believe her, and couldn't blame them. The look she got from Flynn in the elevator cemented that. This was going to be hella awkward.

They walked down the hallway to Flynn's desk and the woman began, "Listen, you're not here with IA-"

"Do you know who Harrison Rose is?" Gail didn't want to screw around with the rumors and stupid fears today.

Flynn eyed her. "The shipping magnate?"

"His son was killed two weeks ago, lit on fire in a car, cuffed to the wheel, with a box of high grade pharmaceutical drugs that don't match the box they came in." Gail pulled her iPad out and keyed up the photos, handing it to Flynn. "That's all I give a shit about. You can sleep with your boss and I don't care, as long as you can help me out. Otherwise I've got a dead case, and I hate that crap."

A man laughed. "She's got your number, Ang." Smoothing his tie, a freakishly familiar face stood up. Jesus fuck, Blackstone? "Detective Peck, pleasure to meet you." And he held a hand out that she took by reflex.

Crap, that was scary as hell. Gail felt her heart skip and then thunder with shock. "You're... Vega?" She eyed him. If this was Blackstone, she was going to shoot him in the knee and then find a high powered taser for his balls.

"Pleasure to meet you," he smiled. No. Not Blackstone. Jacob would never smile like that. He was never without motive or secret. This guy, Vega, was a good guy, a good man in a storm. He was trustworthy. And he was the spitting image of Blackstone.

"Yeah, yeah, nice to meet you too," Gail said shakily, hoping he wouldn't notice.

It seemed Vega did not. "This is Detective Lucas." He waved at a younger, awkward looking guy, and Gail shook Lucas' hands. "Are you related to the former police chief, Harold Peck?" Oh yeah, Vega was way too nice and groomed to be Blackstone undercover, but she'd make a call later.

Gail nodded, "My grandfather."

Vega laughed a pleased laugh. "I knew it. If a Peck is from Toronto, it's gotta be one of those Pecks." Turning to his partner, Vega explained, "You're looking at Police Royalty. She's sixth generation police, right?"
"Seventh, depending on who you ask," sighed Gail. Awesome. That was just going to follow her.

"Really?" Flynn looked a little suspicious.

Vega leaned back in his chair. "It's not all sunshine and cuddles, Ang. Politics are nasty shit."

Gripping her belt made it easier to pretend she didn't mind the chatter. "Sorry to disappoint, I'm not that kind of Peck." Vega caught her eye and nodded. "Did the case files get sent?"

"Just rolled in," said the young Lucas and he pinned the photos up to their moving blackboard. Gail eyed the setup and made a note to suggest it to Butler when she got home.

She took her iPad back from Flynn and nodded. "So the dead kid is Aston Forsyth Rose, youngest son of Harrison and Beverly. He was a known pothead slacker in university, arrested a couple times on petty crap. Don't care. Supposedly cleaned up his act but was still the wayward son until he died, slacking and leaving his family obligations on his brother, Donal Weston Rose." Gail tapped the headshot of Donal.

"Any chance his brother killed him?" Flynn perched on her desk, eying Donal suspiciously.

"Not directly if he did. Donal's a quadriplegic."

"Doesn't rule him out," mused Flynn.

Gail sighed. "His brother was driving the car that sent him off the road. Donal doesn't know that, though."

All three Vancouver detectives looked at each other. "You sure?" That was Vega.

"Yep," she said clearly. "Aston was blackmailing Latz, though, since it was his car."

A uniform walked in with coffees, handing them out to everyone including Gail. "Sorry, I didn't know what you'd like, detective."

"Caffeine and sugar," replied Gail, and smiled at the offered cup. It smelled great. "But. No, it doesn't rule Donal out. Still, he's been pretty helpful. My partner's keeping tabs on him and checking his contacts. So far, the rest of the family seems clean." She added sugar to her coffee and blinked at the taste. This was good shit.

Vega leaned back in his chair, clearly believing her for now. "The drugs didn't get burned in the car?"

Shaking her head, Gail pointed to the photo of the box. "It's a new kind of shipping box, meant to take risky samples."

"Like what?" Detective Lucas was boyish and reminded Gail of Chris.

"Luongo River Fever," said Gail, reflexively. It rolled off the tongue.

Looking up, Vega was surprised. "You really had an outbreak in Toronto? That wasn't a hoax?"

"Not an outbreak, but two deaths before we got it sorted. One was from our lab."

Flynn muttered, "Jesus. You work that case?" She looked relieved when Gail shook her head. If only they knew. "That must have been scary as hell."
It had been and Gail sighed. She didn't want to share her personal drama with these people. "It could have been a hell of a lot worse. But we all know way more than we ever wanted to about how you ship nasty ass pathogens across the country."

There must have been something in her tone, because both the seasoned detectives took note and looked at her curiously. They clearly could tell she had some tie to the case she'd claimed not to work on. "What's the tie between them and the drugs?" Flynn was spinning a marker pen in her hand.

"Same company. GeoDrug."

"So someone nicked drugs," muttered Flynn, studying the board. "Put them in a special case."

"Prototype case," Gail noted. "Limited access."

Flynn smiled. "Small pool of suspects."

Gail smiled back. She liked Angie Flynn. Taking a pen, Gail moved the picture of their suspect to the far left. "Meet Phil Latz. Went to school with Aston Rose. Cracked and cried like a baby. Didn't have the drugs, just the box."

Frowning, Lucas spoke. "I thought you said they were the same company."

"Did you know there are five companies in Canada who specialize in making vaccines for virulent diseases?" Gail sat on Vega's desk and was not surprised that Lucas shook his head. "One of them, GeoDrug, has labs in pretty much every Territory. They split up which work on what. The Ontario branch specializes in research for containers, the B.C. one in creating drugs. Quebec is all admin and HR."

Vega made a pleased noise. "So you need to know who is shipping and where they got it?"

"Bingo. The shipping, we have no idea. The Rose family gave us carte blanche and my partner's running background checks. We're checking Aston's files, trying to see how he contacted people out here. Not all the shipments came from here, but enough did that we think his accomplices are here."

Then she smiled. "One of them was a GeoDrug employee."

Flynn smirked. "Was?"

"Aston's dealer. Mark Arnott quit GeoDrug three years ago. He used to hook up Latz, who is tweaking but getting clean. He's not the supplier anymore, though. He's the contact."

Leaning back, Vega looked at the board thoughtfully. "You have access to all their computer records?" Gail confirmed she did. "Lucas, do your magic. Ang and I can work the drug company. Find your new supplier."

"Think you can pick up Arnott? We found a paper trail and then he popped off." Gail flipped pages to Arnott's last known information.

Lucas picked up the page and skimmed it. "This is good."

"My partner, Simmons." Smiling, Gail watched the boyish man bounce over to his computer to bang on things.

The rest of the arrangements were made simply. Gail had limited access at their offices, but would be in the loop. But there was legwork they'd only started in Toronto and had to be perfected here. John had worked his special charm, getting info on everyone who'd ever been to Toronto, but the local
PD would be able to pull up all records faster.

And if it all worked out, Gail wouldn't have to come in every day.
At least Gail made it back for dinner. Holly saw the car pull up right as her father started to make noise about feeding her leftovers and unlocked it on her way to the kitchen. "Sorry, but I picked up the beer you like, Brian," called Gail as she bounded in the front door.

With a cheerful "Gail!" shout, Vivian galloped over to see her. "Did you get your bad guy?"

"Not yet, Monkey," sighed Gail. "Here, this is for Lily."

Thundering back in, Vivian was carrying a box from a bakery. "Miss Lily, it's a pie!"

With beer and pie as an apology for her tardiness, Gail had clearly won her in-laws over. Holly smiled. "Clever," she told her wife as Gail came into the kitchen.

"I'm freakin' brilliant." Gail put the beer down and leaned in to kiss her. "I'm really hoping this will be done tomorrow. Not much of a vacation for us," she muttered.

Holly looped her arms around Gail's neck. "We'll work on that," promised Holly. They kissed again and Vivian gagged.

She heard her father laugh. "They're just kissing," Brian pointed out.

"Kissing's gross," declared Vivian. Then there was the sound of someone else kissing, and she whinged. "Moooooms, Miss Lily and Mr. Brian are kissing too."

With a reluctant sigh, Holly let go of Gail and turned to their daughter. "Kissing's important for grownups."

It was clear the kid wasn't buying that one. "And so's grownup time," groused Vivian. "Can't you guys go to your room and close the door? After dinner." There was a brief pause before Lily and Brian started laughing.

Gail stepped behind Holly, her pale hands on Holly's hips. Whispering, Gail asked, "There's no way in hell your parents don't know what she said, huh?" Holly shook her head and Gail smiled, kissing her neck. "Come on, I want to be fed."

They made it through dinner and dessert, including a round of Spades after Vivian explained the rules for Brian. Losing miserably, Brian countered with Uno and they played that for a little while. Since Vivian was used to life with adults, she didn't complain when they wanted to relax. She also had homework, to write up about her vacation, so Vivian sat in Gail's lap and they worked on that together.

"I knew she was good with kids," Brian noted quietly as he brought beer over. "But she's amazing with her."

Holly smiled, taking a beer from her father. "I kind of kick myself for dragging my feet about kids," she admitted.

Her father frowned. "Don't, Holls. You two are lucky. You can't accidentally have a kid, so you actually got to wait till you were ready." Brian leaned over to pat her cheek. "You and that big brain, you had all the science in the world, but you didn't pick up people until you met that big kid over there."
"Oh and you're one to talk?" Holly laughed. Her father barely talked to people if he could help it. And Gail didn't get people either, but Holly had to admit that she did start to understand people better after spending time with Gail and her friends.

"Hush, or I'll tell Gail you were an accident."

"My birthday's less than nine months from your anniversary, Dad, she knows."

It was nice to hang out with her father, and they talked science and books and news while Gail and Lily seemed to be going over recipes, and Vivian played with the massive bucket of Legos that had been Holly's once. The reality of a quiet family night was just marvelous. As the night eased into bedtime for mini humans, Gail took Vivian off to shower and read to her from a new book from Lily and Brian.

"Is she coming back?" wondered Lily, picking up her own beer and curling her feet underneath her. Holly shook her head and smiled as she watched her father absently wrap his arm around her mother, holding her close. She remembered so many times, seeing her parents sit like that. She loved sitting like that with Gail. It was something she'd never thought of for herself but now missed on the nights she couldn't have it.

The night before, Vivian had fallen asleep on the couch before dessert and, since Holly hadn't slept on plane, they all called it a night together. Only after Gail promised she could have the cake at breakfast. "Why not?" Her father looked confused.

"Vivian doesn't sleep well," Lily explained to Brian.

Brian frowned. Her parents knew about Vivian's past in the broadest terms possible, which meant they knew she was an orphan. "What exactly happened to her parents?" Brian had zeroed in on the topic.

Holly toyed with her beer bottle. "Her father shot everyone. Her sister, her mother, then himself. She wasn't home. But she's had nightmares since." She sipped her beer. "We didn't think it'd be good to let her sleep alone in a strange place." She was still amazed Vivian had been alright sleeping somewhere besides home at all, but suspected it was because they were all there.

Leaning back, Brian looked surprised. "No wonder she doesn't like men." It was impossible for him not to notice, but Vivian had warmed up rather quickly. After all, he was Holly's dad and Lily's husband and everyone else was pretty relaxed around him. It really helped that Gail was friendly with him.

She talked to her parents a little longer, about the difficulties Vivian had in school and the ones they were having as parents. It was encouraging and enlightening to have her parents assure her that she and Gail were doing everything right. "There's no right way to raise a child, Holls," pointed out Lily. "There are a lot of wrong ways, but they're not the end of the world. Look at Gail's parents."

That was still weird. Elaine had been nothing but helpful, ever since Gail had nearly been blown up. "I'm still mad at her," Holly muttered.

"And you should be," Brian replied firmly. "So should Gail. And Steve."

"But," cut in Lily. "Elaine also was there for you, when you sat up with poor Gail in the hospital. And she's helped you both with Vivian, and with your ... Adventure." Lily had weirdly got along with Elaine, which had crept Gail out considerably.

Holly quirked a smile. "That was an adventure I could do without." It was annoying to admit that
Elaine's advice to Gail about helping Holly deal with the fear and pain of seeing someone die was spot on. Going back to work had been easy. The weird dreams and messed up sleep from watching Andrea die had not been. But Gail was incredibly patient any time Holly freaked out about her own mortality. If Holly woke up in a cold sweat, Gail was awake and sat up with her, chatting, until she calmed down. When Holly went to her therapist to talk about getting back in the field, which had only been a week after she went back to work, Gail came along and expressed her worries and concerns in a safe, kind, way.

"You're okay, though, Holl?" Her father looked serious and worried. He would understand it much better than Lily would, of course.

"I think so. I feel okay and I'm not thinking about doing stupid things like move to San Francisco or Prague."

Her parents laughed. "I'd be a blubbery sack of wet toffee if it'd been me," her father noted. "You sure you're okay for real? None of this shit where you just hide it all?"

She shook her head. "Honest, Dad, I really am okay. I ... look, I'm not a cop. I don't run off into things. This was just a totally random act of an insane man. And... I have Gail. And you. And Viv. And, god help me, Elaine. I have people who care about me. I'm not alone."

Lily shook her head. "Honey, Elaine's not a bad person."

That was something Holly still had a hard time with. "I just don't know how Gail just looks past the shit she pulled for almost thirty years." She understood why Elaine had done what she did. She was still annoyed by it. Chapped off.

Her mother reached over and put a hand on Holly's knee. "Perhaps she remembers a time when it wasn't like that. Or maybe she's willing to give her mother a chance." Lily paused. "You should ask Elaine why she did those things. I had a nice talk with her about it."

In fact, Holly had conversed with Elaine about things, but that was a conversation for her and Elaine only. "Stupid Pecks," muttered Holly. "Sometimes I think Gail's the only good one."

"Exactly so," agreed her mother.

Holly eyed her mother, wondering what all Elaine and Lily had talked about. Did her mother also know that it was Bill who'd spiked the adoption? Holly wasn't quite sure Gail had worked that out, and she didn't want to be the one to tell. But when no further information came out, she sighed. "On that note, Mom, I'm going to bed. Night." Holly kissed her mother's cheek. "Night, Dad," she said, and hugged her father.

In the little guest cottage, Vivian was curled up on the sofa turned day bed. She'd snuggled up into a little ball, leaving room for an entire other person at the foot. Gail had turned some of the pillows into a fort, but was not in the front room and the sleeping room door was closed.

Thinking Gail had gone to sleep, Holly banked the fire and went in without turning on the lights.

She regretted that a second later. When she turned around to look at the bed, she saw her wife. Gail was lounging on the bed in a rather skimpy nightgown, reading from her iPad. She was only illuminated by the glow from the iPad. Holly's skin went hot, her mouth went dry, and other parts burned.

"Took you long enough," sighed Gail. The iPad went down and Gail patted the bed.
"Gail," hissed Holly, hurriedly closing the door behind her.

"Yes?" And Gail smiled toothily. She shifted her legs, sliding one along the other, and Holly blinked a few times.

Their daughter was in the next room over. One door separated them. It was not as soundproof as their house or even the cottage. Holly came up with a hundred reasons to tell Gail this was a bad idea, including the fact that they'd used the sleeping arrangement here as an excuse for a late night before they left home. And all those excuses were dying before Holly could put them into words. Navy blue, slinky, and just covering up things slightly, Gail had picked one of Holly's favorite outfits.

Damn it, Gail was beautiful and Holly's resolve was drifting away. "If you wake her up, we will never hear the end of it," cautioned Holly, swallowing a dry mouth.

Gail smiled still. "Same to you, Dr. Stewart." She gestured at the bed. "Care to join me?"

Just because Gail had a case and just because they had a child in the next room did not mean they couldn't enjoy their vacation. Holly kicked off her shoes, stalling, trying to decide how bad a parent this made her. "I feel like I should shower," she admitted. While Gail had been out working, Holly had gone hiking with her father and Vivian. Which was probably why the girl was dead to the world. Okay, this could happen without any guilt.

"As you like," Gail replied laconically and stretched. And Holly realized her wife didn't have a stitch on under that 'sleepwear.'

It was one of the faster showers of Holly's life.

After, she lay wrapped around Gail's pale form. She could hear Gail's heart pounding and smiled. Well done. "So. How's the case going?"

"Eh," sighed Gail. "No suspects yet. And one of the detectives looks like Blackstone."

"Holly picked her head up. "He's not..."

"No, I checked."

How horrible. Holly settled back down. "Going back in tomorrow?" Gail made a negative sound. She probably wouldn't have to unless they called her. No point in sitting in an office the whole time. "Good," smiled Holly, running a hand over Gail's stomach.

Eventually Gail's heart rate and breathing went back to normal. "What're your plans?"

"Hiking with Dad," mused Holly. "Mom wants to take us to the winter garden. We'll do the tree the day before Christmas." It was two more days to Christmas, so that was coming up fast. She traced her fingers over Gail's ab muscles, getting a shiver out of her wife.

"Holly, I don't have a clue what you're saying if you keep touching me like that," muttered Gail, shifting to look at Holly seriously. Holly's response was to let her fingers drift over the hollow of Gail's hip and smile.

For a while, Gail thought she got away with it. But as she helped decorate the tree (a Christmas Eve day tradition for the Stewarts), she heard Vivian explaining to Brian that Holly and Gail had grown up time the other night, and that's why her moms were relaxed even though Gail hadn't closed her
"Crap," muttered Holly, poking her head around the tree. Her face was red.

Gail smiled and kissed her wife's cheek. "Like your folks don't know we have sex." She was slightly embarrassed, but more because she'd hoped Vivian hadn't heard them. "Hey, Monkey, what did we say about grown up time?"

The girl turned around, flour smudged across her nose. "But they're family, Gail!" The conversation had been that, since grown up time was private time, it wasn't something you talked about with other people. Like swearing, it was okay when it was family.

Beside her, Holly laughed. Lily did as well. "She's got you there, Gail."

"In the guest house, though," grumbled Brian.

"Oh, you know they did last time too," Lily swatted Brian's arm. He'd caught them getting a little frisky in his kitchen the first time they'd been out west, after all. Brian argued about Vivian being there, only to have Lily remind him of the RV and Holly to groan and cover her ears, chanting 'La la la."

Gail watched her in-laws tease each other and grinned. It was nice to see a family that liked each other, teased each other, and was goofy. "I like your parents, baby," she told Holly, grabbing her waist. "They're good people."

As Holly leaned in, blushing, to kiss Gail, the sound of their daughter gagging interrupted them. "Ewwww. Everyone's kissing."

And lo and behold, the Stewarts were kissing under the mistletoe. "Keep acting like that and Santa won't come," laughed Brian.

"Santa isn't real," Vivian nearly sneered and sounded just like Gail in her worst mood.

"Gail Peck! What have you done?" Brian swiveled and stared at Gail, aghast.

Ugh. Why did everyone blame her? Gail kept hold of Holly, "Didn't do it! She came that way."

Thankfully Holly came to her defense. "Really, Daddy? You told me Santa was made up when I was younger than Viv!"

Lily shook her head. "I'm almost afraid to ask this... Vivian, you do know other children believe in Santa, right?"

Nodding, Vivian carefully measured the vanilla. "That's what my first foster parents told me." Sometimes she was so nonchalant about it... Gail had forgotten that her daughter's birth parents were only a year gone. The resiliency of children was astounding. "I figured Santa wasn't real, 'cause rich kids got all the best presents, and if Santa was real, he'd give the poor kids the best stuff."

Her wife slipped out of Gail's grasp to walk over and hug Vivian. "Are we making snicker doodles or sugar cookies?" Holly tried to sound like the hug was unrelated to what Vivian had said.

But Gail was just impressed. "Nice detective work, Viv," she remarked, joining Holly in a group hug that had Vivian yelling they were messing up her peanut butter cookies.

Just as they were setting up for lunch, Gail's phone started ringing. She glanced at the number and...
frowned. "Peck." Both Vivian and Holly looked up, being far too familiar with Gail's cop voice.

"It's Vega. We found your guy last night. Mark Arnott. He gave up the name of his replacement. Dante Brown, still works at GeoDrug."

Gail glanced at Holly and stepped out to the back deck, signing an apology. "At GeoDrug? Don't these guys run names before they hire them?"

"He was a pharmacy admin too," agreed Vega. "Brown had a had a minor charge for possession, just like the other guy. Took us a while to tie him to Aston Rose, but your partner pulled it out."

That was John, she grinned. "He found the connection?"

"Dante Brown and Mark Arnott were both being blackmailed by Aston. He got your guy Latz to spy on the company."

Which Gail knew. "Sure, feed him the deep info on backgrounds and shit. He took that and found weak points?"

"You got it. Entrapment. Arnott's sister needed mouth surgery after meth, so Aston paid for it provided Arnott helped him out. When he quit GeoDrug, Aston was going to tell his family that he got the money to help his junkie sister by being a dealer."

"Rough but not that bad… Kind of Breaking Bad of him."

"Arnott was the one who got his sister addicted to start with."

Whoops. "I take it back," Gail snorted. "So to not get outing, he found Brown?"

Vega made a noise. "You might say that. He knew how Aston worked, so he found a guy who needed extra cash to pay for his father's Alzheimer's care."

Jesus. Aston had turned into such a dick! "Keeping eyes on him?"

"We were. 911 just got a call, he was found dead at his office. Want to tag along?"

Gail hesitated and looked inside. Holly was watching her so she signed 'dead body' and her wife rolled her eyes. "Yes, want me to meet you there?"

"Where are you?" When Gail gave the address, he grunted. "Ang can get you, it's on the way for her."

At least that would spare her having to explain the family situation, Flynn wouldn't come inside. She thanked the man and hung up. "Something came up," she explained as she walked back in and caught an angry pout from Vivian.

Holly sighed, making a sandwich. "Go put on something else, honey." Right now, Gail's top was covered in flour and sugar. She quickly changed into a clean, snug, sweater under a blazer and trotted back into the main house to find Holly holding up a lunch bag and her wool coat. "I will be very annoyed, but understand if you can't be home before nine."

"You know you're awesome, right?" Gail took the bag and smiled at her wife. That was still an awesome thing to think about. Wife.

The smile was returned, which was promising. "I am. I'll explain to Mom and Dad." The senior Stewarts were politely not interfering and standing over to the side, as if the conversation wasn't
They kissed again, briefly, and Gail went to say a goodbye to Vivian. "I'm sorry, Monkey," she said quietly, pulling the scarf around her neck.

Pouting more, Vivian hunkered down in the chair. "I hate your job. It's Christmas. We're on vacation." Her eyes went to Gail's waist where the gun was tucked away.

Gail squatted to look her daughter in the eye, as much as you could when your kid was looking away. "Vivian," she said gently. "You know, me and Holly have really important jobs. We do these things because other people can't, and we have to protect them and make the world safer." What would Oliver say? Unclipping her badge, Gail held it up for the girl to see. "See that crest? That's a promise I'm going to protect everyone out there, but also that I'm always coming home to you and Holly."

The girl started not at Gail but the badge, reaching over and gently touching it. "Who protects you?"

"My partner, other cops. We always protect each other." She reached over and put a hand on Vivian's shoulder. "Right now, these funny detectives named Vega, Flynn, and Lucas are all watching my back. And I'm watching theirs. Because they promise to come home too."

Almost reluctantly, Vivian gave Gail a quick hug and some fresh cookies, which she brought into the car with Detective Flynn along with coffee from Lily. "Are those fresh cookies and coffee? Please tell me one of those is for me."

"I'm pretty sure they don't want me to be that caffeinated," smiled Gail, handing over a cup of coffee. "Have a cookie too. I'm hoping it means I'm not in the doghouse for this."

Flynn took a cookie and sighed. "That's good. That's really good. Messy though. Your family not used to you zipping off for work?"

Shrugging, Gail carefully started on her sandwich. "Yes and no. It's the holidays and this was supposed to be a vacation." Taking a bite of her lunch, Gail sighed. Holly had made the ham sandwich the way she loved it with mayo and mustard. God love that woman.

"Always hard around the holidays," muttered Flynn. She clearly hadn't noticed the hickey on Gail's neck.

"My Dad's side of the family all goes to the range on Christmas morning. I think my normal's a bit left of centre."

Flynn laughed. "Wow. What do you do on your birthday? Have a competition shoot?" When Gail didn't answer right away, Flynn glanced over. "Wait, seriously?"

Everyone always thought it was weird. Even Holly still said it was a strange tradition, but she tagged along every year anyway. "My birthday's in November. Too close to Christmas for anyone to get amped up about it, so … I hustle my friends at the range." And Flynn just huffed an appreciative noise.

"I guess that makes sense if your whole family are cops."

Gail shrugged and changed the subject. "So who was watching Brown and how'd they miss him getting whacked?"

"Lucas and Sung," sighed Flynn. As Gail recalled, Sung was their team's uniformed rookie. "He
went into his office and... Well. Hopefully Betty will tell us it's a murder and not a suicide." After a
pause, Flynn added, "Betty Rogers, our medical examiner."

Another team member. "We usually end up working with forensic pathologists," mused Gail. "At
least in the field. The chief medical examiner's nice, but his assistant is a power playing freak." Thanks to Holly, Gail had met the assistant more than once. She privately expected Holly to take
over the role in the next few years.

"Betty's not," smirked Flynn. "I like her. She's like you, kind of. Quirky and blunt."

Scrunching her face up, Gail sneered, "Thank you?"

And Flynn laughed. "She's cool. Doesn't judge."

"Oh so she's nothing like me," pointed out Gail, smirking. "I judge everybody, and generally they
suck." When Flynn gave her a suspicious look, Gail added, "I hate most people. Including my
family."

Flynn looked thoughtful and drove quietly for a while. "Vega weirds you out."

Gail grimaced. "Vega looks like a dipshit I know in UC and drug ops."

"Ah," mused Flynn. "That has to be creepy," she agreed. When Gail just shrugged, the silence
returned. "This is awkward."

"Why? You dating Vega?"

"You mean my future husband," she corrected, in a way that told Gail this was absolutely not the
case. They were clearly friends, like her and Traci. "I can't figure you out."

"Well that's nothing new," Gail agreed, not minding that in the least. She absently touched the chain
around her neck, checking for the ring. Holly had figured her out. Weird, wonderful, Holly. This
was a shitty vacation for them. The last one hadn't been much of a vacation for Gail either. She'd
spent too much time trying to pretend that Holly's exhaustion was normal, and they hadn't just
stumbled through the most terrifying three weeks of her life.

Flynn's phone rang and the local detective pressed the speaker button. "Flynn and Peck," she said a
little loudly. The car was noisy, Gail had to admit.

"You sound like a cop show. That Rizzoli & Isles thing." That was the warm voice of Detective
Vega. Against the odds, Gail didn't mind him so much. He was good people, like John. Of course,
Holly had made a joke about that show and them. She wondered just what Vega was thinking and
what he knew. Could people just look at her and see she was a lesbian?

Shooing Gail a 'can you believe this guy?' look, Flynn growled, "It's Peck, not Betty in the car,
Vega. What's up?"

"Arnott showed back up at the station."

Gail blinked. "Back? You let him go?"

"Nothing to charge him on," pointed out Flynn.

"Jesus, protection for one!" She rolled her eyes and started to reassess her idea that Flynn and Vega
were good cops.
Over the phone, Vega replied, "Which is why he came back. I'm taking care of this. Can you handle the body without me, Ang?"

"Sure, I've got a hundred years of Toronto Policing in the car."

"Fuck you too," smiled Gail, sweetly.

And Vega laughed. "I like you, Peck. Angie, say hi to Betty." The phone clicked off as they pulled up to GeoDrug.

Gail squinted up at the building. "Looks like Toronto." It looked exactly like the building in Toronto, actually. Cheap ass architects. They flashed their badges to the cops watching the tape line, Gail's not getting a second glance which promoted her to go back and yell at the rookie to look at her badge for Christ's sake.

"I bet she was a great training officer," said a voice Gail didn't recognize. When Gail turned back around, she felt her heart actually fucking stop.

The red hair was way longer than it should be. The face had some serious work done. This was a cougar on patrol, not the look of a woman resigned to her life's upheaval, the face of someone who had shelved her personal life that Gail expected. But the face shape, the eyes, the body, the height... That was all so, so goddamn close to exactly what Elaine Peck looked like, that Gail found it hard to breath for a moment. The feeling in her head was a weird throbbing and roar. Like the cognitive dissonance that came after waking up from the throes of a nightmare.

"Only trained two," she managed, her voice snapping a bit more than she wanted. "Detective Gail Peck, Major Crimes."

"Dr. Betty Rogers, Medical Examiner." Dr. Rogers did not hold out her hand and neither did Gail. "Came all the way from Ontario just to see our victim here?"

"Ah, no, I'm on vacation. The case is a coincidence." Gail forced her face into her most even and flat cop face. She hoped it didn't show, how off-kilter she felt.

Flynn led them in through the building, up the stairs, and to the office which was nominally white. "I'm gonna go with bleeding out," muttered Flynn, looking up.

The volume of blood was impressive. "Boy, I hope he doesn't have any pathogens..." Gail saw the pools of blood already congealing. He must have been killed shortly after entering his office. There were no obvious voids, no footprints. Lucky shot or... Wait. That looked like a case she had worked. Gail pulled her iPad out of her bag and checked the list of cases she'd downloaded earlier. Holly had run a couple searches as well and Gail had saved them just in case.

She glanced up as Dr. Rogers pulled a mask on and stepped into the room. In heels. What a strange woman. "No signs of struggle," mused the medical examiner. "You know, Angie, next time you bring in someone from Toronto, could you make it a cute boy?"

"It really wasn't planned, Betty," laughed Flynn. "Hey, Peck, is your partner cute?"

Okay. This was officially weird. "John? I guess." Gail dropped her eyes back to the tablet and hit the name Peck as a victim. Peck? Oh, Danny. Okay, that would be weird. "Hey, Doc, can you check his arm for track marks?"

The doctor looked up at her, confused. "That's oddly specific." Holly had said the same thing once, making Gail wonder if all doctors said that. "Care to share with the class?"
"We've had a couple cases with guys being drugged and then a more staged murder, probably meant to cover up the drugs. Or to screw with us." She held out her report on Aston to Flynn, the part about the injection marked for her. "We ran a search on others, but we never found a solid pattern," Gail added.

Accepting this theory without complained, Dr. Rogers checked the inside of each elbow. "Add another to your list. Left arm has a needle mark." Gail frowned. She wasn't sure if she felt this was progress or not. "Why doesn't that make her happy, Ang?"

"Beats me. I've given up on trying to understand her. She's a mystery."

Gail took her iPad back. "Okay, so why would anyone kill Brown and Aston- Rose. Assuming they're related, it's got to do with whatever scumbags are managing the crime behind the crime." She frowned and started to walk back and forth outside the room. "Drug lords using their own product, but none of it matches, so the cases can't all be related. Just these two, probably... Flynn, can you make sure the lab gets the results we had from the drugs in Aston? Match 'em up maybe. We've been deadlocked on the drugs."

"Sure," said Flynn slowly. "Do you always do that? The walking and thinking?"

"Only when I'm really frustrated," Gail admitted. "I want the supplier."

Flynn leaned against the wall. "Latz didn't know?"

"No, he wasn't in on that." He was practically useless. "Think Vega'd let me grill Arnott?"

An evil grin flashed between Flynn and Rogers. "She's a charmer, Angie. I like her. Can we keep her?" Meanwhile, Gail was deciding Rogers was a creeper cougar.

Shaking her head, Flynn said, "Pretty sure we can't keep a Peck out of Toronto too long. It'll collapse."

"We charge divisions a fine if they don't have one of us on staff," quipped Gail. "Interrogation? Yes or no? 'Cause no offense but right now, we need to wait on labs and an autopsy, unless Dr. Rogers can pull a rabbit out of her hat."

Dr. Roberts looked up at Gail, amused. "A detective who understands how long my work takes. I'm trading Lucas for her."

"You like Lucas."

"He's cute, but she's the kind of girl you'd change teams for."

Oh if they only knew. If it was less creepy, she might tell Holly for some laughs. Hell, if it had been less creepy, she might have told Flynn and Rogers. "I'm not very good at identifying short tandem repeats by hand."

And Dr. Rogers laughed. "Keep talking like that, Peck, and I'll expect you wrapped up under my tree tomorrow morning."

"Sorry, I've got a prior engagement." She was actually looking forward to Christmas morning with a kid.

"So you won't wear a Santa Hat to tomorrow's autopsy? I guess I wasn't a good girl after all."
"Exsanguination." Both Gail and Flynn gave Dr. Rogers a dry look. "Someone cut his neck while he was alive. You can tell by the spray pattern." As Dr. Rogers pointed, both detectives stepped into the room and looked up. "Sung, come here."

The tiny, uniformed cop stepped up, perplexed. "Ma'am?"

Dr. Rogers pulled off her gloves and held up a pen. "Face the door, cutie. Good, now turn... Okay, she's Brown. I'm the killer. She's alive, standing, looking halfway between the door and the window, good girl. I've drugged her, so she's a little out of it, but she trusts me. And... I kill her." The doctor drew her pen across Sung's neck. "Arterial spray, falls on his knees, no you don't need to do that, Sung, and then forward, hits his head on the table, knocks the plant off. Poinsettia. The red clashes. Bleeds out." Patting Sung's arm, the doctor let her go.

It was rather nice that Holly didn't do those kind of reenactments. "Do we applaud?" She glanced at Flynn.

The other blonde shook her head. "Don't encourage her flair for melodramatic."

Gail smirked. "Wrong hand, Doctor." Everyone stared at her. "Cast off is there," she pointed. "Killer was left handed. Smooth stroke, one go. Easy to step around the fallen body and avoid getting blood on them." With a slow smile, Gail added, "But you were just being dramatic."

"I like you," smiled Dr. Rogers broadly. "You're welcome to come to the autopsy. I won't even make you wear the Santa Hat."

"I'm actually on vacation," smiled Gail, trying to ignore the creeps from having her mother's lookalike hit on her.

It took them a little longer to sort out the details of the autopsy. Part of Gail wanted to go, but she was not convinced she'd be able to deal with being in the same room as Dr. Rogers for that long. Instead, she and Flynn checked the videos for the killer but only saw the expected traffic. Except they saw, on camera, someone leaving in Brown's winter jacket and hat, get into a car, and drive off. They had to allow as to that being clever. The car even had dirty plates, making them difficult to read. Of course, they turned out to be the plates to a guard's car, who was rather pissed off to find it was stolen. A BOLO was out on the car and, with nothing else to look for that wasn't under the auspices of the crime lab, Flynn and Gail went back to the station to meet with Vega.

Mark Arnott, safe now in protective custody, had turned himself in just in time. His car had been lit on fire in his driveway. When Gail walked into the interrogation room, she watched Arnott's face fall when Vega told him about the car.

There was a pause while Vega let him process. "Someone put a bomb under my car once," Gail said absently. Vega gave her a raised eyebrow but let her go with it. "I pissed off these car thieves pretty good. Chased them over the border, got to work with Interpol and the FBI. Real TV stuff. So one of their ringleaders put a bomb with a GPS in it. Soon as I drove to the station and sat back down, the bomb was set."

Blinking, Arnott asked, "How'd they defuse it?" Criminals were as artless as children sometimes.

"They didn't. Car blew up into a million bitty pieces." Gail sighed. "Insurance was a bitch." Vega smirked, but kept himself calm. "Do you know how pissed off you have to make people to get them to go after your car, Mark?"
"His eyes dropped to the table. "I don't even know how they knew about me! I never met them."

Gail and Vega shared a look. Police telepathy was a thing and Vega filled in for John, playing the nice guy. "They who?"

"The ... The supplier."

Ding! "You're the supplier," Vega said slowly. "Rose hired you to deliver drugs."

"No, no, man, it's not like that." Mark Arnott cleared his throat. "Astie was clever, man. I'm the middle man. I was the middle man. See, okay. Latzie and Astie needed the good stuff, the pure, and I'm just the runner. Delivery, right?"

Nodding, Gail crossed her arms. "Sure."

"So they got me cause they already got the drugs, they just needed someone to pick 'em up and drop 'em off."

This was a different story, but told with the kind of fear that came from realizing someone wanted you dead. Better truths were had here than at the bottom of a bottle of tequila. Vega's face changed slightly. It was a subtle sort of look that handed off control of the interview to Gail. She understood why. Her unrelated story seemed to spur a confession. So Gail nodded and did the one great thing Luke had taught her. She leaned back and waited, watching Mark Arnott squirm.

And boy, did he. Arnott stared at Gail and then Vega. He also sensed the shift, his eyes locking with Gail's, wide and scared. "I had one job. Just one. I pick up the packages, a bottle here and there, and drop it off again. It ... I had two real jobs, you know, right? I'm the desk guy here. I was. I was the guy who was in charge of the couriers. We used a fleet, all in house, cause it's drugs. And sometimes when they're sick, I took orders. So when I had enough, I'd take 'em to my other job. Managing the same thing at Rose Shipping."

There was a long pause. Arnott was stuck. Gail exhaled softly, "Why Brown?"

"He ... He. I thought, besides the blackmail thing Astie liked, he'd do it. I didn't ... He was a user."

Oh. So maybe the track marks were self induced. "And you never met the real supplier?"

"No... And the stuff at Rose was shipped by weight automatically. They had some smart program."

Gail glanced at Vega, who nodded. The golden boy, Lucas, could take that angle. "Alright," sighed Gail. She pushed off the wall and rapped her knuckles on the door.

"Wait- wait- where are you going?"

She paused, hand on the doorknob. "Check your story. See, Marky, I have a problem. I have two dead guys and two useless sidekicks. What I want, what I need, is the supplier. Maybe that loser can tell me why I have those two dead guys. But you? You can't, so you can spend Christmas here, safe and sound." She gave him a sickly smile and pulled the door open for Vega.

Flynn was sitting on the table, watching through the glass. "How can we hit so many dead ends?"

She held out a cup of coffee for Vega and then Gail.

"The whole damn case has been like this. All I got for motive is Aston was screwing over his supplier and got killed for it. Now it's just cleanup."
Vega grunted. "That's as good as anything else," he muttered. "Ang, you want to take Arnott to booking and I'll finish up the paperwork? Then we can get outta here and go to the bar." He paused, "You want to come, Peck?"

"God yes, drinks can be on me," Flynn offered, arching her eyebrows at Gail as if to entice her.

A drink sounded great. Checking her watch, Gail winced. "Actually, do you think there's a uni who can give me a ride back to my family's place?" If she could get back not too late, maybe she could salvage some of her trip.

"You sure? Betty'll be there." Flynn had a wicked smirk.

"Why would she care about Peck?" Vega pulled his coat on with a flourish.

"She's got a total girl-crush on Peck here."

Gail looked up, wondering if God would be so inclined to help her out. "Yeah, definitely need that ride."

Because life wasn't weird enough.
I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus

Just as Holly reached for her phone to check on Gail's whereabouts, there was the sound of a car pulling up and, shortly after, a knock at the door. "Stewarts, I don't have a key!"

Vivian popped up from behind her Lego castle. She was at the door before anyone else had moved, "Miss Lily! Mom's back and I can't reach the chain!"

"I can," laughed Holly, coming out of the kitchen first to let her wife in. "I was starting to worry," she joked.

Looking tired, Gail shrugged. "It's been a hell of a week," she complained and waved over her shoulder at the police car. "Let me lock up my gun and we can do presents?" Pecks always opened at least one on Christmas Eve, after all.

So Holly took hold of the coat and didn't let Gail scoot off, "Hang on." When Gail looked confused, Holly pulled her in to kiss. "Hi," she said softly and pressed the key into Gail's hand.

"Hi," exhaled Gail. She was very tense for whatever reason. "Be right back." You could get to their guest house without coming through the main house, but they only had the one key right now.

Holly listened to Gail check with Vivian and promise to be right back. She waited until Gail was out the door before asking, "Viv, what present do we want to give Gail tonight?"

The girl looked thoughtful. "She looks like her case sucks. More cookies?"

Laughing, Holly sat on the couch. "Did you get her jewelry, Holls?" Her father dropped heavily into his easy chair.

"I got her a necklace," admitted Holly, helping Vivian into her lap.

Her mother appeared from the offices, carrying the last boxes. "Is that what you got at the antique store?" Lily had taken Holly and Vivian to town their second day in town and Holly had been distracted by that store.

Without tact, Vivian asked, "What'd I get? Is it a bicycle?"

"You get one small present tonight, and tomorrow you get some more, and then I think you can have a bike for your birthday." The bike was big on Vivian's radar, as Olivia and Matty had bikes, and bikes meant freedom even when you weren't allowed to cross the street or go biking without someone watching over you.

Vivian huffed. "I hate having my birthday so close to Christmas. Yours is way better, but Gail an' mine sucks."

Of course Gail walked back in to that wearing a hoodie sweatshirt and looking a little annoyed. "What's that?" Gail sounded confused and a bit cranky.

"Your birthday sucks," explained Lily. "Based on proximity to Christmas. Coffee or tea?"

"Tea, please." Wedging herself in beside Holly, Gail leaned against her. Maybe she was just beat. It took a little maneuvering but Holly draped an arm across Gail's shoulders while Vivian made herself comfortable on both of them.
When Lily brought the tea over, Vivian informed her it was made wrong, and tromped off to show her how Pecks made tea. Catching the tired smile on Gail's face, Holly grinned. "How come the Peck Tea is the right way?"

Gail snorted, "Because you drink that hibiscus chamomile crap." Shoving a hand into her sweatshirt pocket, Gail pulled out two small boxes and put them in Holly's lap. One said 'Lunchbox' and was long and flat, the other said 'Monkey' and ... Well Holly knew what that one was.

She let them sit. "Dad, Gail's giving me my present tonight."

"Hey, what you two do in the privacy of your own."

"Brian Jacoby Stewart!" Lily's voice cracked like a whip and Gail got the giggles. "There is a child in this house."

While her father looked sheepish, her daughter piped up, "I know grownups have sex." And she made a grossed out face. "An' I know you're not supposed to swear outside the house, 'cause people are weird and incontinent."

"Inconsistent," corrected Holly, smirking.

Vivian frowned and brought Gail her properly fixed tea. "Which one's incontinent?"

"That's the pooping one," Gail smiled. "Thanks, kiddo." She sipped the tea and slouched more.

Looking at her sternly, Vivian announced, "Cookies. You need cookies, Gail. And presents. Can I give her the one I picked, Holly? Please?"

As tired as she seemed, Gail quirked a smile. "Yeah, Holly? Can we do presents please?" She picked up the larger box on Holly's lap and waggled it in the air. "This one's for Viv, after all, and I made it home before nine."

Apparently even children who don't believe in Santa got excited for Christmas. Vivian squealed. "Oh fine. Go get it." Holly shook her head. "You'll have to get your nice one from me tomorrow."

"I can wait," Gail replied, sipping the tea.

Quickly boxes were handed around, with Gail and Holly's present for Lily (a new lens for her camera) being the first opened. It was something Lily had been craving for a while. Brian's present, from Lily, was a gag gift of a giant coffee mug. Then Vivian insisted Gail open hers, which was shoes. Replacements for the boots Gail wore nearly every day and had finally started to wear out. Gail declared them perfect and handed Vivian her 'mom' gift: a phone.

Vivian's eyes went big. "My own? I can bring it to school?" When Holly said she could, Vivian smiled ear to ear. "Gravy," she declared.

As expected, Holly watched both her parents look disapproving. "Holl, she's six," said Brian. He hated phones in general. Too much input. He'd been annoyed to see Gail's smart watch.

"Almost seven," corrected Holly. She and Gail had talked a lot about it before picking the phone out (and having Dov set it up so it was locked down and secure). "Given our jobs, she needs a way to get in touch with us. We can tell her if someone else is going to pick her up."

"And who's she gonna call?" Gail shrugged. "Olivia has one too, Brian."
Lily leaned over to Brian, "Olivia is Vivian's friend. Her parents are also police officers, I believe. And if I recall correctly, you two had your first date at their wedding?"

Bobbing her head, Vivian explained, "Moms kissed in the closet. And Olivia has a phone 'cause if someone gets all upset about her dad being in IA, she can call for help or something. And she can use the find thing to see where Mr. Frank or Ms. Noelle are."

Putting the last shot in, Gail added, "When I was her age, I had a phone card for the same reason. It's a different thing to be worried about, Brian. That's all." While he made a disgruntled sound, Holly's father just shook his head and let it go. "We had Dov set it up with everyone you know, all their numbers."

"Sam is in here," Vivian said with distaste.

Holly smirked. "Well. In case Andy uses his phone." The disgruntled noise Vivian made sounded like Brian's... No. It sounded like the one Holly made. As Holly pondered that odd inheritance of mannerisms, Gail took her hand and started to run her fingers over Holly's. It was pleasant and Holly turned to smile when she felt the cool clasp of metal click around her wrist. It was a smart watch, similar to the one Gail wore, but less boring and functional. This one was graceful and smaller, but without losing any of the practicality.

"Merry Christmas," whispered Gail before kissing Holly's knuckles. Her wife may have been a little grumpy and distracted, but Gail still paid attention to details.

"It's perfect," grinned Holly, leaning in to kiss Gail's cheek. As Holly took her hand back to admire it, Gail's nimble fingers brushed the hair away from the back of her neck and unhooked the chain there. "Hey!"

But Gail was busy hooking a new metal carabiner onto the necklace. "Now you won't have to fiddle when you take off your ring," she explained and clipped the necklace back on.

Reaching up to fiddle with the new addition to her chain, Holly hooked and unhooked her ring twice before deciding it was a good choice. She reached for Gail's necklace and tugged it out to make sure it matched. Smiling, Holly leaned in and whispered, "This is good." They kissed softly, the fond kind of kiss that held on for hours and seconds and wound around your heart, keeping you warm on a cold day.

Sighing, Gail leaned against Holly. There was something still bothering Gail, the tension in her back was unmistakable. She pressed her cheek against Gail's forehead, watching their adopted daughter play with her phone by taking pictures of Holly's parents. Lily was sitting in Brian's lap, their foreheads touching, looking as in love as they had for Holly's entire life. It was adorable.

Before Holly could comment on it, her mother asked, "How come you two take the rings off?"

"So we don't deglove our fingers," yawned Gail.

The Stewarts understood, but Vivian looked up. "What's degloving?"

Absently, Gail replied, "Pulling off the skin like a glove."

Vivian looked thoughtful before declaring, "That's gross. And cool."

The night passed easily, as did Christmas Day. Gail took a few work calls, but didn't suggest going in to the lab for the autopsy. She was closed off, though agreed quickly to driving up the mountain to go sledding. While they capered, Lily took photos of Gail laughing and sliding down the hill with
Vivian on a sled. They got home late, with Vivian and Gail drifting off in the back of the car. Holly started to think everything was just fine.

It was the angry outburst of "Shit!" that woke Holly up the next morning. She jerked awake in one, blurry, motion, and immediately looked to the other side of the bed. It was empty.

"Gail?" Reaching behind her, Holly blindly fumbled for her glasses and shoved them on, focusing on the mess of sheets and the fact that a pale hand was reaching up the side of the bed from the floor, gripping the fitted sheet.

Not good.

Holly leaned over until she was lying across the bed sideways. On the floor, mostly, was Gail, eyes closed, breathing fiercely and raggedly. It had been a few years since Gail had "spazzed out" in a nightmare and fallen out of bed. Not since Perik died. Depressingly enough, they both understood the nightmares would probably never go away entirely.

"I'm okay," muttered Gail, pushing herself up to lean against the nightstand. She was anything but.

Silently, Holly took careful hold of Gail's hand, the one with a death grip on the sheets, and uncurled her wife's fingers. One at a time, she peeled them back until Gail's hold on the sheets was loosened and Holly could ease her palm in there safely.

Gail squeezed the hand and kept breathing loudly. Finally it quieted, evened out, and Gail opened her eyes. "Is my iPad up there?" It was. Holly handed it down, letting go of Gail's hand so her wife could tap in the entry to her dream log. It was fairly brief, as those things went, and Gail pulled herself up to sit on the edge of the bed.

"Lie down?" Holly kept her voice quiet and made sure not to sound too pressing. There were techniques you learned from five years living with someone with PTSD, and of them all having patience was a must, but so was letting them feel safe.

"Yeah," sighed Gail. They shifted around until they were lying side by side. "I'm tired, Holly." The complaint was nearly a legit whinge.

Trying not to smile, Holly took her glasses off and scooted so she could easily stroke Gail's hair. That got the blonde to curl up with her head just below Holly's breasts, one arm flung across her waist. Gail was clearly running on fumes. "I'm here, honey," she whispered back. There was no reply from Gail this time. She just held on.

While Holly wished that had been the end of it, a bad nightmare and nothing more, but it was pretty clear Gail was on edge. Holly was used to looking at Gail, admiring her body and face, but that meant she could tell when the shoulders were set too tightly, or her face was in that mask of 'everything is fine' lie that she'd worn so often when they'd first met. The walls that had surrounded Gail closed their gate, locking away whatever was bothering her.

Tickling the back of her mind was a conversation with Elaine up at the Peck Cottage. That Gail couldn't do it all on her own. That she'd burn herself out trying to be everything her own parents weren't. Wasn't that similar to what Lily had implied? Telling Holly about Gail's mini-meltdown when she'd arrived at their house, Lily told Holly that she suspected Gail wasn't used to having support in a family way at all. Of course Lily was right, but that wasn't something she wanted to get into with her mother. Holly sighed and whispered, "I love you." There was no reply from Gail, though Holly suspected her wife wasn't actually asleep.
The nightmare hadn't disturbed Vivian's sleep, leaving the girl to celebrate Boxing Day by bossing Brian around later that morning (it was his own fault, they all agreed, for telling her that it was traditionally a time that officers and enlisted men traded places). Of course her idea of that was to enlist his help in designing the world's greatest Matchbox car track, which Brian loved doing anyway. Gail just sat with her coffee, not even interested in the fresh cinnamon rolls that Holly and Lily were baking.

Of course Lily noticed. When Holly told her the bare bones about Gail's issues, why she and Gail saw therapists, her mother had informed her the real reason Holly was an only child was that Brian had gone through a rough patch while Lily was pregnant. His own trauma, mild compared to a kidnapping, had hit the point where he couldn't deal with Lily being in a car someone else was driving. Struggling through pregnancy, birth, and postpartum depression that made her an absolute wreck, Lily came out of it knowing she had to decide now if she wanted Brian or a bigger family.

She picked Brian and Holly and nothing more. And she regretted none of it. As she told Holly, she loved Brian, as difficult as he was sometimes, and she would never trade him in for a chance to be smaller or less of a person.

"What's going on, Holls?" Lily pitched her voice low and quiet.

"Didn't sleep well," replied Holly, glancing at her wife who was staring out the window.

Lily snorted. "She's wound up tighter than a drum, honey." This was true, but Holly didn't answer. "She bottles everything up."

Looking down at the roll she was making, Holly frowned. "I know, Mom. Leave it." While her mother had told her about Gail's cry-it-out when Lily had shown up on the red eye, Gail's only remark about the event was that it was embarrassing. Still, Holly knew Gail best, she felt. Poking Gail about this would just make her grumpier even if she was being too Peckish.

"Fine," said her mother. It was anything but fine. Holly would be hearing about this later.

When Gail's phone rang, she scowled deeply and went into the guest house to have a private conversation. While Holly tried to ignore it, she couldn't miss her mother making eyes at her, all but ordering her to go after her wife and check on Gail. But Holly waited, trusting that she knew her wife and her moods better than her mother. If Gail was in a crappy mood, one went armed. After the first batch of rolls were out of the oven, Holly took two and two mugs of coffee.

"Back in a minute," she informed her family, and took the food over to the guest house. She rapped on the door. "Gail, please confirm existence."

Without a word, the door opened, but Gail was still on the phone. "No, that's fine. It works." Putting down the food, Holly waited till Gail looked at her and carefully signed: *Take the day off.*

Gail blinked and made an okay reply. "Listen, there's nothing else I can do except haunt, so ... Yeah that's good. Thanks, Flynn." She hung up and, to Holly's surprise, threw her phone at the couch in disgust. "Fucking dead ends," she said. Angry. Gail was angry.

There was an actual moment of fear, something Holly hadn't felt around Gail before. Caution, yes, when her wife was freaking out, but she'd never seen Gail throw... anything. Ever. But she was angry and frustrated and, for the first time that Holly had ever seen, Gail was lashing out with an action instead of swallowing it whole and letting it eat her heart. It was impossible to tell if this was progress.
Keeping her voice calm, something she didn't feel at all, Holly asked, "The autopsy wasn't any help?"

Christmas Day, Gail had actually not gone into the lab for the autopsy, citing that they really didn't need her. And now, when the autopsy was mentioned, she got a little weird. In all the time Holly had known her, Gail was one of the most blasé about autopsy of all the police officers. She respected the dead and had no issues with the process.

To see her, now, being weird and twitchy and a bit angry was odd. Which meant the anger, the pain, was unrelated. And the logical part of Holly's brain pointed out Gail was mostly self-containing the volcano in her head. The phone had been thrown away from Holly. Fear stepped away.

"No, nothing we didn't know already." There was a sharpness to the words. "This whole fucking case is a nightmare. People I know with screwed up secrets. Death and blackmail and everyone keeps fucking dying." Gail's hands tightened into fists and then she shook them out by her head in frustration. No... Gail's hands were just shaking.

Holly tilted her head, hearing the bite to Gail's tone. "Honey, sit down," she said calmly. She still didn't feel calm, though she didn't feel afraid. There was a feeling of panic seeing Gail get wound up this way. Not for herself, but for her wife. It reminded her of a time when Gail locked herself in a bathroom and cut off her hair. When Gail wasn't herself, when she wasn't able to deal with whatever she was thinking or process what she was feeling. She had to do something to make a change and break out of the rut. Thank god Gail wasn't inclined to actual self-harm.

Without looking at her, Gail sat down on the floor and covered her face with her hands. The strangled noise confirmed Holly's suspicion. Gail was fighting her emotions right now and losing. Volcano. "I'm... I'm very..." Another noise. Gail sounded wet and Holly sat on the edge of the couch, waiting. "I don't want to scare you."

"It's a little late for that," noted Holly. Seeing someone you love slip right off the sane and stable end, even for a moment, was disturbing and prone to make you react badly too. Holly didn't want to have to be the calm one all the time, the stable one, but it wasn't like Gail actually had a choice. Holly had a choice, had many choices, and kept choosing this one. She kept choosing Gail.

"Sorry." The words were muffled and it was another minute before the hands went away. "Dr. Rogers looks like my mother," she sighed. And Gail just switched it off. She swallowed whatever it was and stopped it cold.

That action was sadly expected and still as unhealthy as it had been years ago. But the weirdest things could set you off sometimes. Holly kept her reply measured, wondering if Gail was just projecting fears and no one actually looked like anyone. "Didn't you say that Vega guy looks like Blackstone?"

"Cleaner and nicer, yeah. Rogers is like... A ... I don't even know. Cougar." Gail got up and picked up Holly's iPad, tapping in a URL before sitting down on the far end of the couch, keeping distance as if that was her apology. There were tears streaking down her face, but she wasn't sobbing. She handed it over and Holly stared.

"Woah." Holly found herself staring at a nearly perfect copy of Elaine Peck, only with a little more work done. The hair was more orange and the face was a little less puffy, but Gail was not projecting. It was fucking creepy.

Gail grunted her agreement and leaned back against the couch. "I don't know," she sighed. Silently she lifted her hands. They weren't shaking any more. "I hate not being in charge of my head."
Reading Betty Rogers' history, to make sure there wasn't a hidden Armstrong history in there, Holly glanced over. "You and me both, honey." She nudged the plate of cinnamon rolls over and was relieved that Gail took one and nibbled it morosely.

A woman who looked like Gail's mother. A man who looked like Blackstone. A case that was not letting itself be solved. A case involving Ketamine. Sleeping in a different place. Everything was piling on top of itself. Holly wanted to sweep her into a hug, but other than that first time, she'd learned not to do that. She had to let Gail ask for it, otherwise she'd often feel worse. Be available without pressing.

Gail slouched deeper into the couch. "I'm sorry." Gail sounded exhausted.

"Not your fault," Holly pointed out. "I'd offer to get you some painkillers, but..." It was just too much at once.

"I think I just need some coffee."

Holly put the iPad down. "How about we go for a walk down the hill and get some cocoa?"

Both of Gail's eyebrows went up. "The kid'll wanna come." Smiling and forming a plan to get around that, Holly started to get up but then Gail asked a favor, in a quiet and embarrassed tone, "Can I come over there for a minute?"

"Of course." Holly pulled Gail into a hug and rested her cheek on Gail's head. There was a palpable feeling of relief from Gail, relaxing into Holly's arms, holding her tight. A loud sigh and a softening of her body. Holly caressed Gail's back, trying to project an aura of safety.

There hadn't been a lot of downtime for Gail as a parent since October, recognized Holly. In fact, she'd pretty much been on full time as a cop and parent, taking up a lot of the chores they shared on her own shoulders because there had been three weeks where she had. And she hadn't really stopped because she had either forgotten how to, or she was still worried about Holly's health.

Her wife was super stressed and overworked. Stupid Holly, missing that.

"Can't I just nap?" Gail sounded petulant.

Holly almost said yes. "No. No, we're going to walk down the road and get cocoa from that awesome shop. Then we're going to watch a movie and go out to eat at the bistro Dad said was too trendy."

Letting go, Gail looked at her with a frown. "What?"

"You need a break. There needs to be more grown up time."

Gail laughed. "I think we did that the other night—"

"Not sex," Holly said firmly, poking Gail's ribs. Though that answered the question of why Gail hadn't felt like she should take a break. She was cramming it all in, right? Obviously everything was fine. "Not sneaking around trying to be quiet grown up time. Just you and me and no kid for a few hours. And tonight, you can watch crappy reality TV with Dad and not work at cop or mom. Okay?"

Her wife screwed her face up into confusion. "I have a feeling there's no acceptable answer except okay."
Holly kissed her nose. "Good. Go wash your face and grab your purse."

She found Vivian playing Lego architect with her father, trying to make a spectacular race track for the Matchbox cars that had once been Holly's a million years ago. "Mom! Look! Mr. Brian made it do a double loop!"

They demonstrated the new track proudly. "That's awesome," grinned Holly. "Viv, can I steal Gail for a couple hours?"

Looking up suspiciously, Vivian asked, "Can I get my book first?" Behind Vivian, in the kitchen, Lily shot her daughter a vindicated smirk. Parents were so annoying.

Wanting to grimace, Holly shook her head. Awesome. The kid was default-assuming that being alone meant sex. Well done. "No, not… I want to go for a walk and have dinner with her. She hasn't really had a break from being Mom Gail or Detective Gail since I went to the body farm."

"Oh a date!" Vivian smiled happily. "Can I watch Brave an' Frozen with Mr. Brian? He hasn't seen them. He hasn't even seen Prince and Prince."

Holly glanced at her father who shrugged. "Apparently it's very important I watch them because they're about girls who are strong on their own." Which was a yes. Holly kissed her father's cheek. "Oh, don't do that," muttered Brian.

"Thanks, Daddy," smiled Holly and, indeed, her father blushed. He was such a pushover. "And thank you too, Viv." Holly paused, looking at the toys. "Hey, Mom, where's the box of my old toys? The ones I put in the box because I was living in the shit-hole with Lisa and Rachel?"

"Your collectables?" Lily thought about that for a moment, distracted from her constant know-it-all smirking. "In my office. Why?" And Lily followed Holly's look towards Vivian. "Really?"

Of course, Holly knew exactly why her mother was surprised. Teen Holly had threatened a cousin once for damaging her precious toys. Five year old Holly had bitten a different cousin. "Really," nodded Holly. Gail didn't really collect anything that wasn't functional. Books, toys, shoes, guns; she used everything she owned and loved it. If they wore out from love, well, that was okay. Gail had been replacing parts on her guns for years. She joked that her first gun wasn't even the same gun anymore. And maybe, just maybe, that was rubbing off on Holly.

"Fine, but I'm mailing it all to your house when you go home." Lily shook her head and went upstairs.

Gail walked in with their coats and the dishes (empty), looking a bit better, as Lily came back down with the box. "I ate your roll, baby," Gail informed Holly, as Holly pulled out the Millennium Falcon. "Woah. I wanted that for Christmas," swooned Gail, stunned.

"Too bad," laughed Holly and she held it out for Vivian.

The girl's eyes went wide. "For real?" She and Gail had marathon-watched Star Wars (only the first three) while Holly had been in isolation.

"For real?" That was Gail, also agog. "Holly, those are the originals!"

"Use it or lose it," replied Holly, making sure Vivian had hold of it before pulling out the Death Star playset. "This has the working trash compactor."

Both Gail and Vivian's eyes were wide. "I think I'm jealous," muttered Gail. "Seven year old me is
They didn't hold hands or link arms as they strolled down the street, nor did they talk about anything serious. Gail made fun of the street names, Holly poked fun at Christmas decorations. They just meandered down the road into the main of the tiny town. Gail had joked about how silly it was for a town that small to have a theater, but they got their cocoas and watched a stupid James Franco/Seth Rogan movie (Gail's choice) filled with frat humor and hilarity before eating soup and sandwiches at a shop that was trying way too hard to be cool.

The walk home, though, that was different. There Gail absently took Holly's hand and bumped her shoulder into Holly's a couple times. Sometimes, Gail was like a little boy, awkward and unsure how to express a thank you. She even scuffed one boot on the sidewalk, in an 'aw shucks' way.

Sometimes you had to ask your cat why she was in a tree in order to get her back down. "What are you thinking about, honey?" asked Holly.

"Beyoncé lyrics."

Holly smiled and leaned against Gail's shoulder. "Okay."

As they reached the bottom of the long hill up to the house, Gail paused. "Thanks." Holly smiled and reached for Gail's other hand, tugging her gently into a hug.

"We're a team, honey," whispered Holly. "You and me. No matter what. Even when you get all weird and stuck in your tree."

Gail snorted a laugh. "I hate that metaphor. You're never letting me live it down."

"Nope." It was a promise. Holly kissed Gail's cheek. "You feel okay?"

"Drained," admitted Gail. "I'm not looking at the case for the rest of the trip."

"Good. Or I make Butler give you more time off." Predictably, Gail grimaced. "You forgot how to relax."

And Gail looked up at the trees. "Oh. You know why I like background noise, baby. It stops the voice in my head." Holly had heard that before. Not voices, the voice of doubt, of self-worthlessness, pushed into her mind by years of being a disappointment to Pecks who didn't understand her.

"Got a little buzzy up in there?" When Gail nodded, Holly took a hold of the lapels on Gail's wool coat. "You. Are on vacation," she told her wife firmly. "You are not in charge of anything. No working either."

Gail's face screwed up. "Shit. I don't even know what to do to relax anymore," she complained.

"We could go find a bar..." They both laughed, derisively, at that idea. "Karaoke? Batting cages? Shooting range? Ice skating..."

"For someone who insists that sex isn't the right way to relax, you seem to be very stuck on the topic of physical activity."

"Sex is one of the many, lovely, ways you can relax, honey, but it's not the only way." Her cop did not really have a functional off switch at the moment. Sex would just be an avoidance right now. Also it was clearly not working, if Gail's stress level was any indication. "Let's start with relaxing on
the couch?"

While Gail was skeptical, she held Holly's hand as they tromped back up to the house. Inside, Vivian and Brian had the Legos and Star Wars play sets combined to make the living room into a giant Death Star. Vivian, playing Han Solo (aka the coolest one) and Princess Leia (aka the bad ass one), was swooping the Millennium Falcon around things, while Holly's father made the appropriate 'pew pew!' sounds of the Storm Troopers guns. Immediately, Holly was roped in to play Luke and Chewy, leaving Gail and Lily to be the audience and peanut gallery. Just like when Holly was a child, her father did a brilliant James Earl Jones, putting Gail in hysterics when he started quoting Shakespeare at key moments but only in ways that made no sense, or were double entendres.

Finally they'd had enough and it was time to clean up and go to bed. Holly took charge of Vivian and her evening routine. Before reading, however, Vivian informed Holly she was not to stay and hang out while Vivian slept. After discussing why, Holly agreed and surprised Gail by coming back.

"Everything okay?"

"You're on vacation," Holly said sternly, settling on the couch so Gail was trapped underneath her. "However I give you permission to check your phone."

Gail arched her eyebrows and pointed to the table. "Brian, tell her I didn't check when it pinged."

"She did not touch her infernal device, Holls." Picking up the phone, Brian tapped it and read aloud, "I love you, I'll text you if I'm scared." He turned the phone so Gail could see. "Your daughter is a child of her times. I think I feel old."

Instead of reaching for the phone, Gail wound her arms around Holly's waist and asked, "So since our kid is okay ... if I wanted to watch something besides sports...?"

"Thank you," caroled Holly's dad, pumping his fist into the air and snatching the remote. "And I love you, Holls, but please no more cartoons or football."

Negotiations were swift, ending with a peculiarly fascinating choice of a cooking competition show where people bid on items to screw over fellow competitors. It was a simple, quiet, night, and when they did finally go to bed, Gail muttered that her brain was blank. Curled around her wife, Holly smiled.

"Good," she told Gail quietly. "But we're still going running in the morning."

Gail grimaced and pulled the pillow over her face. "Hate you."

Back in November, as Gail's birthday had neared and plans were being fomented, Vivian had asked why Izzy was going to be babysitting, and wasn't she allowed to come celebrate too. Gail had explained that they were going to the shooting range first, but then they'd come home and have a party there with everyone. Especially with Vivian. The surprise came when Vivian asked to come to the range too.

They ended up taking her the week before, on a very quiet night (Gail had begged a favor to clear the range just for them and Ollie), and let Vivian watch Gail shoot. Holly, of course, was there and held Vivian in her lap the whole time. At the end, Vivian said it was loud but kind of neat, and asked for birthday shooting details. And that was how Gail ended up with her daughter starting to be comfortable with her job.

But that was her job, and her gun, and her station and her idiot friends. The Vancouver PD was a
different story, and Gail wasn't sure how it would go. She was still on Holly's enforced 'you are on a
damn vacation, Peck' thing, but she needed to drop off the files and since Holly wanted to catch up
with a cousin who bored Gail to death, she pointed out this was just a better use of time. Vivian
attached herself to Gail, promising not to let her work, and they would all meet at the arboretum
where Lily was currently working.

Gail was loath to admit it, but Holly was right. Relaxing was harder than it had ever been for her.
She'd been working too hard, too long, without a real break. The last three days of their vacation had
been spent as a real vacation, and Gail really did feel better for it. Calmer. Centered.

Squinting around the police department, Vivian asked, "How come i'ts all open and stuff?"

Gail glanced down. "Dunno. Think we should tell everyone how boring our station is?"

"Nah," Vivian decided. "I like Fifteen. It's ... Solid. Like Chris." Gail laughed and ruffled Vivian's
hair.

"I think you're right. Okay, let me drop off this and we'll go meet Holly and Lily at the garden and
then?"

Her daughter shot both arms up over her head. "Lunch! I want lobster mac'n'cheese!"

"How about a food truck," countered Gail, smirking. She and Holly had the fancier stuff their last
trip, but Gail had no problem going to kid friendly places instead. Food was food, and as long as it
was good food, she'd love it.

The now familiar voice of Angie Flynn joined them. "I like the kebab truck, personally."

Gail smirked. "Oh, now you're talking my language." She held out the folder and thumb drive.
"Thanks for the intel."

Flynn nodded, "Sure. Who's this?"

Her hand was grabbed by her daughter and Gail smiled. "This is my daughter, Vivian. I told you I
really am on vacation."

Doing a double take, Flynn said, "I didn't peg you for a single mom."

"I'm not, I'm married." Before Flynn could shove her foot further into her mouth, Gail elaborated.
"We adopted." It wasn't Flynn's business to know more than that right now.

"Oh! I'm sorry, she just… Actually she doesn't look much like you at all," laughed Flynn,
embarrassed at her own faux pas. "Some detective I am, huh?"

"It's the whole mannerisms things. My mother swears she scowls just like me." She squeezed
Vivian's hand. "Viv, this is Detective Flynn. She's been helping me."

Per usual, Vivian's eyes hit the gun first, then the face. "Hi," muttered her daughter, scooting so she
was partly behind Gail. Vivian was used to Gail's gun, as well as Traci and Steve's, but that was
about it. Everyone else with their gun was to be cautious around. Even Oliver.

Flynn smiled, as if she understood the situation. Then again, she had a child so she probably did.
"My son's in college," she offered. "You're going to look back on this time and miss it."

Looking down at Vivian, Gail grinned. "I'm trying not to think of you as a teenager, Viv. It's
absolutely horrifying." That brought a small smile from the girl. "Listen, Flynn, thanks. It sucks we

can't figure anything out, but this was a stretch anyway."

Vivian tugged Gail's hand and asked, "Does the case still suck?"

"Pretty much, Monkey." When Vivian sighed dramatically, both women laughed. "Wanna thank

Detective Flynn for being cool and letting me use her office?"

Fixing her with a confused look, Vivian asked, "Aren't you s'posed to do that?"

"Sounds like she's got your number, Peck."

"She's totally in charge-" Gail stopped as she saw the boyish Detective Lucas running down the hall.

"Your Boy Friday's looking for you," and Gail jerked her chin in that direction.

Flynn tilted her head. "$10 says its for you."

"See, now that would be an epic Christmas present," sighed Gail.

"Detective Peck!" The boyish man-child gasped and Vivian giggled. "The inventory was faked! I

figured it out!"

Fishing out her wallet, Gail handed Flynn two fives. "Did you do something really cool with a

computer that I don't care about?" Flynn took the money and coughed a laugh. "What'd you find?"

Lucas opened his mouth, stopped, and stared at Vivian. "Um. Do— you know there's a kid there?"

Her daughter was becoming more and more like her every day, and snorted the way only a nearly


Both Gail and Flynn were trying not to laugh. "Keep it PG and fast, Lucas. Did you find out who

messed with the records?" He nodded, lips pressed tightly closed. Clearly he was not used to kids.

"Is it totally awesome, break the case level shit?"

And Lucas paled. "There's … Ma'am, your daughter—"

"Knows the appropriate usage of swear words. She's six, Lucas, she's not a moron." The 'like you'

went unsaid and Vivian giggled. "Dámelo." She held a hand out, expectantly.

"Oh! They have bad code. If you put more items in an inventory bucket than the bucket allows, it

just overflows and doesn't count them. They used that bug to hide items with the wrong RFID codes

and then ship them with the real items. The trick was checking the weights."

Transit was heavily weighted, right. "How off were they?"

"Not much," smiled Lucas. "They were real close, but the weight difference between the real item

and the fake overflow adds up over time." He held out a sheet of paper and a thumb drive. Gail eyed

it, reading the chart on the paper carefully. "The discrepancy per shipment is grams. But when you

look over a whole year…"

"Nice," muttered Gail, showing the sheet to Flynn. "And do you know who did all that?"

"A few people. But here's where it gets fun. They're all Vancouver employees but their IP is

Montréal."

Thank god for life with nerds. She hesitated and Lucas opened his mouth. "No. No, I get it.
Someone from Quebec used the IDs for people in Vancouver. Well that's stupid. Couldn't they use a VPN tunnel to Vancouver and do it locally?" When Lucas looked surprised Gail smirked. Gotcha. "They could, but they didn't. Figures. And to think I wanted this gig because I thought the criminals would be smarter than the ones in Guns and Gangs," she sighed.

Vivian tugged her hand. "You promised us no work till we got home."

And so she had. Gail sighed. "Right! I'll send it in and John's going to have to work the rest of the holidays though," she grinned.

"Aunt Rachel's gonna be mad at you," Vivian remarked. "I won't tell her its your fault if I can have pie."

Gail snorted as Flynn coughed a laugh. "Nice try. She'll know it's me anyway." Turning back to Lucas, she asked the next logical question, "Can I have your computer forensics sent to my guys?"

"Yes! Of course, I'll go do that!" And Lucas hesitated before heading back. "The last four shipments were adjusted late, which maybe means someone else was messing with it." And then he left.

Pocketing the drive, Gail asked, "Is he always that spooked or is it just me?" The back of her head was ringing. Someone in Toronto was making last second changes. Was it Aston at home or someone new?

"I think your kid's freaking him out. This'll be fun." Flynn smiled and held a hand out, "It was good working with you."

"Same," agreed Gail. "If you ever end up in Toronto, look me up and I'll repay the favor."

Shrewdly, Flynn asked, "Just me or can I bring Vega?"

She was a good cop, decided Gail. "Bring him. It'll be hella fun to watch everyone double take."

As Gail paused to put the files in her bag, Angie Flynn asked one last question. "How does someone who hates everyone get married?"

"Just lucky, I guess," shrugged Gail, and she slung the bag over her shoulder. "Come on, Monkey, before I get in real trouble."

"So I get pie?" Vivian grinned.

Rolling her eyes, Gail glanced at Flynn, "I'm clearly not the boss."
Convincing Gail to take one more day off, after getting home, was surprisingly easy. She just said it once and, on the drive home from the airport, Gail called her boss and said she needed an extra day. Done. Holly, wisely, had the next day off as well, which made for a slow paced morning. Even Vivian had no impetus to get up at the crack of dawn, like she often did. That meant a lovely, quiet, comfortable laze in bed was in order.

Per usual, Holly woke up at six. She had no problem adjusting back to her proper time zone, while Gail grimaced and burrowed under the quilt arguing that it was three. Since Gail could sleep comfortably with the lights on, Holly flicked on her nightstand and read as the quiet winter dawn broke over the house. She kept looking down at the blonde tuft of hair sticking out from the navy quilt.

"Stop looking at me," mumbled Gail.

"You're pretty." Holly reached over to smooth Gail's hair down. After a moment, Gail peeked out of her nest and smiled sleepily. "Hey, pretty lady," she added and blew Gail a kiss.

Gail stretched her arms out and curved her body in a very contorted pose, holding it until her back popped audibly. "God I hate airplanes," groaned Gail. "I feel old."

Fixing her wife with a glower, Holly poked her in the side. "You are 33. You're not even as old as I was when you met me."

"Soon," yawned Gail, stretching out and taking up more than half the bed. "Soon I will be 35 and then 38 then and we will be one of those sappy couples who talk about how we've been together for ten years and then Viv'll be ten and fifteen and graduate and you will be chief medical examiner."

She smiled toothily. "I'm getting old. You're getting old. Viv's getting older. It's nice."

Holly put her book down. "I don't think I have ever heard someone say getting older was nice."

But... There was something sort of wonderful to think about a sort of future where things made sense. "When do you make full detective?"

"Dunno. Next year maybe." She reached over and took the iPad off of Holly's lap. "You put up with a lot of my shit," noted Gail, leaning across Holly to put it down on the nightstand.

Running her fingers through Gail's hair, Holly smiled. "You're worth the headaches, honey." Gail laughed and rolled onto her back, leaving her head in Holly's lap. "Getting you out of your tree got me out of my rut," she added.

Closing her eyes, Gail smiled more. "See. This is a good Christmas."

"It's practically New Years now, you goofball," grinned Holly. "Speaking of, are we really not doing anything?"

One blue eye opened. "Do you want to? I mean, we can't take Viv to the Penny..." Actually they probably could and it might not be a terrible idea to stop in and let her meet them. Holly started thinking about that and was abruptly startled. "Neeerrrrrrrrrr," teased Gail.

Holly smiled and caressed Gail's face. She'd been thinking too hard, clearly. "I think we should bring Vivian by the Penny, early before everyone gets loaded, and then go to the lakeshore and watch the fireworks."
Her detective looked thoughtful. "If, if you can get her to nap."

"I accept your amendment," grinned Holly. "Now come here and kiss me."

"Morning breath and all," smirked Gail, but she did sit up and kiss Holly, pressing her lips against Holly's neck. It was impressive how Gail just knew where to touch her and how. "Love you," she whispered and started to get out of bed.

Holly sighed. "When you kiss me like that and then leave me high and dry, I hate you a little bit."

But Gail was on her way to the bathroom. "I'm hungry, my breath tastes bad, and I wanna open my presents." She paused, "You're still in charge, right? I mean, of vacation."

Sitting up, Holly nodded. "I'm the boss of you, Peck." Still, she didn't order her wife back in bed as she was right. Holly's breath tasted terrible as well. And she wanted to see what presents their friends had dropped off while they'd been gone. And food was a good idea.

Since Vivian was still completely wiped out, they didn't try to wake her up. They had a light breakfast and were curled up on the couch, reading, when Vivian finally came down, her phone held up to her ear, sleepily rubbing her eyes.

"Moms! Olivia wants to know if I can go sledding with her and Mr. Frank. Can I? Please?"

Gail laughed, "Good morning to you too." She put down her coffee. "Is that Olivia or Frank?"

"Liv," replied Vivian.

"Ask her to put Frank on, please," smiled the blonde, holding her hand out. Vivian bounced up and handed the phone over, giving Gail and then Holly a super quick hug.

The hugs were still something marvelous and treasured. Holly wondered if, like Gail's smile, she'd ever really get used to that in her life. Speaking of, Gail's conversation with Frank was pretty short, mostly getting it clear what time to expect Vivian home, and then she nodded at the girl. Taking her phone back, Vivian thundered back upstairs, telling Olivia about her new winter boots and jacket, and how her mom gave her all her old Star Wars toys.

Gail elbowed Holly. "Mom," she said, with a grin.

Blushing, Holly got up. "A mom who should feed her kid a good, energizing breakfast." She got out a bowl for cereal. "What did Frank say?"

"This is our Christmas present, the baby sitting. Noelle told him I was taking the day off and he figured it meant I needed a break."

Her wife showed no signs of getting up again, stretching out on the couch. "You have two jobs today, besides relaxing." Gail made an appropriate hmm noise. "First, go find the sled. Second, start the laundry. Other than that, your ass is on the couch or in the bed."

The snort from the couch prefaced Gail's getting up and walking to the laundry room. "At least I know where the sled is."

When Frank came by, he only briefly spoke to Holly and Gail, wishing them a happy holidays and taking his van, filled with six girls and Oliver, to go sledding. Apparently even Oliver's two older girls had wanted to go, and Holly privately felt bad for him.
That said, it gave her a deliciously quiet afternoon with Gail. They read in the quiet, feet in each other's laps while comfortably sprawled on the couch, until Gail got up to change the laundry. When she came back, Holly put her book down and beckoned her over. "Can I get a real kiss, or does your mouth still taste bad?"

Gail laughed softly and kissed Holly equally softly. It was one of those tender kisses that, like the sometimes shy smile when Gail wanted a more human touch, was a feeling Holly never really got tired of. She smiled into the kiss, coaxing her cat out of the tree and into her arms on the couch. They just sat there, Holly's arms around Gail holding her close, Gail's head resting against Holly's shoulder.

"I forgot what a quiet house sounds like," mused Gail, taking Holly's left hand and running her thumb over the plain band.

"Well you did live with Dov and Chris." She lay back on the corner of the couch, watching Gail's fingers. Another thing that never got old was watching the Peck pale skin on her dusky (supposedly Spanish) color. It was just stunning.

Gail's shoulders shook with short, silent mirth. "This year has ..." Gail paused, sounding unsure. So Holly filled in the word. "Sucked. It's been dramatic and shitty. Did you realize you got blown up in your car just eight months ago?" Gail paused and made a surprised noise. "Car, then Vivian, then Luongo, and now we're here. We really need an actual real vacation."

"Sorry," muttered Gail.

"Hey," Holly frowned and squeezed Gail. "Not your fault. Okay?" Nodding a little, Gail fell silent and Holly sighed. "So, did you know I've never been to Europe?"

There was a pause and Gail finally, really, laughed. "Subtle, Stewart." She sat up and turned to look at Holly, who was giving her best innocent look. "That's a good idea, though. Be a nice anniversary-slash-birthday present. Kinda expensive."

Holly arched an eyebrow. "I'm going to put this out there, honey. We actually have money."

"Yeah... And now I have to think about a kid going to college. Retirement for two." Gail smiled and kissed Holly's hand softly. "Probably."

"Probably college, or probably retirement for two? And I have a ROTH IRA." Ever since she'd started working for Ontario, Holly had been putting money away. They'd talked with Gail's money guy about putting money in a fund for Vivian, as well as the legal work of determining if Vivian was going to inherit the Armstrong money through Gail. They had given Holly her 'married in due' after giving Gail hell for the lack of a pre-nup. Had Holly known then that they were those Armstrongs, she might have been less annoyed.

The lawyer meeting about the contract had been enlightening. Holly learned way more about how much money her goofy wife, and now she, had in their possession. Somehow they'd managed to have that conversation without bringing up the whole diamond thing, which Holly felt was very weird and crafty. Still, it meant she knew they could afford things. It also meant she knew how much Gail ignored the money and let it sit and grow. Holly would never suggest they go wild and spend, but there were experiences that would be important.

Gail leaned in and kissed Holly's lips. "This really beautiful woman told me I'm on vacation today. And that it meant I'm not allowed to be in charge and do things."
"And yet you arranged to get out kid out of the house for a few hours," teased Holly, reaching up to caress Gail's face, letting her fingers trace the curve of the pale cheeks.

With a quiet smile, Gail pointed out, "Noelle and I planned that the night before we left. I forgot to tell you."

Hmm. She leaned in to kiss Gail again. "Alright, I accept this." Snaking her hand around to the back of Gail's head, Holly pulled Gail down on top of her. They fit together so well, their bodies meshing into place just right. She loved how warm and soft Gail was, even when Holly was pretty much manhandling her just then. Gail's hands somehow ended up half on Holly's pants, and half on the bare skin of her waist. When had her shirt ridden up?

Probably somewhere around the time they'd slid down on the couch and Gail was lying on top of Holly. Her body felt so good, so warm and soft. Gail made a soft 'ah' noise as Holly tangled her hands in Gail's hair. It was getting a little longer, but so, so soft. All of Gail was wonderful and soft.

Gail flexed her fingers and Holly shivered. "Sometimes, when you're kissing me, I get lost," she whispered.

It was weirdly romantic and Holly bit her lip, smiling. She knew what she wanted. It was there on top of her on the couch, looking down at her. Gail's eyes reflected the same feelings she had, the same desires. That was a great thing about years of togetherness, of marriage; they knew how to read each other's minds. There was going to be some kind of satisfaction found on the couch, possibly more upstairs. But right now, right here, there was a craving for each other.

The couch led to a quiet and simple release, born of friction and pressure and that so sweet pleasure. They abandoned their books and went upstairs for a little louder time and, thankfully, managed to be cleaned up and dressed by the time a rosy cheeked Vivian came home, filled with stories of snow and sledding. She was also an exhausted kid, who didn't even seem to mind the fact that tomorrow meant babysitting by Celery, though with Olivia, and there was no argument about the shower after dinner.

Sensing Gail's twitchiness growing, Holly handed over her laptop after they cleaned the kitchen. They shared an awkward smile and Gail curled up in her favorite easy chair, pouring over case notes while Vivian was engrossed in her game with Star Wars action figures and Legos. After Holly tucked Vivian in and read a little from her latest book (they'd started Harry Potter, which Viv was perfectly capable of reading on her own, but she liked listening to Holly or Gail read), Holly went back down to ask Gail the important question.

"Tell me where you're stuck?"

There was a pause and Gail closed the laptop. They did this sometimes, when one or the other was stuck in a case without an answer. It let them think aloud with someone who knew the right questions. "You know how sometimes I bitch I don't have enough information?"

"Sure."

"Well. I've got lots of information, but none of it makes sense." She put her feet on the coffee table. "Aston was 'running' a drug ring. He got the pure drugs from someone in Vancouver, who handed it off to this guy Mark Arnott, who dropped it off at the shipping firm to send it to Toronto. Arnott quit, got a replacement. He's my dead guy in Vancouver, Dante Brown."

Holly folded her legs underneath her, thinking about that. "Was Brown also injected with drugs?" Tapping her nose, Gail looked morose. "Same drug cocktail?"
"Surprisingly not. This was junk. Brown was a frequent abuser, so my guess is he was doping anyway and it was a crime of opportunity."

A decent theory. "But you think it's related to Aston?" And Gail nodded. "Did you figure out how they were hiding the shipments?"

That brightened Gail up and she nodded more energetically. "Aston was using a hole in the system! Turns out he wasn't a total idiot. There was a software glitch that lets you send extra items as invisible overflow. We'll tell 'em soon enough, but I want to keep watching and see if our UnSub was doing it or Aston."

Why Holly found it delightful that Gail used the shorthand for 'Unknown Subject' she could never be sure. Maybe it was just that she was as attracted to incredibly clever Detective Constable Peck as she'd been to uniformed Officer Peck. Soon to be full Detective Peck, Holly bet. "So ... This is all a drug deal gone bad? Whomever Aston was selling to got mad and killed him and then had Brown killed?"

"Either as a second half of the killing or a way to throw us off, yeah, looks like. So we have all this info and I can't find the people he was selling to. John went over all his phone and email records while I was gone. Lots of little leads, nothing panning out. He had to work with Blackstone."

There was a pause. "I have to say, Vancouver is officially creepy to me now," Holly muttered.

Gail snorted. "My therapist's gonna have fodder for years. Yes I called her. Going first week of the New Year for a full session. Yaaaay." Waving her hands in fake joy, Gail slouched. She'd clearly had a phone session somewhere in all their recent running about. "At least Viv had a great time."

Sticking out her leg, Holly nudged Gail with her foot. "I had fun. I wish you'd had an actual break." Making a noise of agreement, Gail rested a hand on Holly's foot. "Being a grown up doesn't mean you have to be grown up all the time, honey."

The sound Gail made sounded like a frustrated cat. "I've grown a whole new tree to climb into, I think." That made sense, agreed Holly. "I'm not getting anywhere here. Bed?"

Celery came over at seven the next morning to pick up Vivian, armed with tea for everyone. In a moment of politeness, Gail did not make a comment about tea and thanked Celery, handing over a belated Christmas present. With their schedules so up in the air, they took their own cars to their offices, though Holly made sure to get a proper kiss goodbye.

She walked into an office filled with insanity. Half the staff was out sick with the flu and the other half was already overworked. Oh and Holly was the highest ranking person around. That meant she worked through three cups of coffee (Celery's energizing tea wasn't going to cut it), a salad, and barely looked up from managerial work until three PM.

Frankly she was impressed that she got out of the mire before sunset. But there she was with only ten unread emails, thank god. One of them, in the middle, was from a name that surprised her. Dr. Betty Rogers. Trepidatiously, Holly opened the email and found the autopsy report, tox panel, and case file on Dante Brown. Gail's dead guy.

Really she should work on a local case first, but technically this was a local murder of an important person. It had nothing to do with wanting to help her wife solve a very frustrating case. As she read down the list of drugs, Holly stared at one. Ketamine. Why hadn't Gail mentioned that? She'd said the drugs weren't the same, and she was right, so either he'd been shot up by someone else or he'd had his drugs laced.
There was an outside possibility that he was into Ketamine, but the autopsy did not suggest that.

Ketamine.

That was pissing off Holly a lot.

"Okay... What if the drugs were cut," she said to herself. That wasn't abnormal. Lots of dealers cut drugs with saccharine or rice flour or a hundred other cheaper products. You tended to cut Ketamine though, not with it, and Holly recalled hearing how bad cuts had been the cause of death of some teenagers in the UK. Of course, then you had the idiots who claimed they'd been poisoned by MSG found in the Ketamine.

So if you were to look for trace elements of smaller drugs, less common, and assume they weren't transfer but intentional, what did you get? Holly grabbed a dry erase pen and started listing them on the glass wall of her office first from Dr. Rogers' email, then her own notes. They really did jump out at you.

"Baby formula, ibuprofen, midazolam hydrochloride, and ... Kalydeco." Holly screwed her face up. Why did she know that? Checking her drug references, her eyes widened. "What the what?" That was for Cystic Fibrosis treatment. In fact, the last three all were used for treating CF. Holly stared at the wall. The amount of baby formula made sense. That was a common, cheap, cutting agent that everyone used. The other three were in ghost amounts, barely trace, more like an accident...

She checked the list again. On Aston's list of drugs was glycopyrrolate. This was all crap a doctor would use for interventional radiology procedures.

Holly snatched her phone and texted Gail.

What about a doctor?

A moment later a text came back.

Want to unpack that one?

No. Not via text. She press the call button and was relieved Gail picked up right away. "Brown and Rose both had keeee- drugs tainted by other medication used in the treatment of CF."

"You have my attention," Gail replied slowly. So Holly explained in detail what she'd just done and determined. "Killed by a doctor, who would have access to the drugs being shipped in the first place. And he was shipping mostly to Vancouver. Hey, John! Find me a doctor Aston might have blackmailed!"

In the background, Holly could hear John grumbling. "Tell him to look for anyone working on developing new CF drugs."

"Start with ones working on the Cystic Fibrosis research- No I don't think Rachel did it, dickhead." Gail sound so annoyed, Holly laughed. "John has all the background work done, this'll be fast unless he's got no record or gone to ground."

"How many people doing CF drug research could there be?"

Gail paused, "Dunno. Hey John?" She repeated the question and then whistled. "Couple hundred. Doctors and lab techs and nurses who have access. Wonderful. Okay thanks, Doc. We'll chase that down."
Laughing, Holly asked, "I'm Doc now?"

"Doctor Stewart," clarified Gail, sounding amused.

"You're welcome, Detective Peck. Love you."

"Love you too, weirdo." Gail laughed and hung up.

At least Holly had been some help. She smiled and went to the next email in her inbox. A man found frozen to death in his car in his garage. Suicide or not?

While John hunted down the doctor angle, Gail took Lucas' notes from Vancouver and put them up next to her own transit notes. Why would the IPs match specific locations, she wondered. It was something she could wrap her head around, but it was still weird. When she'd worked from Vancouver, she used the VPN for a secure connection, and both Rose Shipping and GeoDrug had the same thing. Hell, everyone did this days.

She tossed that information to IT, who sounded excited and said they could track things down and maybe find the real source IP underneath. Awesome. Thank god for nerds. Gail pulled up the charts again, hers showing what ones Aston had touched in Toronto and Lucas showing the ones with altered loads. They matched, as expected, so she ran a similar search for all locations. That took a while, even with full access to the Rose system.

She watched the data scroll past and felt like she'd been smacked. "What the fuck…"

Two more shipping trips from Vancouver, dated the week she'd been in town but after Brown had died, due to arrive the next morning… Tomorrow? What the actual fuck? But Brown was dead, Aston was dead, and Latz and Arnott were in protective custody. She clicked on the data and read it a couple times. It matched every last pattern except there was no possible way for that to happen.

Picking up her phone, Gail dialed Flynn's number, only half aware of the timezone. "Miss us already, Peck?"

"No, we have real snow here, Flynn. But you have a ghost."

"Oh?" Flynn sounded interested and listened as Gail explained the shipping trips. "Wow. Got the fancy computer info?"

"Sending to you right now," Gail said firmly. "Get Lucas on it. I'm going to stake it out here. I didn't see anything in GeoDrug's database about missing drugs, though."

That had been the other problem. There was just no data about missing drugs. That was insane. Either GeoDrug was stupid (always a possibility given the crap job they did on background checks) or the drugs were lifted higher up the chain.

Flynn snapped her fingers, "I do! Hang on, I was going to call you when I had more, but… Vega, where's that— Yes, that! Peck's on the phone." Papers were shuffled. "Okay, so check this out. You told me they made up drugs in Vancouver, right?"

"GeoDrug? Yeah. Drug R&D."

"They get stuff shipped in from another company, base in …. Ontario."

This sounded like a fresh new circle of hell. "Wait. The drugs go Ontario, BC, back to Ontario?"
Flynn laughed. "It's drug laundering!"

"That's so stupid, it's brilliant." Gail shook her head. "How'd you find that?"

"Lucas checked all other shipping companies using the software. He figured they might be exploiting the same hole." She could tell Flynn was smirking. "We went and talked to them last night, guy was handling shipping from PharmaCan to GeoDrug. What drugs are these guys on when they name these companies?"

Now Gail laughed. "PharmaCan. We can check them out here. Think you can find the smugglers on your end?"

"No problem," said Flynn, casually. "We're just looking for someone who went from GeoDrug to Rose Shipping recently, dropped off some drugs, and sent 'em to you. All without tripping any of the monitors we left in place? Be done by dinner."

Gail grinned. "If it makes you feel better, I get to sit in a van all night."

"Only if it's cold. Tell me it's fucking cold out there, Peck."

"Brutal," confirmed Gail. "Oh and today's my first day back."

The bright laughter of Flynn carried over the line. "I feel way better. I'll let you know if I can find your moron."

They hung up and Gail caught John up on the info. They had a few options, but sending uniforms to do this watch felt like cheating. And that was simply how, two days before the New Year, Gail was in a security room at Rose Shipping with Andy, watching the marked shipping container. Nick and Chris were hiding actually in that shipping container. John was up in the other control center with a rookie, just in case.

Luck was, finally, on their side. As they watched, a young man used Aston's ID to let himself in, walked right up to the shipping container. Gail and Andy barely had enough time to get there and be backup, he moved so fast. They'd expected some sneaking around, but the idiot just waltzed in. Of course, when he opened up the container and found two cold, uniformed officers, he turned and bolted.

Using their favorite tricks, Andy and Gail herded the loser so he knocked himself silly running into a container, trying to avoid them. They had him back at the station by five, tossed into interrogation to wait until everyone had warmed up and had a plan. That too went better than expected, as he folded faster than Gerald in a late night poker game (look you did what it took to stay up late). Sure, he knew Aston was dead. But Aston had given him the badge to pick up the drugs, and the email order came in, same as always. He even showed on his phone how he got the email. The phone and email went to the tech team to dissect. Where had the email come from, that was what Gail wanted to know now. But all their guy had was the name of his counterpart back in Vancouver. His own brother.

"Now what?" John looked at a loss. "We still don't have the supplier."

"And you don't have me an evil doctor," agreed Gail. "I'm gonna pass this on to Flynn and Vega, and go home."

John nodded. "I could ask Blackstone."

Gail shuddered. "Can we not? He creeps me." And having worked with Vega...
"He kinda looks like Vega," mused John as they went upstairs. Gail startled and stared at him. "I pulled up Vega and Flynn's records. Wanted to make sure they weren't going to fuck you over."

Her partner was a good guy. "Yeah, wish you'd looked up Dr. Rogers," muttered Gail, dropping into her chair and reaching for her laptop. She started to type in her report, wanting to get it done before she went home, when John swore. Ah. He'd found the photo of Betty Rogers.

As soon as she had the meat of her report done, Gail picked up her phone and was surprised her call to Flynn went to voice mail. Well. Damn. She hesitated and pressed Vega's number.

"Hey, Peck. Did you just call Ang?"

"Yeah, yeah I have a lead for you."

"Oh thank god. I'm freezing my ass off here."

Gail smirked and relayed the information about who the smuggler was, which had Vega laughing in a way that wasn't funny at all. "Apparently the brothers got busted for trying to sell weed at the company by one of the managers. Aston said he'd 'deal with it' and drafted them for his crew."

"Which means you gotta find your supplier to close the case. Any luck there?"

"Not yet. We're looking up doctors and tracing the IPs to find the source, but it's slow."

Vega grunted. "Hate those. Anything we can do?"

"Keep tabs on the brother. If another shipment comes in, maybe we can find him that way."

"You got it. I'll set up a couple unis to keep eyes on him."

She couldn't help it. "Better than Brown, right?" There was a pause and Vega snorted. "You walked into that, Vega," Gail pointed out.

And he laughed for real this time. "I did. I have eyes on him myself right now."


Her partner had a slight smile, the barest hint of one, and he turned his laptop around. "IP trace on the emails." Gail stared at the physical address in silence. "You know..."

Gail rubbed her face, "Get the warrant, John. See if we can do that tomorrow morning?"

"Sure," agreed her partner slowly. He looked like he wanted to say more but then fell quiet. She knew what he was going to say. In her heart, she felt it was to be expected. That was what everyone in her life, everyone she'd every trusted, had done. Even Steve had turned from her for a long while. Everyone except Holly. How had she forgotten that fundamental rule, not a Peck rule, but the one her mother told her. Don't believe them. They're not here for you.

It made for a long, introspective, drive home.

Both Holly and Vivian were surprised when Gail got home before nine. The garage door went up right as Holly was putting leftovers into a plastic box. "Thank god," muttered Gail. "Lemme warm up and I am starving, baby. Hey, Monkey."
"You got the guy?" Holly had been under the impression that Gail would be stuck pulling an all night stakeout with Andy, which was rarely fun.

"Two of 'em, and a lead on ... Someone else. Shower, food." Gail did take a moment to kiss Holly's cheek and then ran up stairs.

Vivian gave Holly a confused look. "She didn't say anything."

"She will," promised Holly, putting the leftovers back on a plate and tossing them into the microwave. But Vivian was slinking into a sulk. The mood of a child switched faster than Gail's.

Thankfully, before the shower turned on, Gail poked her head back down the stairs. "Vivian, what happened to your hair?"

"Celery did it!" The child smiled ear to ear. "She cut Olivia's too!"

Gail looked at Holly who nodded. "Huh, okay, I'm gonna shower and you're going to tell me how this one happened, kiddo." Very quickly, Gail was back in a robe, looking less frustrated than she'd been in Vancouver, but a little off. Her short hair stuck up adorably and Holly smoothed it down as Gail started eating.

The story about the hair was told to Holly first by Celery. Vivian had long hair, Holly length, when she'd moved in, which had been part of the problem with showers. She hated washing her hair. After Vivian and Olivia had played in the snow, and gotten soaked, Celery made them shower, and first hand met Vivian versus showers. Instead of arguing, as Gail and Holly had tried, Celery suggested a haircut. Idiotically the issue with showers turned out to be related to how long it took her hair to dry. Holly could have kicked herself.

"I like it," grinned Gail, taking in the chin length hair. "But why did Olivia get a haircut, and is Noelle going to kick my ass?"

"Cause I got one." This clearly made sense to Vivian. She and Olivia were quickly becoming best friends. "We got matching crystals too." Vivian held up her necklace with a piece of stone that Celery claimed would do something or another that Holly had not actually paid a bit of attention to.

"Amethyst," said Gail, surprisingly knowledgable.

Vivian beamed. "It's supposed to help me sleep. Except I think it's kinda like Santa. Just stuff people believe in when they can't explain things."

Yeah, that was their kid. Holly laughed a little and Gail? Gail just nodded, accepting all this without a turn. "Well. It might work if it makes you think that you should relax. Like a reminder. You know you can do anything you want with your hair, right? If you wanna dye it colors, that's okay."


"Am I allowed to do that?" Vivian's eyes were wide.

"Maybe not bleach just yet, but we could manic panic your hair," suggested Gail. The idea enthralled Vivian, captivating her thoughts until bed. Gail was requested for the bedtime story, so Holly was showered and in bed by the time Gail got there. "It's very weird reading the Harry Potter book. I think I missed stuff the first time," noted Gail, hanging up her robe to reveal some of her more girly sleepwear.
Arching her eyebrows, Holly asked, "Special occasion?"

Gail smirked and slid into bed. "I'm feeling femme. Sue me." She kissed Holly's cheek and curled up yawning.

Holly smiled and ran her hand through Gail's short hair. "I love your hair."

"Your mother accused me of getting this haircut for you." Gail yawned again. "She's right, too."

"I'm glad you did," admitted Holly, pleased. She adored that haircut. "How was work?"

At first, Gail's reply was a grumble sound. But it wasn't the noise that begged for Holly to please fill her brain with inconsequential data and drown out the voices in her head. "You know how I said people always screw me over?" Holly made the appropriate hmm noise. "They still do."

Frowning, Holly smoothed down Gail's cowlick. "Not John... Vega and Finn?"

"Flynn. No. Donal." Gail exhaled an annoyed breath. "There was another drug delivery this week. We traced the IP used to email the losers back to the Rose mansion."

"Hang on, Aston's dead. Who put in the order?"

Gail looked up, scowl in place. "Donal."

Shit. "Well... His parents live there too. And all that staff and-"

"And the MAC address matches his custom computer setup. We had email exemplars. Did you know that was a thing?" No, Holly had not, but it made sense once she thought about it. "So he lied. I hate it. Everyone lies to me and betrays me and uses me." There was a pause. "Except you," Gail mumbled.

Ah, that. "You sound like House," noted Holly, smiling softly. "Everybody lies."

"They do," grumped Gail, petulantly.

"My petulant Peck, I am incredibly fond of you." She leaned back against the pillows and opened her ebook. "Going to arrest him tomorrow?"

"Early," confirmed Gail, her eyes closing. "I'm going to sleep now, baby." Smiling, Holly read, sneaking looks at her wife as the blonde drifted into sleep. It had taken years, but Holly now had the ability to know when Gail was really asleep.

She loved that soft, youthful expression that took over when Gail was asleep. It was like the magic a cat or a puppy or even a baby had on you when they slept. They just made you feel insanely heavy and sleepy and wanting to join them. Holly made it to the end of the chapter, realizing reading the latest book would take about as long as George R.R. Martin took to write the damn thing.

But... She put her iPad on the nightstand and switched off the light, watching the nightlight slowly fill the room with the secure glow of protection. It didn't matter. She had all the time in the world. As the her eyes adjusted to the soft yellow hue, Holly caressed Gail's arm. "I love you, Gail Antonia Peck," Holly whispered.

With an exhale, Gail snuggled into the blankets more, her face relaxed and gentle. How could she not love this face. Holly watched the way Gail's lips were turned slightly into a sweet smile and ran her thumb over Gail's cheekbone. The roundness of Gail's face was so beautiful.
Smiling, Holly rolled over and curled up against Gail, taking the little spoon spot. Reflexively, Gail reached over, pulling Holly close and mumbling something softly that sounded like Holly’s name. "I love you," Holly said again and let sleep take her away.
Good King Wenceslas

Pulling up to the house, Gail hadn't stopped frowning. Neither had John, frankly, and he asked, "Are you sure it's good to do this now?"

"You mean at eight in the morning or you mean on December 31st?" She bumped the door closed with her hip, locking it and admiring her car. God she loved the car. She needed to take it on the course again, maybe hustle someone who hadn't heard of her new top score.

John grunted and checked the warrant again. "Both." He looked over at the two squad cars and the van from evidence.

Shrugging, Gail adjusted her badge. "Hell if I know." She just wanted it to be over. "Collins, you stick with the lab. McNally, you're with us." They each had relative rookies for partners, people Gail knew in passing and was neither impressed nor worried about. Bringing Nick and Andy was a reward of sorts for the work in the shipping yard the night before. Chris and Dov were hunting down various doctors for them. It was nice to have the old band working together.

As usual, the door opened before they knocked and Thomas just looked sad. "The family is in the breakfast room, Detectives," he said by way of greeting.

Holding up the warrant, John gave him a sad smile. "Good. McNally, Witty, keep 'em there. Collins, stay here a minute." They marched into the breakfast room, Gail concentrating on keeping her face blank.

"What the hell?" Harrison Rose stood up, dabbing his mouth with a corner of his cloth napkin. His wife froze, her coffee cup raised to her lips. Donal, a straw in his mouth, widened his eyes.

"Pardon the early intrusion, but we have a warrant for Mr. Donal Rose's computer. Actually all your computers." John held up the papers.

It was Beverly, not Harrison, who took the warrant and skimmed it. "Thomas, take them upstairs," she said quietly. "Harry, call our lawyer."

"It's New Years Eve-"

"Yes, and for the exorbitant amounts we pay him, he should have no issues with working today."

Under her breath, Beverly added, "At a stiff surcharge, no doubt." Her eyes never left the papers.

Gail turned towards the main hall, caught Nick's eyes, and jerked her chin. He knew her well enough and nodded back, taking the crime scene team upstairs with Thomas the butler. Really more of a manservant in this household. She turned back to the Rose family, Harrison on his phone in the corner hissing at it, Beverly still reading the warrant, and Donal...

The man she knew, the boy she knew, had no poker face. He wore his emotions on his face, plain as day. Guilt was painted across it now. But somehow he'd managed to hide it before... No. Gail had not asked the right questions. And Donal had been drunk off his ass the second time.

So Gail just asked him. "Why?"

He looked away from her. "Come on," he groaned. Gail crossed her arms and waited. Beside her, John said nothing. When Harrison started to talk, muttering the words about waiting for a lawyer, Beverly hushed him. Donal looked between them all and hung his head. "I messed with the orders."
There. It started. "Why?" Gail repeated the question on purpose.

Once, Gail's mother had made her sit in a class about how to ask iterative questions. It was a management class Elaine was taking, in preparation for her jump to Staff Superintendent. Rookie Gail had been dragged along for mommy/daughter bonding, which failed, but the class had an interesting concept she'd remembered.

"Because... He was screwing with them. Adding things. I wanted him to know someone knew."

"Why?" The third time, Gail felt like she was starting to get to the root of things. She'd not had the chance to use this in an interrogation before and, thankfully, John was trusting her enough to just watch. Gail kept her eyes on Donal.

He flinched. "Because... Damn it Gail, you know what family business is! You're a fucking cop! This is our heritage, our destiny. You can't not be a Rose! He was screwing it up and I needed him. I didn't think he'd die. I just ... I didn't know about the drugs."

It looked like she wasn't going to get to the five whys. "What did you think was going to happen?" How she kept her voice even, Gail wasn't sure.

"I don't know," muttered Donal. "I didn't even know what the hell Astie was doing. I just... I found the bug in the system."

Now Beverly cut in. "Bug? What bug?"

Clearing his throat, John explained, "If you file more items than the shipping containers can hold, your system will add them to the manifest but not remove them from inventory. They become ghost items. Aston was using that glitch to ship drugs between BC and Ontario."

Harrison, a life long shipper, looked stunned. "The weight would be off."

"He did it with small amounts," John pointed out.

"How'd you find that out?" Beverly looked at her son, astounded.

Donal looked up at Gail, not his parents. "Do you have any idea how bored I am? All the fucking time, Gail. All I can do is think. I can't even play wheelchair sports. I'm a brain in a chair and nothing more. All I can do is this." He turned to look at his mother, "So yeah, I read every fucking shipment manifest, Mom. I got so bored I made notes of every time we were shipping wrong weights, just to see if I could find a way to save money and fuel. I thought it would be awesome or ... Something. And then I saw the same weight difference on a dozen shipments, all between the same places. And Astie, stupid, golden boy, Astie. Your favorite son." Donal spat the words out. "I thought he was just nicking overstock."

Gail sighed softly. "Why'd you ship one last week?"

"Drugs," muttered Donal. "When you said it was drugs, and you found that crap in his room, I thought they might go after us. So ... I ... Before you took his stuff, I had the backup loaded on my computer. I already knew his schedule so, y'know, I just did what he did. The email for the order came in, I sent the messages to his guys."

"Why, Donal?" She repeated it carefully, hitting that fifth why anyway.

Looking at his parents, Donal sighed. "Because of the drugs. They killed Astie, I didn't want... Mom, I'm sorry."
Interesting. He didn't apologize to his father. Beverly looked away from her son, her face closed. "Now what?" Beverly looked at Gail and no one else.

"We need to know who Aston was working for," Gail said softly.

Donal sighed. "I don't know. The email came from gmail."

That would give IT another headache, sighed Gail. Getting warrants for gmail were always fun. MLAT aside, it was rarely fast, even for a murder investigation. She took a breath and laid it out. "We have the authority to place you under conditional arrest, Donal Rose, for accessory to drug trafficking, and criminal negligence resulting in the death of Aston Rose."

No one objected. Andy and her partner stayed behind to monitor Donal. House arrest did not mean, in his case, without police supervision. It was a gift from the judge who conceded to Gail's argument that he couldn't easily run away in his condition. But there was to be no use of computers nor phones and no unsupervised visitors. Not even his parents.

After moving Donal to a new room, the parents arranged for the police to take over the room next to Donal's, promising to stay on their wing. The two rooms were connected by a shared door, making it easier for the police to watch him 24/7. By the time the lawyer arrived, it was just paperwork. They knew, they all knew what the deal was.

Gail and John walked out with CSU, who had stripped Donal's old room of all technology. "What was that you said to McNally before we left?"

She had pulls Andy aside and asked her a favor. "Suicide watch," sighed Gail, sliding into the driver's seat. "There's fuck all left to do today, isn't there?"

Buckling up, John looked thoughtful. "We aren't getting a same day warrant on three gmail accounts, not on New Years Eve unless there was a serial killing. I say we file this, set up someone to take over for McNally tonight, and call it a day."

"I guess," muttered Gail, turning the heat up a bit.

"You coming to the Penny?"

Gail nodded. "Just for a bit. Stop by with Viv and then go watch the fireworks. You?"

Oddly, her partner hesitated. "Probably," he finally allowed.

No mention of a romantic night, or even a hint that he'd be with his girlfriend. "What's up with you and Rachel?" It wasn't her business and yet it was.

"She wants kids," John replied bluntly. "Which is your fault." He smiled, clearly not blaming her. "And she wants to get married."

Ouch. "Married life's okay," she noted quietly. But just as she'd had issues with a wedding, John had his own totally legit fears about engagements.

John grunted. "It's not that." He paused. "No, okay, it is. Part of it."

"Did you tell her?" And he nodded. "Lemme guess. She said she's not the same?" And again, he nodded. "You know, just because Rachel's one of Holly's BFFs doesn't mean you have to stay with her. If it's not right, it's not right."
Her partner said nothing until they crossed into downtown. "I don't think ... I like Rachel, a lot. She's amazing. But you know, I look at us and I don't see you and Holly. I don't see that place you have. When she was sick, I saw you, Peck, and you had this hole because she wasn't there. I look and me and Rach and I see... God I see Andy and Sam."

The analogy was muddled, but Gail caught the gist. "Doomed to failure?" The McSwarek marriage had been pretty rocky lately.

"No sustainable future," agreed John.

"Well. Sam is an ass and Andy makes worse life choices than I do. You and Rachel are neither of those. But if you're not in love, don't get married."

John laughed quietly. "You make it sound so simple."

Pulling into the garage, Gail gave her partner a serious look. "This is the only relationship advice I'm qualified to give, John. If you don't love her, don't do it. You will be miserable and break each others hearts and it'll take you a lot more stupid choices to get to where you can be right with yourself and her. Whoever her ends up being." She paused. "Or him. Okay?"

He nodded and said nothing, getting out of the car. They filed their paperwork, caught Butler up on things, and as John had suggested, called it a day. It wasn't much, but it did get Gail home at lunchtime, much to Vivian's delight. She liked Celery, especially after the haircut, but as the girl explained, Gail was her mom and was pretty cool.

The moment she walked in the door, she was put at ease by the most wonderful smells in the entire universe.

"Doctor Holly!" The woman behind the counter beamed at Holly, clearly delighted to see her again. Holly had been coming to the Mazanderani family bakery ever since med school, and moving to her townhouse and then to the actual house with Gail hadn't changed her habits in the least.

"Baker Bita," replied Holly, just as cheerfully to the matron of the Mazanderani clan. "I didn't think I'd make it before you closed."

With a smirk, Bita teased, "We were waiting for you. Since you missed last year." They both knew it was because Holly had called two hours ago, promising to be there before three in the afternoon. It was fifteen after. "Flip the sign for me, Miss Doctor?"

Holly obliged, turning the sign to closed. "Sorry I'm late, I was trying to catch up."

"It happens. Speaking of it happens, I have too many leftovers. Can I give you a bag to feed those police people you hang out with now?" And Bita held up a rather large bag. "We're closed tomorrow so I can't even sell them as day olds."

Laughing, Holly nodded. "If Gail doesn't eat them all first, I'm sure they'll love it." She shared a look with Bita, who had met Gail once while catering a party they'd gone to. Holly had made Gail swear not to go to the bakery without her. For whatever reason, that turned out to mean Gail went to the bakery and coffee shop and only Holly came here.

Bita smiled. "Your wife will eat all the sugar before your daughter does."

"That reminds me... Her birthday's in February."
"Having a party?"

"Probably. It's been a weird year."

The older woman looked Holly up and down. "You look much better," Bita noted. "You were practically a shell of yourself when you got out of the hospital."

While Bita didn't know exactly why Holly had been in the hospital (she'd only said she was sick), there had been no avoiding the fact that Holly just looked like crap when she got out. You shouldn't lose that much weight that fast. "I feel a lot better," she agreed.

And Bita grinned. "So how old is that child going to be? Vivian, not your pixie wife."

Blushing, Holly pulled out her phone. "Seven." She pulled up a photo of Vivian from the night before, sporting her new shorter hair and held it out. "I'll bring her in to pick out her cake next month."

Bita smiled ear to ear. "I like the hair. She looks much happier with it short." In the photo, Vivian was outside holding a snowball and pointing at Gail, who was off camera and laughing, as Holly recalled. Not that it took much to give Gail the giggles.

"She is," agreed Holly, and she flipped to a photo of Gail and Vivian and their snowman. It apparently had to happen. "Thanks for staying open for me, Bita. I really appreciate it."

Brushing it off, Bita handed over the cake box and bag. "You have had a very difficult year. This is worse than the year you were dumped four times."

Oh god, Holly had tried to forget that. None of them had been really serious girlfriends, but god, it had stung. "I think I found my freshman fifteen that year," she muttered. She'd spent her time hiding at the bakery and studying.

"Well right now you need to eat those cookies and get fifteen back. Say hello to Gail for me."

Promising to do so, Holly ate a cookie on her way back out. When Holly got home, she found her wife and daughter asleep in the master bedroom. Vivian was soundly asleep on Holly's side of the bed and Gail was curled on her side in the middle, hand trapped in a book. As quietly as she could, Holly eased the book out and marked the place (Harry had just gotten to Hogwarts) before slipping under the throw blanket and snuggling up behind Gail, draping an arm across her waist.

The plan to nap before going out seemed to work. Holly woke up to a soft hand stroking her arm and squinted to look at Gail's sleepy face. "Hey," whispered Gail, lying on her back, Holly somehow resting against her shoulder. Gail's fingers lingered on Holly's elbow.

"Hey," Holly whispered back. When Gail's hand crept to the back of her neck, Holly cleared her throat. "Uh, there is a child right there." They both glanced at Vivian.

Gail scoffed and drew Holly in for a soft, gentle, kiss. "I'm not getting in your pants right now, baby. I just ... I love you. A lot."

Oh. Holly sighed and nestled her head against Gail's shoulder again. "What happened at work?"

Gently caressing Holly's hair and back, Gail sighed. "I arrested my ex and John's breaking up with Rachel." Holly felt herself stiffen and clearly so did Gail, who drew Holly closer into an embrace. "This is weird. I'm not used to you on this side."
Holly gripped Gail's shirt. "Why?"

"Well, normally you're on my other side and-"

"Gail," she hissed.

Her wife stopped. "He's not in love, she wants to get married and have kids and he's not ready." Gail hesitated. "That could have been us," she whispered.

It could have. Easily. Except they'd cleared the hurdle years ago. They'd talked and worked around the issue and made sacrifices for each other. John and Rachel had not. They hadn't talked, they hadn't tried.

"No," she told Gail softly. "It wasn't ever us. We talk about stuff."

Gail puffed a laugh. "That's what makes us great," she agreed.

Squeezing Gail tightly, Holly closed her eyes again. "You're right, it's weird on this side." She propped herself up to look down at Gail. "We're good together, honey."

And Gail just smiled. It was that smile, the shy and tender smile that melted Holly's insides. The smile that broke her heart open and won her over. Gail reached up and ran her fingers lightly down Holly's face. Her eyes were soft and warm behind their normal icy barrier. God, that smile still flipped her stomach and made Holly weak in the knees. Gail's thumb brushed Holly's lower lip and she drew Holly's head down.

Oh it was impossible to resist just then. She smiled back, knowing it was that side smile that Gail loved, and kissed Gail softly. It wasn't full of lust or passion, but it had a promise of all those things and more. Of years together and more, of choices and futures and everything Holly could dream of.

"I bought you that cake from the Persian place," breathed Holly, resting her forehead against Gail's.

The grin became the toothy, childish grin. "I love you too." Gail's voice was an assurance of the fact. They kissed again, still lightly. "What time is it?"

Holly looked over the sleeping form of their daughter. "Eight. We should wake her up and feed her, huh?"

"She's not a puppy," teased Gail. Her arm still around Holly, she held her close and reached over. "Hey, Viv. Wake up."

The girl scrunched up her face. "Is it New Years?"

"In a couple hours," grinned Holly. Vivian opened her eyes and blinked happily. "Hi, honey."

"Hi moms," smiled Vivian and she sat up. "How come you're using Gail as a pillow?"

Holly poked Gail's stomach. "She's my soft cuddly Peck." But Holly rolled off Gail and stretched. "Viv, you want to come with us to the Penny before the fireworks?"

"Can I?" She sounded surprised and eager. Assuring her that she was welcome, Gail climbed over Holly to get off the bed, kissing her on the way and getting an 'eeeew' from Vivian. "You were kissing in bed," she gagged.

Laughing, Gail headed to the bathroom. "We're married, Monkey. And I love your mom, so you're just going to have to get used to this."
They managed to get everyone fed and dressed for the fireworks and out the door just after ten, which impressed Holly. Sometimes getting Gail wrangled was harder than Vivian, but they showed up at the Penny while the party was in moderate swing. The Penny visit was brief by design. They made their way through all of Gail's friends (except Nick, who was working, and Andy who was somewhere else with Sam) and picked up Dov, Chloe, and Chris to join them at the lake shore.

Dov expressed his surprise when they met Oliver, Celery, and Winnie at the parking lot. "Is this a secret married people thing? Like once you're hitched, you learn about secret parties?"

"It's a secret parent party, Epstein," laughed Oliver.


Gail took Vivian's other hand. "Well we usually do other things," drawled the blond. Her winter watch cap was pulled down snug over her blonde hair, only her bangs peeking out.

"What other stuff?" Vivian looked up, innocently.


Dov looked surprised. "You just... Gail she's six! You can't just tell her you're having sex."

"Can. Do. Did. Oliver, why does everyone think kids are dumb?" Gail shook her head.

"They are clearly not ready for kids," agreed Oliver. His daughter Winnie rolled her eyes. "Peck, is that pale pale figure my Keystone Peck?" Steve stood next to Frank, his arm around Traci, watching Leo and Sophie. Frank had Olivia on his shoulders, waving in their directions.

Laughing, Gail waved back. "Come on, Dov, it'll be fun. Fireworks with the kids, a snowball fight, back home for some mulled wine and the little kids will be asleep by two."

As one, Olivia and Vivian shouted, "Will not!"

Except they totally would be. Olivia, from her perch on Frank's shoulders, gave everyone the blow by blow of the pontoon boats setting up. Feeling jealous, Leo asked Steve about a lift, and to Holly's surprise he declined, citing Leo's age. Gail promptly teased her brother, saying it was his age, not Leo's, that was the issue.

Beside them, Vivian was straining to stand on her toes and Holly asked, "Do you want to sit on my shoulders, Viv?" Holly looked down at her daughter thoughtfully. She could probably handle it for the half hour of fireworks.

To her surprise, Vivian looked at Chris. "But Chris is taller. Can I sit on your shoulders, please?"

There was a slight pause, as if Vivian was tossing around what to actually call him. Finally she went with just his name. "Please, Chris? I promise not to squirm."

The deep, somewhat morbid aura Chris had worn all day faded a little. "Sure," he replied, smiling. It was the first true smile Holly had seen on his face in a while. Gail helped Vivian up, telling her not to try and take photos of the fireworks. Then she kissed Chris on the cheek and thanked him.

Smiling, Holly watched Gail take photos of the kids. "What's it like?" Chloe's question startled her. "Married, kid, and a kick ass job? Is it ... Hard?"

"Very," admitted Holly. "And tiring." There had been a lot of nights where it was a struggle to stay awake long enough to right the house and prep for the morning. Especially when she or Gail had a
complicated case. The whole eight hours at work and out the door was rarely possible. She had no idea how single Traci had handled it at all.

Chloe exhaled. "You look like you wouldn't give it up for anything."

Holly smiled. "I wouldn't. I didn't expect... You know, we thought Vivian was just going to be temporary. But now. Now it's like that moment when I realized I could live without Gail in my life, but I'd be miserable. It's weird, I know-"

"No," Chloe shook her head. "It makes sense. She's your people. And Gail... Once she lets you in, she's crazy... Loyal. She's dedicated to her people. She'd do anything for them, even if it hurts."

Like help them pack to move to another country, even when she was hopelessly in love. Yeah. Holly possibly knew that better than most. "It's one of her endearing qualities," agreed Holly. "Don't let Oliver get to you. You don't have to get married."

Chloe grinned. "Oh, I've done that before. I'm not sure I should do it again."

That was right. Chloe had been married to Wes. "I'm still in a bit of shock we did," Holly said, conspiratorially.

"Eloping with Gail was probably the only way," agreed Chloe. "She hates weddings."

Between her general dislike of most people and Nick, Gail flat out despised weddings. And yet she'd grudgingly gone to Frank and Noelle's, Oliver and Celery's, and of course Steve and Traci's. "She'll go to yours."

"She'll go to Dov's," corrected the tiny red head. They both laughed. Point, agreed Holly.

Speaking of the devil, Dov came up and threw an arm around Chloe's shoulders. "Are you two talking about me?" He held out a thermos towards Holly.

"I'm telling her all the stories Gail told me," joked Holly. "If that's a meat cocktail, I'm out." Holly had enjoyed one beer at the Penny. She wasn't the designated driver that night, since Gail had serious issues with people driving on the roads in winter. And on a holiday night. And she hated Holly's car. Gail was not shy about expressing her opinions about Holly's driving, which she said was 'perfectly acceptable for decent weather and daylight.'

"Mulled wine, spiced by Celery. And never, ever, speak of meat cocktails again," pleaded Dov.

Holly took the thermos and sniffed it before pouring some into the cap. "That's Gail's opinion too," she grinned. The wine smelled good and felt warming, even though she knew it wouldn't actually warm you up. In fact, the alcohol caused your body temperature to drop. "Whose idea was that anyway?"

With a grimace, Dov replied, "Chris's."

Glancing at Chris, Holly couldn't help but grin as she saw the tall, teddy-bear of a man pointing at the water and talking to Vivian. "He still misses Christian," realized Holly, abruptly.

"Never got over it," Dov muttered, taking the thermos back and helping Chloe pour a cup.

How would she feel if she lost Gail? Now she'd be even more hollow and devastated as she'd been back when they were younger idiots. Five years. That was nothing and everything. Across the group, she caught Gail's glance and lifted her hands to sign, slowly and carefully. You are beautiful.
Then she flashed the sign everyone knew. *I love you.*

Gail's reply, naturally, was a little sillier. *You have snow in your hair.* Yep. That was her wife. The mulled wine made its way back around towards Oliver, allowing Gail to make her escape back over to Holly. "What brought the sign on, baby?" She wrapped her arms around Holly to kiss her.


"You know... I hated Denise before she pulled that shit on him." There was venom in her voice, the tight anger of Gail barely holding back her anger. If Denise stood here, she'd fear for the woman's life. "Chris deserves better than that." An unspoken 'better than me' hung in the air.

Frowning, Holly placed her hands on the side of Gail's face. "Hey." That was all she said. It was all she needed to say to remind Gail that she wasn't a bad girlfriend or wife. The one word was all Holly had to use to tell Gail that making a relationship work took both sides. And the one word, the three letters, reinforced the fact that they were making it work.

Gail pressed her forehead against Holly's. "I know." And Holly knew she did. It was going to take years to convince Gail that she wasn't a pale fail, but it was years Holly was not just willing to spend, but actually wanted to.

"Okay. Good," smiled Holly, kissing Gail gently.

"Hey, no kissing till midnight!" That was Steve, laughing loudly.

"Shut up, Steve," snapped Gail. She leaned in to kiss Holly again, a soft and tender kiss that warmed Holly faster than the drink. "What did you drink?" Gail's lips turned up into a confused expression.

They stepped apart, holding hands, and Holly explained about the mulled wine. When Gail expressed an interest, Celery wrote the recipe down for them to make later. Finally it was time for the countdown and, as the crowd chanted the numbers, couples paired off. Gail sternly instructed Vivian not to say ewww unless it was at Steve and Vivian grudgingly agreed, provided she could have hot cocoa when they got home.

The bargain completed and as the crowd shouted "Happy New Year" they laughed into a kiss.

At home, Holly found herself carrying a 'not at all sleepy' Vivian into the house and up the stairs. Normally this was Gail's job, as Vivian complained less when Gail held her, but for some reason Vivian had all but climbed into Holly's arms when she got out of the booster seat. Gail helped with the winter coat, boots, and hat, letting Holly wrangle the girl through a shower and into pajamas and then she was sound asleep in bed.

"That was fast," remarked Gail, heating what looked like mulled wine. "Now I don't feel so bad for not making that cocoa for her."

"The sledding three days in a row wore her out." Holly stretched her arms up until her lower back popped. "That was really nice of Chris," she mused.

Gail nodded. "Your shoulders probably thank him, too."

That was true. Holly felt sore just from toting the girl around the house. "She's finally catching up to other kids."

At first, Social Services had thought Vivian was just small. It turned out she'd been seriously malnourished to the point of adverse development. Thankfully all that had been physical and not
long term enough for lasting damage, mentally or physically. The only healthy food Vivian didn't really like was avocado and Gail's love for guacamole was slowly changing that. But with the catching up came a small issue with Vivian weighing a bit more than what Holly or Gail could easily hold for any considerable length of time.

"Kinda makes me sad we didn't get her earlier," reflected Gail, reading Holly's thoughts.

As Gail kept stirring the wine, Holly eased onto a stool. "Do you ... " she paused and sighed. Holly didn't really want to ask the question that was on her mind. "Do you regret not having a baby?"

They both knew they weren't going to have a baby on their own. And unless Anne or someone else from Social Services showed up with a baby or another child, right now Holly couldn't fathom another. She had no idea how Oliver had handled three, or how the Bests managed two.

Without a moment for pause, Gail replied, "No." She smiled over her shoulder. "Hey, I got everything I ever wanted. You, a kid, a house not in the suburbs, thank you."

Holly laughed. "Okay. But ... I don't know. I don't want you to settle for things."

Very quietly Gail took the wine off the heat and poured it into two large mugs. "Holly too-cool-for-a-middle-name Stewart, I am settling for nothing." The mugs went onto the counter. "You were never a fallback or an alternative. I wanted you from ... Oh, the time I saw you on that stupid set up." Gail kissed her forehead. "Besides, can you picture me with an infant for the long term?" The blitheness of her tone made Holly laugh.

She had a point. "I can picture you with me for the long term," countered Holly. Mugs were lifted and gently tapped together. "Happy New Year."

"Happy New Year." They sipped and Gail frowned. "Okay, either Celery left out something or her super witchy powers give it a better taste."

"No," laughed Holly. "This is right. You just tasted it on me first."

Gail huffed. "Awesome, I only like this stuff through you." She paused, realizing what she'd said, and laughed softly. Even though Holly said nothing, Gail laughed, "Oh shut up."

They smiled and drank the warm wine, feeling the lovely languidness that came from a good time with good people and a good home.
"I have a stupid theory," announced John as he walked in to the bullpen. Late.

Gail blinked a few times at her partner, who was sporting a fresh haircut and the beginning of a mustache and wisps of chin foo. "Wasn't Movember last month?" They'd both taken the first off, giving them a long weekend. Just long enough to grow scruff apparently.

He ignored her. "What if the doctor, I'm going with that theory by the way, what if the doctor wasn't the drug czar?" She put her coffee down and gestured for John to continue. "What if he's a victim too?"

"You mean he's dead?"

"I mean beat to shit four months ago in a random robbery. Except he still had his wallet and phone."

"That is oddly specific, Detective Simmons," muttered Gail, wondering just how her partner had spent his weekend.

John booted up his laptop and showed Gail the file. "He was on my short list already. Once Donal said he was screwing with the orders, I went back over the list. He shortchanged them, going back months. Four months ago, Jeffrey Paulsen was rolled."

The photos were impressive. Gail had stopped a radio with her face once, years ago, but this was more impressive. "Broken hand," she noted. "Stomped on. He was kicked hard." She frowned, trying to remember what her brother had told her about what drug gangs did as punishment. "So you think Dr. Paulsen was beat up over the drugs being shortened as a threat. Shape up or ship out? Can you connect him to Aston or... Some nebulous drug gang?"

At least John had the grace to look annoyed. "Neither. Yet."

"Boring research time," chuckled Gail. She pulled up the files on her own laptop and read through them. "You want the gang angle or the Aston one?"

John looked thoughtful. "Aston. You can talk to Steve and I can look at the Roses."

Tilting her head, Gail wondered if John was trying to spare her feelings, regarding the brother of a man she used to know. Either way would really be slightly uncomfortable. Working with her family was always a strange thing, even when the family was Steve. Given that it was Steve, Gail did the meat of the research before calling him and suggesting a working lunch.

"Are you paying?"

"Hey, I have a wife and kid," she laughed at him.

"So do I, Garbage Pail." Steve's smile shone down the line.

Gail wanted to poke fun at him, call Leo his step-son, but that was a low blow. "Fine, I'll pay, but that means I pick the place."

They ended up getting Steve's favorite Italian and eating at Steve's desk. Steve's favorite was one of
her favorites too. "Breaking hands. That's old school, baby sis."

She nodded, picking at her ravioli. "Which is why I'm asking you for help, big bro." They shared a smirk. Ninety-nine percent of the time, they called each other sister and brother. It was for the same reason they called their parents mother and father much of the time. Formalities were high in the Peck household scale of importance. As time went by, the siblings had found hilarity in calling each other as they did. It didn't mean they never said bro or sis, as both Traci and Holly knew, but it was more rare.

Steve had managed to call Elaine 'Mom' more often than Gail could. They both called Bill 'Dad' fairly easily, but that wasn't like either of them talked to him at all anymore. Just a month ago, Gail had suffered an incredibly awkward queue with her father in the big building downtown. Saved only by the third person in the line, the very confused rookie between them, they only said a word each. Detective and Inspector.

"Well," exhaled Steve. "Not a lot of gangs hire doctors. Not unless they need an on hand guy for stitches."

"He's an experimental type doctor. Messes with new drug combos."

Steve leaned back in his chair. "See now that's extra weird. Why would they want that... Okay, so you want a gang who pushes new drugs. You know who would be good about that, right?"

Wincing, Gail nodded. "Was hoping not to."

"Why? Look, I know you and Blackstone have a history..." Pulling her phone out, Gail flipped through her photo album until she found the right person. She held out the phone and watched Steve's expression change to shock. Snatching the phone, Steve flipped back and forth, looking at the photos of Vega, Flynn, and then... "Holy fuck!"

"Dr. Betty Rogers. She hit on me, Steven." Gail scowled. "The less I have to deal with Blackstone right now, the happier my therapy bill will be."

And Steve froze. He held the phone back out, frowning and looking pained. "Still?" When Gail shrugged, Steve flinched. "Gail... I don't know what to say."

She looked up at the ceiling. "Steve, it's fine. It sucks, don't get me wrong, but it's fine. I'm actually doing okay."

"How's Holly? For real?"

With a shrug, Gail said, "Fine. Apparently. It's weird to me too. It'll probably come out some weird way later."

"How come the stupid shit has to happen to you?"

Gail blinked and reminded him, "Hello, who got shot and is missing a kidney?" Her brother laughed. That had been a terrifying moment when she was a teen, just starting university. No longer a rookie, Steve had been with some other young cop when they'd been embroiled in a shootout and Steve had been hit by a round in the wrong place. Gail was struck by the memory of everyone in the family being tested to be a potential donor, just in case his other one gave out.

Looking at her sadly, Steve pointed out, "You stayed with me all the time."

Oh. He was feeling guilty. "You didn't know, Captain Stupid. You were undercover and if you want
to be pissed, be pissed at our parents for telling your handler not to tell you."

They had a lot of reasons to be mad at their parents, but that one took the cake. "Dad actually told me you were tough enough to deal with it."

"Ironic," snorted Gail. "I thought he was disappointed I kept going to the shrink."

"You're not still seeing that idiot out in the 'burbs, are you?"

With a laugh, Gail shook her head. "No, I have a good one downtown. See her every couple weeks or so. Depends on shit."

Her brother looked stern. "You're not broken, Gail."

"I know." It was odd to say the words that plainly, but she did know it and even more importantly, she felt it. Therapy had a point. She could talk about her feelings in a place where she wasn't judged or felt less of a person for needing help. In turn, that let her open up more to the people she loved. Kind of. She still thought most people were idiots and losers and snapped at them.

The simple admission surprised Steve. "Oh. Okay. So ... I can talk to Blackstone. Old school gangs and new tech drugs. We can find you something."

Good police work was good teamwork. "Who would be on your short list?"

Steve exhaled loudly. "Your doctor didn't say anything about who kicked his ass. So I'm going blind here, but I'd say Gil Hammond's crew."

"That is a totally lame name," Gail snorted.

"Says the woman who took down the Two Rivers gang."

"Which Holly agreed had the stupidest name. Do they just pick out the dumbest names? Maybe there's a contest for it and they hope we laugh too much to arrest them." She knew that the guy's name was probably Gil Hammond, but that was just annoying. "Who the fuck names a kid 'Gil' anyway?"

Steve smiled. "That's my sister. He goes by Hammy."

Pausing, Gail sighed. "Well that's much better," she said flatly. "If his gang is called Hammy's Heroes, I'm going to seriously question your career choice."

"Bloody Jokers."

"Not much better," grunted Gail. "Why him?"

And her brother's face closed. Normally Steve had a sort of goofy geniality about him. He, like she, wore the normal Peck confidence like a shield or a wall, but his was behind a self-deprecating shield of ambivalent idiocy. Steve had the ability to sound stupid and yet be amazingly brilliant. The times Steve put up the wall, the wall Gail wore like a second skin, were few and far between.

She waited. Her expression, flat and even, held firm and steady.

Like a common crook, Steve crumbled. "He experiments with Special K." He rubbed the back of his neck. "When did you get good at waiting people out?"

"Interrogations," shrugged Gail. "You should watch me sometimes. I'm a fucking bad ass at breaking
"If it's anything like that look you just gave me... Jesus it's like disappointed Dad plus that eye thing Mom does when you're being stupid." He shuddered. "You said there was K in the guy, so y'know, Hammy screws with it. Maybe."

Objectively, Gail understood why her brother avoided talking about it. He still felt guilty for not being there for her. None of that was his fault but Steve, being a Peck, had obsessed the way that broken Pecks do. He'd thrown himself into work and she'd not really seen him at all for a year. That whole year where she really didn't feel much of anything at all. That year that, had it not happened, wouldn't have ended with Nick and the stupid interrogation and Perik and Blackstone and blind dates and Holly.

What would it have been like if Steve had been there, and not just the owner of an apartment where she slept when she couldn't deal with her parents anymore? That was a hell of a thought. Right now, looking at her other brother, the guy who'd protected her as much as he could until he, almost ten years older, had been off to school and confused and a little weird and distant because of girls (or possibly because their idiot parents were trying their fucked up idea to deal with her and he'd picked up on that)... right now Gail saw his guilt and regret.

"Steve," she sighed after a while. "Can you stop? You're giving me a headache." Rubbing her forehead, Gail thought out loud, "Ketamine. Three syllables. And that's a good idea. The lab said the Ketamine in his system was weird." She reached over and pulled up the lab results on his computer. "You keep the results from the drugs you snatch, right?"

"Sure," nodded Steve, seemingly pleased to fall into work. Clearly he could handle work because Pecks didn't talk about their feelings. They just swallowed them whole. Bleah. When Steve brought up the lab results on Hammy's drugs, he frowned. "It's not a perfect match," he said slowly, pointing at the various jumps in the charts.

It was funny what five years with someone would do to you. "That's just miscellaneous crap. They cut the drugs with that. The part you want to look at is here." She touched his monitor at the peaks of the results on the Ketamine itself. "That's a match. Same batch. Son of a bitch."

Her brother eyed her. "Don't touch my monitor." But he studied the lab files. "You're sure?"

"Have you met my wife?" muttered Gail. Steve nodded, smirking. "I'm sure. Not enough to haul him in though, is it?"

Steve shook his head. "Not really. We can ask him to come talk about why he may have beat up a guy, but we can't trace the drugs directly to him. You know how it works."

And she did. Scratching her neck, Gail nodded. "I can put pressure on our guy. Wish they'd checked his clothes for evidence."

"Why didn't they?" Steve was surprised.

"He didn't want to press charges. Never filed the report. Hospital can't make 'em." The siblings shared a look of disgust. Because not filing a report wasn't suspicious.

Then Steve's eyes lit up. "Hospital took photos?"

"X-rays," corrected Gail, wondering why her brother was excited.

His fingers flew on the keys, mousing like a maniac, until he pulled up X-rays from her idiot people."
Paulsen. "Think the lab could match the damage pattern? That would give us a reason to pull in suspects."

Gail blinked and then grinned hard. Oh hell yes. "Dear Dr. Paulsen, we found the guys who beat you up. Hell yes they can, kick 'em direct to Holly. This case is in her docket 'cause it's the Roses."

"Lucky you," teased Steve, sending the files over via email. "I bet you get the best medical examiner because you're married to her."

"Nah, I just have the best cases."

"You have the weirdest cases," Holly muttered to John and Gail as they all looked at the X-rays stuck to the board on the third floor of Fifteen. "Mind, you did just give me a reason for updating my system. I had to send Charles across town to print these up."

When Steve's email hit her inbox, it was followed by Gail's request to find any similar damage patterns on victims of drug related cases, preferably with Ketamine in their system. At first, Holly wanted to tell them they were idiots, but then she remembered the work she'd done years back with the weird head-basher case. That was still unsolved, much to her and Gail's annoyance.

Over the course of the case, Holly had spent an inordinate amount of time scouring the databases to find any other similar injuries. That meant it took her only a couple hours to pick out the right cases that related and be sure they were right. The problem came when she went to print them. She needed a better system to move the prints to a digital app so Holly took the time to pitch a fast proposal for that before taking her files over to Fifteen.

Her plan was to drop the files off and then go pick up Vivian from the Bests, since it was clear Gail was going to be mired in work for longer. That didn't happen.

"I'll be damned," muttered John, rubbing his chin. He'd startlingly grown scruff over the long weekend. "Those are nucks!"

"They are pretty distinct," agreed Gail. She mimed a punch at John, the two jostling until they figured the right motion. Holly interjected with the actual height of the puncher, based on the angles, and Gail smirked. "So that makes it..." Gail hopped over to the folders on her desk. "Kenny Muldoon. Currently serving a nickel." She tossed the file at John.

Her partner read the file quickly. "Damn," he muttered again. "Okay, I'll lock down the connection to Aston. I'm pretty sure I can pin him with some credit card transactions." Waving his hand, John sat at his desk with a firm expression.

Holly eyed her wife who signed Later. And to her surprise, Gail picked up her laptop, shoving it into her shoulder bag. "Okay, I'm going to save Frank from my kid. Meet you at home?"

"Sure," nodded Holly. "You guys want to keep the X-rays?"

"Please," John barely looked up.

That was weird, thought Holly, and as she walked to the elevator with Gail she asked, "Is he mad at me?"

Gail shook her head. "John is afraid you're going to be mad at him about Rachel."

"That's his excuse for looking like Mirror Universe John?" Holly snorted. She caught the side-eye
from Gail and groaned. "I know you’ve seen that episode! Spock with the beard?" But Gail’s face was remarkably confused, as if she thought Holly was nuts. "Kirk in the vest?" Now Gail’s lips quirked. She knew exactly what Holly was talking about. "Oh my god, you are a horrible person!"

Still laughing when they got off the elevator, Gail caught Holly's hand. "He'll get over it, don't worry."

In a way, Holly could understand that. "I should probably call Rachel," she sighed.

"Should I avoid her and BitchTits?"

No matter what, Gail never stopped calling Lisa that nickname. They did get along now, for the most part, and more since Vivian had shown up. Lisa was surprisingly in full support of Holly and Gail as parents. "That may be wise," Holly said, thinking about the rants that would follow a break up. With the exception of Lisa and her steady stream of booty calls, it had been a long time since there’d been a breakup ‘party.’

Gail huffed. "What did you do when we broke up? Some weird ice cream and sad chick flick marathon?"

"Complained about you so much that Lisa told me to get my head out of my ass," admitted Holly, smiling wryly.

That surprised Gail. "Well if Lisa said it, it has to be true," she said flippantly. Holly laughed and elbowed Gail. "Go home, I'll rescue Viv." As they started to go separate ways, Holly caught Gail's fingers and tugged.

The blonde's eyebrows lifted and, shortly after, so did the corners of her mouth. Cold weather notwithstanding, Holly leaned in to kiss Gail quickly. "Do you want to go out to dinner?"

"Want, yes, but we've gone out a lot. How about I hit up the grocery and get something fresh?"

"Oh well if you're cooking," grinned Holly. She squeezed Gail's hand and got into her own car. Per usual, Gail lingered to watch Holly drive off before getting into her car. At first that had creeped Holly out. It had taken a conversation with Celery to realize that was just something cops did. They watched out for people like that.

On her drive home, she decided to call Rachel and get that over with. "Siri, call Rachel."

The phone picked up right away. "I'm not mad," announced Rachel, sounding... Well ... Like Rachel.

"Alright then. You sure you're okay? I worried when you didn't call."

A glass clinked down. Rachel was drinking? "That's rich coming from Ebola Girl. How'd you find out?"

"Gail. By the way, John has chin scruff and he's avoiding me."

Rachel laughed a little unkindly. "I like how men look in beards, but they are so itchy." She sighed. "We broke up New Years Eve. I was thinking I'd ask him to move in."

Ouch. Holly winced. "Honey, I'm sorry."

"No, don't be," sighed Rachel, loudly. "He was right. I like him a lot, he likes me, but we didn't have
... We didn't have a shared future. Neither of us really wanted to change too much."

Maybe that was the trick, thought Holly, the want to change. "It still sucks. No more booty calls."

That got a real, happy, laugh from Rachel. "Damn, I should have told him we could be friends with benefits!" Grinning, Holly suggested a trip to Good For Her, the women's only sex shop. "Just you, me, and Lisa?"

"Gail and Vivian can find something to do on their own."

Rachel stopped laughing. "I haven't been over as much since you guys adopted," she said quietly.

Their friendship had been tight through med school and countless adventures. It had not been unnoticed by Holly that they spent less time together since she and Gail had started their little fostering adventures. No... it had been a little before that. When Holly had settled into a grove where she lived with Gail, Lisa had come around less often. Then Rachel got wrapped up in John and life and work and she'd been busy. It was similar to how Gail saw significantly less of Andy (which Gail claimed not to mind at all) and a lot more of Traci. Lives overlapped in different ways.

"I think," Holly said slowly, "I think it's more we're all going different directions."

"I miss hanging out with you and Lisa," admitted Rachel. "Did you notice it's been three months since she had a one-night-stand?"

Smiling, Holly nodded reflexively. "I did. She's planning something."

Rachel huffed a laugh. "She told me she didn't think it was okay for her to be so slutty around your kid."

Yikes. Holly blinked a few times and pulled up to the garage. "That is actually very weird of her. Can I tell her you told me?"

"Sure."

"Thanks." Holly paused. "Rachel, you're still one of my best friends on the planet, you know that right?"

"Oh god, are you dumping me?"

"Oh hush," sassed Holly. She could tell Rachel was smiling. She could hear it. "I'm trying to tell you that you're still my friend, and you can come over any time you want, or steal me or whatever you want. And I promise, Gail's not taking anyone's side, so don't worry about that."

And Rachel laughed a real laugh. "I don't know what's funnier, the fact that you said it or that John did."

"Couldn't tell you," grinned Holly. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Pirate promise. I'm okay. As much as I was pissed, he's right. We're at different places, we want different things." With a loud sigh, Rachel added, "I should have set up booty calls!"

"Nah, you don't want it now that he has the scruff."

"Probably true. I'm good. I'll call you after these trials are over and we can do a thing?"

"I pick sports," suggested Holly.
Rachel groaned. "Just because Gail hates it. Fine. But basketball. If I have to see pretty men sweating, I want them in as few clothes as possible."

"Wow," Holly laughed. "That is making me rethink everything."

She hung up after making sure her friend was alright and texted Lisa to suggest they kidnap Rachel soon. It wasn't much, but they could try and recapture some of their excellent youth.

"There's a puppy looking for you," growled Griggs, walking past Gail as she got off the elevator. Puppy? Her confusion must have been evident as he elaborated for a change. "Big tall guy? Dark hair? Answers to Diaz?" He tilted his head back towards their bullpen.

Chris was looking incredibly awkward standing there by her desk, clutching a small stack of files. "Ah, my errand puppy," she smiled. Gail headed in and tossed her bag into her chair, "Gimmie gimmie, Chrissy."

The genial officer held out his files. "I don't know if I did it right," he said slowly, nervously.

"You looked up his past, found something you think is drug related, and you're pretty sure you proved it?" When Chris nodded, she gave him a toothy grin. "Then you have a good start. Go get me some coffee. No, get me and John coffee."

Nodding, Chris rushed out and Gail started reading. "You are so mean to him," muttered John, reaching over for one of the files on Gail's desk.

The notes were actually great. Paulsen had a billion black marks on his records, all thanks to arguments with his superiors... All female. Gail filed that away. "Yeah? Chris rocked this, John." She re-read the file in her hand, grinning more. "Paulsen spent three months on an extended vacation."

"Are you even allowed to be a doctor if you're an addict? I mean, House was a TV character." John looked thoughtful.

"You are if you go through rehab, but he's a research doc, not a people doc." She stabbed at the paper with a highlighter, marking the name of a rehab facility. "Recognize that name?" The file was tossed over to John.

He frowned. "Our Helping Hand Spiritual Retreat and Spa. That sounds so Jesusy." Then John's eyes widened. "Isn't that where Latz went?"

Smiling ear to ear, Gail leaned forward. "So did Aston."

"What!? That... Was that in Thomas' letter?"

"Yep!" Gail popped the P loudly and leaned back. That had been the most revealing part of Thomas the butler's letter. He'd been trying to help young master Aston get sober for years. When the drugs and such had been found in Aston's room, he'd been shocked simply because he thought Aston had finally quit. "Whaddaya say, go get Paulsen and have him ID Muldoon from the mugs?" She figured Chris and Andy would enjoy that pick up.

John shrugged. "You think you can break him?" He was slipping back into his earlier, more taciturn ways and Gail scowled. "Stop looking at me like that," he muttered without looking up.

Standing up, Gail picked up her badge and clipped it on differently. "Oh I can break Paulsen. He
looks like a weeper and a misogynist. I was just trying to decide if Holly was right and you're Evil John." Now he looked up, confused. "Break out an Agonizer and punish you for failures." She quirked a grin at John.

Slowly the laugh worked its way out of John's chest. "It's not a Van Dyke. Stop trying to queer up everything," he chuckled.

From anyone else, Gail might have snapped back or lashed out. Hell, she'd kicked Dov so hard he bleed for calling her a lezbo once, even in jest. But her relationship with John was different. Her parents and her brother had been right. When you had a partner, you bonded in ways different from how she had (eventually) clicked with her rookie class. Your partner was your lifeline. You had to be able to be inappropriate, to have permanent parlay with them.

"Evil John," she said firmly.

As she left to explain what she needed from Andy and Chris, John was smiling a little more honestly. Weirdly, his breakup with Rachel made her think about how they hadn't been spending much time with Rachel or Lisa or some of Holly's other friends lately. Hell, they really only hung out with grownups with kids now. They'd gotten too wrapped up in their lives.

That needed to change. That would change. They needed a more diverse life, more people on their extended family. Everyone who had helped them when it came to the adoption needed to be involved more. That was just going to have to happen.

Gail was still lost in her own thoughts when Andy and Chris returned with Jeffrey Paulsen. He looked much better than the hospital photos. Healthy, unbeaten, shaven... Except for a Van Dyke. Evil Paulsen.

"Maybe I should shave," muttered John, echoing her thoughts.

"A little scruff is okay," Gail allowed. "But you'll need to stop wearing a tie perfectly. Maybe a half-mast."

"Says the woman in jeans and a leather jacket."

She was in a nicer jacket at the moment, as it happened, and had even put on shoes and not her boots. It was a disguise of sorts. Gail flipped him off and walked into the room. "Mr. Paulsen, thanks for coming by," she said, smiling too brightly.

"Doctor." His voice was weird. No. His voice was creepy. Gail hadn't realized people could have creepy voices, and yet he did.

"Excuse me?" She knew what he was on about, but played dumb.

"It's Dr. Paulsen." His watery eyes flickered over her shoulder. Oh good. He thought women were the inferior sex.

With a sickeningly sweet smile, Gail drew out her best Canadian. "Sorry. Doctor." She made a show of looking at the papers in her hand. "I'm Detective Peck."

Paulsen looked around the room again. Agitated. Chris had said he seemed to be clean though and Gail believed him. So not a nervous tweaker looking for a fix. "They said I was a witness. I really don't know what you're talking about."

Oh she could kiss Chris. She'd asked him to keep it simple, keep it confusing. Tell him nothing about
either case. Put Paulsen on edge from the moment he got there. Gail nodded. "Six months ago, just about. This summer, you were mugged?"

He looked shocked. "I said I didn't want to press charges. I mean, how stupid, right?" Quickly, Paulsen spun into his story. He'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time, which was totally his own fault. To be honest, it was a new story for Gail. But it was also still the same story.

Gail made sure to look like she was paying rapt attention. Then she put down a photo of Muldoon and Paulsen stopped. "I'm really sorry this was all so confusing," she smarmed at him, putting on her best kinda vapid blonde smile. "I kinda thought it was, I mean, how do you tell a guy- soooorry, you're not a guy. How do we tell someone we think we caught the guy- perp who mugged him." There was one blessing for her pale, pale, skin (beyond how awesome it looked against Holly's so, so sexy dusky tones), and that was took very little effort to blush.

As soon as the color spread on her cheeks, Paulsen smirked. Perfect. He felt like he was in charge with the advantage. Gail quickly looked down and the door opened for Andy to come in. That had been the sign. She had Chris and John as backups in observation, but everything she'd read on this guy told her how to play this. Everything in Chris's notes was perfect.

And now that Paulsen was comfortable, he ID'd Muldoon. He asked the right questions, the ones you saw people ask on TV all the time. They were useless questions. Throw away ones that didn't matter at all, and Gail ignored them, filing them in memory only for a short while, preparing to wash it all away once the case was over and the papers filed.

As he went on, she kept her face schooled to one of rapt and somewhat dim interest. This wasn't the story she wanted, so Gail waited. She could tell Andy was getting antsy, the way she fidgeted. Of all of them, Andy waited poorly, but that was okay this time. Her fussing convinced Paulsen that the women were worthless. Gail listened carefully until she heard the right tone, the derisiveness about how the guy would have been found sooner if some experienced men were on the case.

"Ketamine," Gail said as sweetly as possible. Her voice dripped sugar. Poison sugar. Andy knew enough to flinch. Chris and John and anyone else in observation probably did as well. But Paulsen had been carefully schooled, prepped by Gail, led down this path where he was in charge and now, when she took hold of the rug beneath his feet, he wasn't ready. Gail smiled carefully, a thousand watt smile that sent terror into Nick's heart. She listed all the weird CF related drugs they'd found in their victims.

Paulsen blinked a few times. "I don't... What?"

And she yanked the rug. "Aston Forsyth Rose. I can figure out that one," she said thoughtfully, watching Paulsen flounder. "I mean, Astie was a total dick, right? Blackmailed Phil. Dante. All those guys. And then he meets you in rehab, knows you'll lose your job if anyone else knows, so he blackmails you too. I'm guessing you got Latz hired, but it's been years and years and then... This is the part that I think you'll like. See, then one day a shipment is short. And since you are the contact, Hammy gets Muldoon to beat the shit out of you. Break your hand. Old school. Don't screw with the big dog." She leaned forward. "Why?"

The man's eyes went wide. The words fell from his mouth, skipping past his story. "That asshole shorted me," he whispered. "Seven years. Seven damn years of fetching and testing and work and that fucker shorted me. He let me take the fine." Paulsen held up a hand. "And he lied."

"Why?" Gail tried not to smile. She tried to look concerned.

"Why did he lie? I don't know. But he said it wasn't him, he swore he'd find who stole them, but I
knew it was him. So I waited and waited. Do you know how hard waiting is?"

She allowed her smile to flicker like the knife sharp edge it was. The blade that sent people scurrying for the hills. The weapon that made Jeffery Paulsen's head snap back and he was clearly rethinking everything. "I do," she smiled.

"What... Why am I telling you this?"

No perp had actually asked that before, so she told him. "Because you want to. Because holding on to that secret, that pain, Jeff, it's killing you. Because you're not that guy, but you did it. Why?"

He looked away, his face filled with raw anguish. "I hated him. We all did. He wouldn't let us go. So we did it."

"We?"

"Latz didn't know he did it," corrected Paulsen. "See... I spiked his K. Both of theirs. And when Aston took it... I was there. Told him it was new and awesome and he let me shoot him up. And he passed out and I thought... I read this story in the news about a fireman who'd been drugged up and killed. Mob hit. So I staged it."

The story clicked. Fucking hell, he'd heard about Danny Peck? "And Dante Brown?"

He shook his head. "Do you know how long it takes to drive to fucking Vancouver?"

Blithely, Gail replied, "I flew. But you... Paid cash for your gas and didn't want a paper trail."

"I wanted the mob gone... I wanted Aston gone. I wanted to be free." He looked at the table. "Fucked that up. But hey, I got that shit back. I got him back good."

"Hmmm, funny thing about that." Gail picked up the files. "Aston didn't short you. Someone else did. We got him a couple days ago. He was trying to get Hammy to kick Aston's ass. Sober him up. Oops. Looks like you both fucked that up." She stood up, "McNally, he's yours."

As Gail left the room, she heard Andy explaining that Paulsen would need to write his confession down. "Jesus, you barely need John," mused Holly, smiling broadly. Standing beside John and Chris was her wife, as well as her brother and sister in law.

Gail froze and stared at her wife. What the what? "Who... Holly, we had a deal." Holly was not supposed to watch Gail in interrogation, not after what happened with Nick. True, Gail was way smarter now and knew how to protect her inner self from the perps in interrogation, but she didn't like the idea of Holly watching. Someone was going to die a slow and agonizing death. From the look of it, it was Oliver.

"Sorry," said the brunette, looking not sorry at all. "Oliver said it was okay." Gail shot a glare at the white shirt and was gratified to see him hold his hands up and scamper away. He'd pay later.

"She totally needed me to do the leg work," John noted. "She's just way better at interrogating people." He shrugged, not taking it personally. He wasn't patient enough with stupid people to excel at questioning, she didn't enjoy being meticulous enough to be phenomenal at research. They worked well together.

Smacking John's arms with the files, Gail walked past him to stick her head out the door. "Hey Sgt. Shaw. Officer Diaz was helpful. Go write that down while I think about how many days you have to buy me doughnuts."
The snort behind her was Holly, the laughter was Steve's, and the compliment came from Traci. "That was impressive, Gail." She shrugged at Traci, nonplussed. "If you'd've put your all in the first time, I would not be here."

"I told you, I didn't want it then." Gail slapped Chris's chest with the files. "Chris, you finish processing him." That would cement his important role in the case, possibly even bump him up a rank.

Holly stuck around, watching Gail and John get the rest of the clean up in motion, grinning ear to ear. It was not forgotten that Holly had a bit of a thing for Gail being a bad ass detective. Since Gail's wrap up would take a bit longer, Holly took the mom role to pick up Vivian, but Gail walked her to her car. As they left the station, their hands linked and Gail bumped her shoulder into Holly's.

"Not knocking it, baby, but why're you here?"

"The courier was sick," smirked Holly, unlocking her car. "Legitimately. And when Oliver said I could see you in the interrogation room... I couldn't pass that up."

Gail smirked back. "Oh, okay, fine." She kissed Holly softly. "I'll be home soon as I can," promised Gail, leaning into her wife.

"I know. Detective Badass." They smiled at each other and Gail snuck in one more kiss before watching Holly head out. She headed back to the station, grinning.

"I have a fucking awesome life," Gail told herself.

And it was true.

Chapter End Notes

The end. Of part 9.

There's one more part left, getting us to an even 100 chapters. "Death Becomes Here" is a wrap up fic. No case stringing you along, just 10 chapters of the drama of Fifteen and a suitable closure for this story.

Happy endings for Gail and Holly. Expect breakups, fights, accidents, surprise returns, deaths, births, and divorces for other people. I will not hurt any of the children in the fic, no matter whose they are.
Chapter Summary

Part 10: Death Becomes Here

Introduction: I was asked the following, regarding my fics.

"Have you considered permanently injuring anyone instead of killing? Like I don't know have someone lose a leg or something?"

Yes. That's this fic. At least one person dies. At least one person gets permanently injured. At least one person is pregnant. This arc spans just shy of two years and is planned to be the end, concluding with Gail's 35th birthday. No, Gail and Holly are not the divorce or the death or the pregnancy. No more spoilers.

When Katie poked her head into Holly's office, it was not the way she wanted her Friday to go. "Uh, Dr. Stewart. There was an officer involved shooting with a detective from Fifteen. Fatality."

Holly's first reflex was to check her phone. It didn't matter that she knew Gail was meeting with the Crowne's Office all day about the Rose case, she had to check and see that Gail's watch pinged her as still being in the office. "Is the detective the victim?"

"No, not ... No. Should I find out who it is?"

"No. They're probably going to ask for me-" As she spoke, her phone rang and Holly sighed. Yep. All the bravado she tried to wear like a shield, like Gail did, was heavy and cold. Holly could never lock away her feelings behind a shell, she could never use sarcasm like a sword. But right now she had to shut up and be a professional. At least that was one good thing she learned from the Pecks.

Chris met her out at the field. "Hey, it's not Gail," he announced, leading her to the body.

She adored that man for so many reasons. It was impossible to miss why Gail liked him too. Chris was just an honest to god good person. "Thank you, Chris," she whispered, exhaling. The weight she tried to ignore flew away. Everyone else, even Oliver, she could live with being shot. "Who is it?"

"Swarek."

Okay. Uncharitably, Holly was just fine with him being shot. Again. Even if he had saved Nick's life, and Gail and Nick were still good friends. Sometimes Holly felt Gail was more a lesbian than she was. Without exception, Holly didn't talk to her exes. She tended to chase them off but good, to other countries and to men. It was a gift. On the other hand, Gail talked to all of hers, drank with them, and generally treated them like everyone else in her life. But. "How bad?"

Shaking his head, Chris held up the tape for her. "He's fine. SIU's picking him up in a minute. Oliver's sitting on Andy."

Right, that would be a problem. It took Holly the rest of day and into the early evening to get the case sorted out, and did not put her in the best of moods to meet up with Gail at the Penny. A few
weeks ago, Gail and John had solved their case of a dead shipping scion. Today the Vancouver contingency had come to visit and close up their end of the case with the Crowne's Office. They had already arranged for Vivian to stay at the Best's late after school under the supervision of Izzy Shaw, so that Gail and Holly could get to the Penny for drinks and a moms night out.

So seven PM rolled around and Holly met her wife at the very rowdy Penny. At least she planned to. When she got there, she couldn't see the blonde head. She saw a different blonde head, sitting with Andy and John, but not Gail's.

"Holly!" Andy waved both hands and, obligingly, Holly walked over. "Gail and Ollie are coming back. She made him follow her home so she could drop off her car."

"That makes sense," sighed Holly, realizing it also meant Gail was going to get a little plastered. "How's Sam?"

"He's fine. Soon as SIU is done, I'll go pick him up." Andy chewed her lip a little, but didn't look all that worried.

Nodding, Holly lied a little. "Glad to hear it." It was going to take a lot more for her to like Sam Swarek. Something about the basset hound man rubbed her raw; he was the kind of guy that made her realize she was a lesbian. She looked at the blonde she didn't know and arched her eyebrows. Since Andy and John were slacking, Holly held her hand out. "Hi, I'm Dr. Holly Stewart, forensic pathologist," she smiled.

Taking the hand, the blonde replied, "Det. Angie Flynn, Vancouver."

"Oh! You're Flynn!" Holly grinned and settled into her seat. "Gail told me about you."

"And she told me nothing about you," laughed Flynn. "Are you the chief ME?"

A beer was delivered, as well as a double scotch. "Nope. Medical Director, if that helps." Holly sipped the beer and put a coaster over the scotch. She couldn't help but wonder why Gail had said nothing about her to the woman, and what was she going to say now? Did she out them? Was it a secret today? Was it just Gail not talking about herself again?

Weirdly enough, Flynn nodded. "A bit, yeah. I was thinking its a law all high ranking medical examiners have to be hot."

Holly did not shoot beer out her nose, but it was a near thing. Thankfully, John spared her any explanation. "You have not met our assistant ME. Weird guy and not the best scientist." John glanced at Holly, awkwardly. "You shoulda had his job."

"She'll be his boss one day," announced Gail, appearing out of nowhere. "Is that mine?"

Nodding, Holly slid the scotch over and Gail kissed her cheek before taking a sip. "Flynn was saying you hadn't told her anything about me," noted Holly, warningly.

Gail made a 'mm!' noise, seeming to pick up on the unease, and swallowed her drink. "Sorry. Ang, this is my wife Holly. She's also the -"

"Medical Director, I got that part," chuckled Flynn. "And I owe Betty $50. Damn."

Snorting, Gail sat next to Holly, her hand resting on Holly's thigh. "If it stops her hitting on me, I'll take it. That's just creepy."
There was a look of enlightenment on John's face. "Oh, Flynn, you have no idea why that's creepy."

Flynn and Andy shared a confused look and Flynn asked, "Are they always like this?"

Andy sipped her beer, "Pretty much." Digging out her phone, Gail pulled up a photo of Betty and showed it to Andy who yelped. "Holy fuck!"

"She looks like Gail's mother," explained Holly, providing a picture of Elaine from the concert the three of them had gone to. Elaine and Gail shared a love of jazz and, for Gail's birthday, her mother had taken them to a performance of some jazz singer they both adored.

To everyone's relief, Angie Flynn did a double take and began apologizing, profusely, to Gail. Then, being as devious as Gail could be, Flynn asked for a copy of any photo of Elaine Peck in uniform to creep Betty with. It was fun to watch the police officers blow off a little steam, even when Dov's suggestion of trivia was shot down. Flynn was nice as detectives went, and someone Holly wouldn't mind terribly to work with. Gail too seemed to like her, going as far as to be as polite as she was with her friends.

They didn't stay out too late, picking up a sleepy Vivian and taking her home before ten. It was after her shower that Holly thought to ask the niggling question. "How come you didn't tell Flynn about me?"

Gail looked confused for a moment. "Today? We were kinda busy with the case."

"Vancouver," Holly corrected, carefully. She picked up the bottle of lotion to rub in to her skin. Winter always dried her out so much.

Like she did every night, Gail reached for the lotion and squirted some into her hands before massaging it into Holly's neck and shoulders. "Oh. Because..." She trailed off, her hands stilling for a moment. "I was trying to keep work and you separate. Which is just the crap cap to my phenomenal failing this year," grumbled Gail.

Holly frowned and caught one of Gail's hands. "Hey. You did not fail. You just forgot we are a team." Her wife didn't answer, taking her hand back to gently massage Holly's neck. "Gail," she said firmly.

"We are a team, together, and I do not have to do everything on my own," she replied softly. Holly felt Gail's forehead rest on her shoulder. "I know. I really do, Holly."

Good. Holly exhaled and they sat in the quiet for a while. "You okay, honey?" Gail made a noise that neither agreed nor disagreed with her well being. She did go back to smoothing the lotion across Holly's back. It was alright not to answer, Holly knew that. She wanted to hear Gail's thoughts, but her therapist reminded her time and again that she had to be patient and let Gail come to an answer in her own speed.

Pulling on a shirt, Holly watched Gail rub the left over lotion into her own hands. "It doesn't smell the same," Gail announced. "The lotion."

"It's the same brand," Holly frowned.

"I mean on me. When you were in the hospital … It didn't smell the same." Gail looked at her hands and sniffed one. "It doesn't smell the same on me."

Holly blinked and sniffed her own hands, smelling the rich cocoa butter. Then she leaned over and sniffed Gail's hand. "It does smell different," she agreed. It didn't go quite perfectly with Gail's skin,
but she liked how Gail smelled on principle.

With a huff, Gail flopped back onto the mattress and rooted her hands in her short hair. "I'm still freaked, Holly."

Hugging her knees, Holly looked down at her wife. "I'm right here, honey," she said soothingly.

"I don't want to chase you away." That was new. Holly frowned slightly and studied what she could see of Gail's face. It was conflicted. When she didn't say anything, Gail removed one hand and looked up at her. "I love you."

Unbidden, the smile spread across her face and Holly reached over to poke Gail's leg. "I know that, goofball." Gail's return smile was a little guarded. "Why do you think I'm getting chased away? Because I'm hanging out with Lisa and Rachel more?"

"What? God no! That's a good thing. You should hang out with your friends, baby," Gail looked actually surprised. "I mean… I'm turning into my mom. Smothering, pushing you on my railroad."

Holly started to laugh softly. "Honey, if that's true then I owe Elaine an apology." Gail looked perplexed and Holly unrolled herself, lying down on top of her wife. There was a brief shuffle as Gail scootched around, letting Holly's head rest just below her boobs, hands folded under her cheek. "I know why you're being this way, Gail," she said quietly.

With a loud exhale, Gail looped her arms around Holly, hands coming to rest on her back. "Doesn't mean it's okay."

"No," agreed Holly. "But you know it and I know it, and you're not trying to make an emergency situation and run up a tree anymore. You're… you're making a really big safety net under the tree, and panicking it's got a hole in it."

Gail snorted. "I really fucking hate that metaphor."

Holly smiled. "It's very useful." The hands on her back started to caress, soothingly and comfortably.

Finally Gail whispered, "What can I do? How do I… I don't know how to relax anymore. I don't know if I ever did." Given that Gail's old relaxation was to get drunk, that made sense.

"Listen to me," Holly replied, squeezing Gail a little.

There was a long pause. "I'm listening." She sounded confused.

"I don't mean right now," smiled Holly. "I mean, listen to me when I tell you that you need to step back. Take a break." Lifting her head up, Holly suddenly found a question. "Honey, when's the last time you did something just for you? Not me, or us, or Viv or work… You know. For you?"

Gail's face scrunched up adorably. "Okay. Point." She looked up at the ceiling. "I kinda wanted to take a class at the college."

"Work," muttered Holly. She felt, more than saw, Gail's blush. "What about something not related to work? Like ice hockey or softball?"

And Gail laughed. "Okay, fine, horseback riding." Holly thought about that for a moment. Hadn't Lisa waxed rhapsodic on Gail's remarkable talent? That could be a fun thing to do. And Gail in those tight pants and boots would be a bonus for her, certainly. "I dunno, that goes back to work again, in
that cosmic fuck up that is my family-"

"You'd look sexy," Holly interrupted. "Do you think you'd like it?"

"I ... Remember liking it."

"Okay. Try that. It's better than book club, right?"

They both broke down laughing, remembering Noelle's rant about the idiots in her book club.

It did make Holly start to think about her own hobbies and how she'd not had as many since getting married and having a kid. She needed to carve out time for herself too, if she was going to stay sane. Sometimes it worried her that she hadn't freaked out after the whole stupid Luongo River Fever incident. At this point, though, Gail had just said that she expected it to happen at some later date, in a weird way, but she'd be there when it did. That was both disturbing and comforting.

The next morning, Holly announced her own idea. "Honey, I'm going to start playing hockey with Lisa again."

Gail froze, her coffee halfway to her mouth. "I'm sorry, BitchTits plays hockey?" They both froze and Gail winced. By tacit, silent, agreement, they'd decided not to call Lisa by that nickname in front of Vivian. "Whoops," muttered Gail, and she hid behind her coffee mug.

At least it was an honest mistake.

Before Holly could think up how they might explain around it, Vivian asked, "Is that why her license plate says boobs?"

Naturally her wife was no help, as Gail started giggling hysterically. "Not exactly ... It's related."

And that seemed to be answer enough. Vivian went back to her breakfast of french toast. "Does she know you call her that?" Gail managed a strangled 'yes' amidst the stifled giggles. "It's not real nice."

"Well," coughed Gail. "Lisa and I didn't get along when we first met." Under her breath, Holly noted that was an understatement, but she let Gail explain this one. "That... It isn't something you should call her outside the house."

"Can I call her BT?"

Holly pressed her lips together so tightly it hurt. "I think Lisa would actually like that," Gail said, a little too primly. She was a half-second from full out laughter.

"Okay," nodded Vivian. "Can I have more bacon?"

"Sure," grinned Gail, getting more out of the fridge. "Holly, can we go back to the part where the prissiest friend you have plays hockey."

With a sigh, Holly sipped her coffee. "She played in college."

"Lisa." Gail looked skeptical.

"Lisa." Holly shrugged.

Gail stared at her for a while, flipping the bacon. "Okay. Lisa plays hockey. Still. And you want to start playing with her? Because your marathons aren't enough. You're disgusting, Stewart." But the edges of Gail's lips were curved upwards, fighting the smile. "You're going to come home all sweaty
and nasty, with a big stick and complain to me that you're old."

A small hand tapped her elbow. Vivian whispered, "Is she really mad?"

"No," smiled Holly. "She's just being Gail."

"Can I play hockey?"

Both of Gail's hands flew into the air in disgust. "You can cook your own bacon!" As she stepped away from the stove, Holly smirked and reached out with her foot to shove her back. "I can't believe my house is filled with sporto freaks." She served Vivian the bacon, taking a bite of her own piece mournfully. "I bet you even like watching sports now too," Gail lamented.

When Gail reached for a second piece, Holly slapped her hand. "Your cholesterol will thank you," she chastised.

Faster than Holly, Gail snapped the last piece. "My cholesterol is better than yours." This was sadly accurate. "Fine. You go play your silly games. I'm going to play Mario Kart."

Bacon hanging from her mouth, Vivian announced, "Wanna be Bowser!"

"Don't talk with your mouth full, you spray food," Gail muttered, but she spun up a game quickly, leaving the breakfast mess for Holly to clean up. It was only fair. Gail had cooked.

All the teasing aside, Holly went to her first practice a week later, after work. Gail promised to come by and watch if she could, but ended up drafted to make invitations for Vivian's upcoming birthday party. It worked out alright, as Lisa's team turned out to be made up of people from all walks of life, including a detective Holly knew. At least she thought she did.

"Cruz, right?" She finally asked as they took a break.

The woman looked at her, confused. "Wait, you're Dr. Stewart. Hey, I didn't know you played."

"I needed something new," she grinned. "Holly."

"Marlo. I think we're the only law enforcement here. Everyone else is corporate."

Holly laughed. "See the one in the pink shirt? That's my friend Lisa. She's a plastic surgeon."

Marlo whistled appreciatively. "Honestly, I didn't think she could play. She looks like a lazy princess, but she totally leveled this woman last month."

"I'll have to tell Gail." Holly squirted water into her mouth. She was feeling pretty pleased, keeping up with the team, but the second half of the practice was bound to kill her.

Beside her, Marlo looked thoughtful. "Oh that's right, you married Peck. Man, I did not see that coming."

"Everyone says that," sighed Holly.

But Marlo shook her head. "You've met Peck. How is that a surprise?"

Holly pulled her helmet back on. "I guess I just see a different part of her."

The second half of practice pitted Marlo and Holly for the same position, left wing, which was interesting. The odd dig at Gail aside, Holly kind of liked Marlo. At least until the second week of
practice, when she nearly ran into Marlo and a very familiar man.

What the hell was Sam Swarek doing? Scratch that. Holly was damn sure she knew what he was doing, the way he was leaning into Marlo's personal space, but he was married. To Andy. Ostensibly, Andy was Gail's friend. Shit. Holly stalled and finally decided to drop her hockey stick and gear. The clatter had Sam jumping back, looking guilty, and Holly sang out she was sorry.

Marlo came over to help, her face a little flushed. "You okay, Holly?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I mean, my shoulder's sore where Billie checked me, but I'm fine." The dead arm had faded already, but it was a good story.

It worked enough, Marlo picking up the bag. "You know Sam, right?" She gestured at the man who looked incredibly awkward.

Holly nodded. "We've worked together a few times. Here for work?"

There was a small pause and Sam nodded. "Yeah, yeah, just work. I didn't know you played, Doc."

"Just picked it up again. Kinda needed to get out there and do things." Since October, Holly had embraced hedonism a little more. You only got one chance at it, after all. Really she was just interested in embracing life, and dragging her petulant wife along with her. "Thanks, Marlo," she smiled, letting the woman put Holly's bag in the trunk.

"No problem. See you Saturday?"

"Ah, no. I have a birthday party Sunday morning."

When Marlo looked confused, Sam spoke up. "Her daughter. She's... Six?"

"About to be seven." Holly grinned. Gail had expressed delight over the idea of cake, but Holly knew she wasn't prepared in the least. "See you Tuesday though." She watched Marlo and Sam walk off, carefully keeping their distance, and wondered what to do about the mess. They could just be good friends, or it could be what she feared it was, and she owed it to Andy to tell her.

Ugh.

Girl grenade. That was what Traci had called it. Holy crap. The party was relatively small, only eight kids and not even half their parents. So how was it so loud? It was louder than the Penny, Gail realized. How was Vivian so loud? She was never loud! She was freakishly quiet, reserved, way too mature, and yet ... there was her too quiet child, giggling as she and her classmates played Mario Kart.

Hiding in the kitchen, she pressed the heels of her hands to her eye-sockets, as if that might stem the pounding headache. "Hey." The soft voice of her wife pierced the decibel blast of seven girls and a boy named Matty (who was gay, Gail was certain, and life had not seen fit to grace her with a gaydar). Two hands gently took hold of her waist, pulling her into a semi-hug. "Traci and Noelle warned you."

Gail flinched. "Don't." She could feel Holly smiling. Thankfully Holly did not sing how their friends had, indeed, told Gail it was going to be too loud. That she should have kept it smaller. But eight was a good number, Gail thought.

It did feel better to have Holly holding her for a moment. "We should've done this Saturday," Holly
sighed. Sunday had been her idea.

"Her birthday is actually today." Gail took her hands off her face. "Painkillers. Please tell me you have something awesome I can take."

"Tylenol." Holly reached past Gail and opened the cabinet where they kept spices and painkillers. Also bandaids. Not willing to beg, Gail took the bottle and popped two tabs. "It's almost over," whispered Holly, kissing the side of Gail's neck.

She could survive. Gail sighed and nodded, going back out and getting roped into playing the winners of the races, as resident house champion. Matty's mother was startled to see Gail didn't hold back, ruthlessly destroying Olivia's run as Baby Peach with her own favorite, Luigi. The other parents said nothing, probably because the children found Gail's skill to be impressive and laudatory.

After trouncing all the children, the party wound down and finally it was quiet in the house. "Why don't you sit down, honey," suggested Holly. "Viv, we can clean up, right?"

There was a pause when Vivian was about to complain it was her birthday, but with a loud sigh she started to pick up the wrapping paper. Gail grimaced and closed her eyes, sitting down in her favorite easy chair. It felt like a second later that Holly was playing with her hair, whispering that she had to eat something besides cake.

"I just sat down," whinged Gail.

"It's dinner time, honey."

Gail squinted an eye open and looked up. Her wife was smiling. "What?" Nodding, Holly pointed at the wall clock. It had been almost two hours. "You let me sleep?"

"Both of you," sighed Holly. On the couch, Vivian was completely sacked out, hugging a pillow. "You looked so cute," she added, sitting on the arm of the the chair.

Smiling, Gail wrapped an arm around Holly's waist, pulling her into her lap. "Thank you."

Holly draped her legs over the arm of the chair, smiling back. She ran her fingers through Gail's hair again before leaning her forehead against Gail's. "How's your head?"

"Better." With Holly's lips right there, Gail couldn't resist and tilted her head for a kiss. Holly made an appreciative noise and her hold of Gail's hair tightened, keeping her in place for a longer kiss, one that was warmer, but didn't edge itself too far into grown up time.

After a moment, Holly broke away and sighed again. "Good." Her eyes were closed and her lips curved up slightly. "I'm going to make meatballs. You relax."

Gail leaned her head back. "Why are you being so nice?"

"Because I married a woman who forgot how to relax, and she finally managed to nap for the first time since New Years." Holly kissed her lips again, very chastely. "So you relax. Read a book. Play Lego." They both chuckled. "But do wake up the mini human there. She can help me cook."

Smiling, Gail let Holly up. "I want to cook," she noted, but did get up to jostle Vivian into an awake status. "Monkey, nap time's over."

The girl squeezed the pillow closer and yawned. "Can I have more cake?"
Holly laughed. "After dinner. Meatballs?"

"And baked potatoes."

Smiling, Gail nodded. "Deal." They followed Holly into the kitchen.

Vivian yawned loudly. "Today was really cool," she announced, getting the plates out and setting the table. It was her regular chore.

"I'm glad," smile Holly. She looked at the plates and added, "We can eat and watch your show tonight, honey." It was a grand offer to watch Degrassi. They'd been trying to eat at the dinner table every night, but after Christmas and Ebola, some of those things felt silly.

Surprisingly, Vivian asked, "Can we watch the cooking show where they buy mean things?"

Gail thrust her hands into the sky. "Yes! I win, Stewart!"

"Hush, it's your fault she likes Degrassi in the first place." Holly smirked.

But Vivian pointed out, "I like Doctor Who better. He's cooler. Fezzes are cool."

Holly stuck her tongue out at Gail. "Take that, Peck."

But Gail just smiled, wrapping up the potatoes and tossing them in the oven. "Which Doctor is your favorite?"

"Twelve. Capaldi's all grumpy and tells people they're stupid like you, Gail."

Narrowing her eyes, Holly looked suspicious. "Did Gail bribe you to say that?"

Vivian looked confused. "No!" Then she paused. "What's a bribe?"

"A bribe is when someone pays you with money or a gift to say or do what they want." The definition was memorized, falling off Gail's tongue easily.

"Do my presents count?" Once Holly assured Vivian they did not, the girl nodded. "No, Gail didn't bribe me." She put the plates back, trading them for the deep bowls.

As Gail supervised, Vivian sorted out the cutlery and Holly managed to actually make the meatballs round. They ate on the couch, Vivian taking Gail's easy chair, watching the show. Halfway through, Vivian asked if the purchases were bribes, prompting Gail to explain the various differences between a bribe, extortion, and contract attacks.

Vivian started drooping early and went to bed on her own, not asking for a story because she just wanted to sleep. They got another thank you for the party and, after making sure Vivian actually was in bed, Gail stretched out on the couch, putting her head in Holly's lap. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the feeling of Holly's fingers running through her hair. It didn't even bother her that Holly had changed the channel to sports.

"You have very soft hair," noted Holly, toying with Gail's cowlick. "Even with all that dye."

"I have excellent hair," Gail smiled. But Holly was tense for some reason. It was strange that she could figure out what Holly's mood was, just from the way her fingers left. "What are you thinking," she asked quietly.

It was a while before Holly answered, but Gail waited patiently. She could do that now, be patient.
"Did Sam and Marlo used to date?"

Gail blinked. "Random much?" She sighed. "They did. Actually, they were going out when we met. They broke up when she went off her meds and he got shot. It was... Well it's McSwarek, so at its best it makes our breakup look pansy ass." What a screwed up time that had been.

The soft 'huh' from Holly told Gail what she wanted to really know and Gail muttered a curse. Sam was cheating on Andy. "I don't know," muttered Holly. "Marlo's on my hockey team." She stroked her thumb across Gail's forehead and down her cheekbone.

Closing her eyes, Gail frowned. "Holly. Did you actually see anything?"

"No, but they were standing... Close. Like they were about to kiss. And Sam jumped when I dropped my bag."

Crap. "I do not want to have this conversation with Andy McNally," muttered Gail. Except she was uniquely qualified to do it. Who else had been with someone when they were in love with someone else?

The hand on her face stilled. "You know, I've always felt there were two good things that came out of you and Nick," Holly said carefully. "He made you know yourself, what you wanted out of a relationship, and he made you someone who would never hurt me like that."

Gail opened one eye. "Except that-"

"Blackstone doesn't count." Holly was rather firm. "Because that's my point. You would never do that to me. Or anyone else."

"There isn't an anyone else, Holly," Gail said seriously. She opened her other eye and craned her neck to look at her wife. "I... You're the best thing that ever happened to me, and I don't want to not be us."

Holly was smiling. "I know."

Reaching up, Gail covered Holly's hand with her own. "Nick free zone."

The smile evolved into a grin. "You know, that is the most lesbian thing about you. You're actually friends with all your exes."

"Not all. I arrested Donal," she pointed out, peevishly.

"And you still talk to him, while he's in house arrest." Damn it. Holly had a point.

Gail sighed and closed her eyes again. "Am I horrible for thinking we should wait and see?"

Holly sighed as well. "Can you vaguely threaten Sam and scare him straight?"

"Probably not," laughed Gail, disparagingly. But she'd have to see what she could do. Emotional cheating was always worse than physical. At least with that, you knew what was wrong. "I'm going to sleep on it."

Poking her shoulder, Holly nudged Gail off her lap. "Let's do that in bed, honey."

With a disgruntled sigh, Gail trudged up the stairs. "Next year we take them to some snot filled park. Or the ice skating rink."
"Do you even know how to skate," teased Holly.

"Of course not. I'm going to sit and drink cocoa with rum," Gail said loftily, and giggled when Holly slapped her butt.
The phone was ringing at one AM and Holly grimaced. Why was the phone ringing? She didn't do midnight calls anymore. It was only her phone, not Gail's. It was Vivian's ringtone. Holly was abruptly awake. She snatched the phone off the nightstand. "Vivian?"

"Mom, can you come pick me up," whispered the girl across the line. There was a sound of thick, wet tears in Vivian's voice.

"Yes, honey, I'll be right there. I promise." Holly rubbed her face, trying to get her eyes to focus better. She glanced at Gail who was still sound asleep and naked, her back turned to Holly.

Really Holly didn't want to wake up her wife, who had finally managed to fall deeply asleep. They'd had a bit of a grown up night at home, with Vivian having a sleep over at the Best's. Naturally that had ended in a bit of naked fun time, where Holly had worn Gail out. In fact, Gail was snoring softly.

And now Holly had to ruin that. She gently touched Gail's shoulder, nudging her slightly. "Gail, wake up," she whispered.


It was hard not to smile. "I'm going to pick up Viv, honey." Holly kissed Gail's shoulder.

"Wha?" Blearily Gail rolled over and focused on Holly. Normally it took Gail a while to wake up, but sometimes cop-mode kicked in. "She okay?"

"Sounds like she's having a panic attack," admitted Holly. Now wide awake, Gail sat up. "No, stay here, honey. She called me."

But Gail was out of bed. "Go get her. I'm going to be up and waiting for you both."

Taking the time to grab a super fast shower, Holly was out the door and on the road within fifteen minutes. Gail had called Noelle to explain the situation but stayed at the house to wait. Part of Holly was kicking herself. They'd known, feared, that sleepovers might be a problem. But after the trip to Vancouver, jaunts up to the cabin, and Olivia spending a night with them, Holly had hope that things would be alright.

She pulled up at the Best house and spotted Noelle in the window. The door was opened right as she got there. "Hi, thank you Noelle," sighed Holly, looking past her to spot the girl sitting hunched up on the couch.

"It's okay," promised Noelle. She knew, as did Frank, that the sleepover might not work out and why. "I told Gail it was fine. Come on in."

Holly stepped inside and, when Vivian didn't look up, squatted in front of her on the couch. "Hey, honey. Got your stuff?" Vivian nodded, still silent. Holly extended a hand and Vivian slipped her own small one in and squeezed. "Okay," she said softly, trying to do what Gail said you did with a suspect. You lower the wall to make it easier for them to move.

Thankfully Noelle didn't say anything, she just slipped out of sight into the kitchen and let Holly and Vivian stay there. Vivian was closed off, not looking at Holly at all. Cats in trees, though Holly, and she waited patiently. If Gail could be patient, she could too. So she waited, keeping her face calm.
and quiet and as gentle as she could. Patience.

Elaine had mentioned to Gail that there were only two things you ever felt when you were a parent: guilt and terror. This must be the guilt. Knowing it might be years, if ever, before Vivian felt safe and whole. Knowing some of it was her fault. Finally, after a few minutes and just as Holly's legs were starting to burn, Vivian slid off the couch and stood up. She was silent all the way to the car, head down. Holly didn't bother with her coat, just carried the coat and bag out to the car with Noelle holding Vivian's sleeping bag.

She buckled in Vivian first, tossing the bags in the back seat. "Holly, if you or Gail need anything..." Noelle trailed off.

"Thanks," Holly smiled sincerely and hugged Noelle before texting Gail that they were heading home. At the early hour, the roads were empty, but Holly drove slowly and sedately. Vivian looked out the window the whole time, her face shuttered and looking just like it had when she'd first arrived in their lives. The face tore at Holly's heart, making her want to do anything to make Vivian smile.

Pulling up in the garage, she heard movement and Holly glanced in the mirror. Vivian wasn't looking at her, but she spoke. "Mom?"

Hearing that startled her. The use of 'Mom' was still precious. Like Gail's real smiles. "Yes?"

"I don't want to go inside," said the child, quietly.

Holly blinked and parked the car, shutting off the engine. "Do you want to go somewhere else?" Vivian shook her head. "Okay. Do you want to sleep out here?" Again the head shook. "Honey," sighed Holly. She turned around and looked at Vivian directly. "It's okay."

Now Vivian looked at her. It was a slightly droll look. She was really too grown up for seven. "It's not," muttered Vivian, looking down again.

With a sigh, Holly got out of her seat and texted Gail surreptitiously, letting her know they were talking in the garage. Points for the smart watches. Then she opened the back seat and scooted in next to Vivian. "Okay. Try me."

Vivian plucked at the padding on the booster seat's arm. She hadn't unbuckled herself, though she knew how to, and had before. If it wasn't for her height, Vivian would be just fine in a regular seat already. "Gail's gonna be mad."

Well, that was not what Holly expected to hear. "Why would she be mad?"

Rubbing her face- no, no she was rubbing her eyes. Tears. Vivian sighed. "Cause I can't sleep over."

"Oh, honey, no," sighed Holly, reaching over to take Vivian's hand. "She won't."

She rubbed her eyes again. "But I can't do it."

"It's okay, Vivian." Holly reached over and unclipped the seat belt. Sniffling, Vivian moved into Holly's arms, crying softly. "It's okay, honey. It's okay. You don't ever have to sleep over and we still love you and you didn't disappoint us at all."

She carefully backed out of the car, holding Vivian close, and carried her into the house. They could deal with the clothes and stuff later. Vivian hid her face against Holly's shoulder, sniffing quietly.

Gail was standing in the kitchen with hot cocoa on the stove. The good stuff by the smell. "Hey,"
offered Gail, quietly. Her hair was sticking up a little, and she had a robe on. Clearly there had been a shower.

"Hi," smiled Holly, sitting on a stool and settling Vivian in her lap. "Is there one for me?"

"Of course." Gail glanced at Vivian, who was still hiding her face. She collected three mugs and the mini marshmallows, filling them up and decorating. "Here you go." Two mugs went down and Gail went back for her own.

Holly gently stroked Vivian's hair, like she remembered her mother doing when she was small and scared during a storm or on a camping trip or a hundred other kid things. After a little while Vivian half turned, still a bit of a turtle, and picked up her mug. The three of sat there, sipping cocoa, until Vivian muttered a sorry to Gail.

That surprised Gail. "What on earth for?"

"Not sleepin' over." Vivian mumbled and looked into her mug.

Both of Gail's eyebrows lifted. She seemed to catch on faster than Holly did, but then again, it was a little closer to home for her. "The first time I slept over at Holly's, I had a real bad nightmare and scared her." That actually brought Vivian's head up. "I couldn't tell her why for a real long time," admitted Gail.

Looking up at Holly for confirmation, Vivian was confused. "What did she tell you?"

"Nothing, really. But she was pretty dopey. She burnt her wrist at work and spent the night." Holly sipped her cocoa.

"Holly's trying to find the right way to say I was high as a kite on painkillers."

Vivian scrunched her face up. "Like drunk?"

"Painkillers ... So kind of, yeah." Gail smiled and put her cup down. "I was embarrassed to tell her for a long time. I still don't tell a lot of people. I didn't tell her about Perik for a long time."

"But you guys are in love," said Vivian, confused.

Oh. Timeframes. "We were just friends then, honey," explained Holly. "She didn't tell me till after we were dating."

Wrapping both hands around her mug, Vivian's expression turned closed again. "I didn't sleep." Holly glanced at Gail, resting her free hand on Vivian's back.

Gail tilted her head. "You don't have to tell us anything."

"Did I really see my dad dead?" Vivian's voice was so small, so scared, Holly wasn't sure she'd actually heard that.

Swallowing visibly, Gail nodded. "You did." She had read the full report, showing it to Holly days before Vivian had arrived. Vivian had walked in the back of her house and found her father's body. She didn't seem to remember much of it after that, which the therapist said was common due to trauma. Gail had nodded, understanding that far more viscerally than Holly ever would. The closest Holly got was what had happened to poor Andrea, and she'd seen it coming.

Vivian took a deep breath. "I was afraid to sleep. I didn't want to come home to you guys dead."
Oh. Holly put her mug down and hugged Vivian close. "Honey." Gail was there in a moment, hugging both of them. They stayed there as a unit until the cocoa went cold and Vivian started to droop. All the crying and tension wore her out, clearly,

"I think it's time to get some sleep, Monkey," suggested Gail, stroking Vivian's head.

When Vivian nodded, Holly picked her up. She wasn't sure where to take her, though, and looked at Gail, lost. I changed the sheets, signed Gail, her hands moving slowly enough for Holly to read certainly. Holly nodded and went upstairs to their room, Gail following.

They clambered into bed, Vivian was absolutely exhausted and dropped off within moments. Gail gently caressed Vivian's hair, watching her sleep. "Do you think she's going to be okay?" Holly kept her voice a low whisper.

"Baby, I ask that about myself every day," sighed Gail. They both glanced at the nightlight.

She wondered how it felt, to live with that fear every day. To have pain that close to you that you could never shake it loose. The worst Holly had ever felt was when she was in the tent, wondering if she had a virus that would kill her in a painful, disgusting, way and leave Gail alone. But every day, her wife got up and put on a badge and went out into a city who generally hated her, where people would shoot at her, and it didn't matter if Gail was afraid.

Holly studied Gail's face carefully. Her wife was more worried about the small human in their bed. She didn't, outwardly, seem too concerned about her own pain. It was always accepted that her life would be full of pain and death. Right now, Vivian's face was scrunched into a deep, furrowing frown.

Fighting the worry, Holly asked the question haunting her at the moment. "What if it doesn't ever go away? What if she's always afraid?"

"Then it doesn't." Gail tugged the comforter up higher, shifting in the bed. "We'll figure out how to work with it, Holly."

"You sound so optimistic."

Gail huffed and curled up under the blankets. "Well. We have to. There isn't another option, baby. Even if she lives at home forever, and goes to a local college, and has to take care of us in our old age."

There was an edge to Gail's voice, as quiet as it was, that made Holly remember what Vivian had said in the car. "Viv worried you'd be mad."

"I'm not," whispered Gail, her voice still tight. "Not at her. I'm mad at what happened to her and I hate that I can't just make it better."

Ah, that was something she could understand. Holly took off her glasses and turned off the lights. Gail was mad, but she'd never let Vivian see it, which was good. Reaching over Vivian, Holly ran her fingers through Gail's forelock, brushing it back. Even in the mostly dark, she could see the blue eyes looking at her, curiously. "I'm here," she said quietly.

She watched Gail struggled to come up with something to say, and finally the blonde exhaled. "Thank you."

The smell of alcohol was making Gail a little dizzy. "Christ, that's a ripe bagosse," Nick muttered.
"Good swish," agreed Chloe.

"Fine shine," replied Nick.

Chloe smirked, "Lush."

No, she was wrong. The conversation between Nick and Chloe was making her dizzy. Gail pinched the bridge of her nose. She was too tired for this shit. Neither she nor Vivian had slept well recently and while Gail could function well on very little sleep, it didn't mean she liked the experience. Being called at two in the damn morning, after a week and a half of short nights, made her more irritable than normal. Being at a scene where only Nick and Chloe were in attendance was like a nightmare.

John cleared his throat. "Collins. You might want to stop that before my partner figures out how to dispose of your body without getting caught."

"Thanks, Simmons," growled Gail. "Chloe what the hell are you wearing?"

The perky red-head was in torn, scruffy jeans, a battered army jacket, and the ugliest, puffiest, hat Gail had ever seen. And her hair was nearly in chunky dreadlocks. "I was undercover until ..." Chloe paused and her face fell.

What the hell had Gail missed? She turned and took in the room. The still had been dented, the fire was out, and there was blood. And Nick had no partner. Gail blinked and stared at Nick. She knew how Oliver scheduled people on the night shift. It was always two experienced cops. Looking at Nick's face, she recognized that worry. "Andy?"

"She's fine," insisted Nick. And he explained the drama, which was surprisingly straight forward. They'd been called in on a domestic and found Chloe, undercover, trying to stop a fight between the woman who ran the moonshine crew and her husband. The husband pulled a knife out mid-squabble, killed with wife and nailed Andy with it, coming right up under the vest. Not that a vest did all that much against a knife.

And they'd called in Major Crimes because of the moonshine and the dead rum runner. Awesome. "Jesus," she grimaced and rubbed her face again. "Okay, Price, is your cover blown?"

"Kaboom," sighed Chloe. "Unless the husband ends up in jail for good, I guess. But... Andy." When Chloe waved her hands, Gail saw the blood that didn't match the dead woman on the floor. The pattern was wrong. Damn it, Holly was rubbing off on her.

There was nothing Gail could do about Andy at the moment. "Where's the weapon?"

"With Andy. It was a fish cleaning knife, we didn't want to take it out."

"A fish knife?" She actually felt sick twice over. The asshole was gutting her friend! Wait. Gutting? "Wait... John, what did Rodney say?"

Her partner blinked. "A hook shaped tip. You don't think..."

Gail pulled her phone out, calling Rodney directly and demanding he send his best person, besides himself, to meet McNally at the hospital. To her surprise, this seemed to be the first Rodney had heard of a case, and promised to be on scene as soon as possible. The moonshine could be stolen guns and gangs, hopefully, with a little more oomph than the whole volume and cross-territory tracking they'd been planning to use. For two months Gail and John had struggled to find any connections with a strange attack by the Humber River. The knife clicked now.
"Price, tell me everything you know about the guy," demanded John, his notebook out.

While John handled that, Gail took in the room and walked the perimeter. They’d beaten the forensics team there, which wasn’t a huge shock at that hour. Rodney had promised he’d be fast, probably unwilling to incur The Wrath of Peck. Damn it... She couldn't even blame Holly for knowing all about that stupid Star Trek movie.

Squatting by the body, Gail made sure not to step in the blood trail. "Nice cut," she muttered. It was horrible and jagged and definitely painful. "Nick, come here." The man was obedient and stood where Gail placed him. "So the husband... Thrust and hook the, ah, the trachea?" She mimed the actions out on Nick. "Yank, and that's when McNally comes up, on his right side." Gail considered the room and the blood drops and swung her right arm back. "Show me where McNally was."

Nick nodded and moved to grab Gail's right wrist. "She grabbed with her left hand, right hand on her gun. Then his hand just went forward."

Looking at their position, Gail nodded. "Pull my arm to the side." When Nick did, Gail used the momentum to step in and her fist thumped Nick at belt level. "That's how," she grumbled. "Why didn't he pull it out?"

"I got between them. Grabbed his wrist with both hands, pressed ..." Nick changed his hold on Gail's wrist and dug his thumb into the pressure point on the inside.

"Ugh, I hate when you do that!" She snatched her hand back and rubbed it. "I need my fingers, thanks."

Nick turned pink and Gail smirked a little. She hadn't meant to imply sex but it was still funny. "Sorry," he muttered. "But I did that."

Nodding, Gail walked Nick through the rest of the incident, making notes. "Okay, so.. What's got you looking like a kicked puppy?"

"This .. I feel like I should be with Andy," he grumbled.

His partner, but there was still more. Gail sighed. "Nick, she picked Sam." It was impossible to keep the distaste out of her voice. But she saw the look on Nick's face and abruptly knew what it was. Nick was still in love with Andy. Part of her was relieved. Knowing the man she'd cared for was still in love with the woman who broke them up did make her feel better. For her at least. It was shitty for Nick.

"She's my partner," Nick said adamantly. When Gail arched an eyebrow, he sighed. "That's why I'm not at the hospital."

After a moment, Gail looked away. "I'm sorry," she said sincerely. Everyone deserved happiness, even idiots like Nick who fell in love with the wrong girls. "Wait..." Gail frowned. "EMT and another set of cops got here before the lab?"

Nick blinked a few times. "Um. Yes."

Shit. Gail pulled her phone out and called dispatch to verify her fears. No one had properly notified the fucking lab. Son of a bitch. She winced and dialed a number she didn't want to bother at this hour. "Whazwron?" Holly slurred her words. "Where... Gail?"

"I got called on a case. Do you know who Rodney reports to right now?"
"What?" Holly's language skills were coming back quickly. She rattled off a name and number. Jenkins. Holly's nemesis, in a manner of thinking. "What's going on?"

Gail glanced around. "A clusterfuck. I've got a dead body, a stabbed cop, and Rodney didn't even know. And I know dispatch would have called him, but... The rota wasn't listed right."

Across the wire, Holly groaned. "I'll make some calls." She paused, "Gail it's three in the morning."

"Trust me," groused Gail, bitterly. "I know." The abrupt laugh on the phone meant her complaint seemed to defuse Holly's annoyance. "I wouldn't've called you, but..."

"No, no, you're right. How long have you been waiting?"

Gail checked her watch. "I called Rodney twenty-three minutes ago."

"He'll be there soon," promised Holly, yawning. "Who got stabbed?" When Gail didn't answer right away, Holly's voice lowered. "Gail."

"Andy, and it's not that bad. According to Nick."

"Jesus," grumbled Holly. "She can't catch a break." When Holly yawned again, Gail suggested she go back to sleep. "Wish I could, you made me brain." But Holly didn't sound annoyed.

Conscious of Nick's presence, Gail murmured her apologies and endearments as quietly as possible. As Holly predicted, Rodney arrived minutes later, looking flustered and apologetic. He swore dispatch hadn't called him, or the right pager, and he had no idea why but... "Is that a trachea?"

Gail wanted to fist pump for recognizing it. "Yep," she grinned. "Belongs to that woman. Oh and we need a pathogen scan on her blood ASAP. The same knife was used to try and gut Officer McNally."

The word 'gut' caught Rodney's attention, "Hey! That guy on the river!"

"Fishing knife," agreed Gail, sharing a smile with the pathologist.

Nearly a full day of work followed, but Gail finished up with enough time to pick up Vivian. That proved fortuitous, when Holly ended up in meetings all day about the nightmare that had been trying to get the right forensics crew to Gail's scene. It was not the first time a fuck up like that had occurred, Holly told her. Jenkins was likely going to be asked to step down due to incompetence, which would leave a power vacuum.

At four, Gail pulled up at the school and grinned as Vivian came right out. Getting her a phone had made everyone's lives easier and made Vivian feel safer, which was the most important part. Being able to warn her about last minute pick-up changes gave Vivian a sense of comfort. She was a kid who liked information.

"Hi, Mom," sighed Vivian, tossing her bag in and climbing into her seat.

Outstanding. A grumpy kid when she was hoping to catch a nap before Holly came home. No rest for the weary, realized Gail. "Buckle up, Monkey," instructed Gail, watching her daughter close the car door and buckle into her car booster seat.

"Is Mom- is Holly working on your case too?"

"No. Not the case part. Holly's got the stupid people part." Accepting that, Vivian looked out the
side window as they drove home. "So dinner's on us, kiddo. Whaddaya think? Lamb chops? Homemade pizza?"

She caught Vivian's thoughtful look in the mirror and waited. "Can you make fajitas?"

Gail huh'ed and tilted her head. "I haven't, but I bet we can." For whatever reason, Holly had a tortilla press when Gail met her. Not that Holly didn't know how to cook, she just wasn't particularly inventive or diverse when it came to cooking. Baking was a different story. Holly loved baking and actually made different kinds of bread, complete with braiding. Things Gail didn't have the temperament for.

They swung by the store to pick up fajita makings, Gail checking a recipe on her phone to make sure they had everything they needed. Sometimes she didn't mind that Elaine had drilled memory skills into her, as she could know for certain exactly what spices were in the cabinets, as well as how much flour and oil they had. When Vivian suggested a spice mix, Gail insisted on making it from scratch, promising it would be more fun that way.

Holly rolled in as they started cooking the beef strips in the cast iron pan. "How on earth are you still awake, Gail?"

"Hello to you too, sunshine," muttered Gail. But she turned her cheek so Holly could kiss it in greeting. "You don't have to have fajitas."

Looking pained, Holly backpedaled. "I'm just impressed how you are always so functional on such little sleep."

"My parents made me do two weeks of school on three hours a night. After that, exams were a cakewalk." Gail shrugged. She didn't particularly like it, but what choice did she have?

Holly tilted her head. "How about I cook and you supervise?"

So tempting. "I'll cook, we'll eat, and you're gonna let me sleep on the couch after dinner." Because the trick was to keep moving. As soon as you stopped, it was all over.

"Well. I still think you should get a hobby," sighed Holly, easing onto a stool.

Gail grimaced. "I did say riding, didn't I?"

"You did. Changed your mind?"

She had. Gail stirred the onions, watching them cook. "It ... You have fun, right? Playing hockey?" She'd watched Holly in a few games and, she had to admit, was impressed at the ferocity and hard hits. It was a surprising turn on to see her wife send a larger woman flying with just a hip-check. Gail and Vivian had caught an inter-squad game and seen Holly duck under a hit from Lisa, flipping BitchTits over. It was awesome. Gail asked Dov to make a gif of it so she could email it to everyone she knew.

"I do," smiled Holly, a little goofily.

"I think it might be too ... Peckish."


Pulling up a stool, Vivian asked, "How come Gail needs a hobby?"
Reaching over, Holly held the stool steady while Vivian climbed in. "Because her head gets busy and she can't sleep sometimes." Gail sighed and lifted her beer to salute Holly's explanation.

That didn't make sense to the child, who asked reasonably, "How can your head be busy?"

"It means I keep thinking about stuff and I can't relax."

Vivian was quiet for a while, processing that. "You should do cooking."

Her wife oohed and Gail blinked and looked at her child. Cooking? "That's a good idea," agreed Holly. "You like food. You like cooking. You could totally take a cooking class."

Looking from her daughter to her wife, Gail felt confused. "Me? Cook?"

"You like it," insisted Holly.

"I like eating," countered Gail, frowning.

Holly hummed. "Okay, why didn't your roommates know you can cook?"

"I ... Dov cooked. Or we ate out. I don't know..." She paused. "Oh. Well. I didn't cook for them."

Gail knew how to cook out of necessity. By the time Steve moved out, her parents were so busy they hardly had time to cook. And unlike the Armstrongs or the rich Pecks, they didn't had hired help. Gail was competent at cooking and cleaning because there was no other option.

Maybe she'd just been rebelling while she lived at the frat house.

"Think about it," asked Holly, giving her that smile that made Gail do stupid things like TosCon.

"Fine, fine. Eat and then let me sleep on your lap."

The next day, she stopped at the hospital to see Andy. Technically she had case questions, but the truth was she did worry about her friend. "Took you long enough to show up," grumbled Andy, propped up on the bed.

"Hospitals are gross," Gail noted and held out a small box. "Donut?"

Andy startled. "You're offering me a donut? Am I dying?"

"You don't have to eat it." But Andy was already reaching out a hand. "How's it feel?" She'd gotten the report that morning on the damage and made Holly explain what it all meant. Andy was damn lucky. The hook on the knife could have gutted her, literally ripping her insides outside.

Shrugging, and wincing, Andy broke the donut apart. "It's painful. And it sucks."

Gail yawned and sat down. "I've never been stabbed."

"I don't recommend it," grumbled McNally. "How come you look so beat?"

"Burning the candle at both ends." Gail sipped her coffee. "Speaking of which, I'm here officially."

Andy snorted. "I knew a Peck wouldn't visit me out of the goodness of her heart." There was no venom in her words and Gail smiled. "But you brought me a donut, so I won't throw my bedpan at you." As soon as she made the crack, Andy looked horrified.

But Gail laughed. "You forgot the lamp."
"The ... Lamp?"

"I threw a lamp at Luke. That was when Oliver had to hold me back." She shrugged. Now, seven years and change later, it felt easier. More understandable.

Looking introspective, Andy leaned back. "When Luke was shot... Do you remember that?"
Nodding, Gail wasn't sure where this was going. She mostly remembered Luke hadn't properly secured his gun. "I visited him in the hospital. A lot." Gail nodded again. "Sam hasn't come by."

Crap. Gail was not ready for this. "How long was he in for when he was shot? Sam, I mean."

"Three weeks." Andy eyed Gail, confused. "Where were you when that was going on?"

"Discovering lesbianism," remarked Gail and Andy laughed, grabbing her stomach. "It was way more fun."

"Oh don't make me laugh." Andy groaned and leaned back. "Shit that hurts."

Gail smiled and sipped her coffee. "You should stay with Traci. When you get out. She'll pamper you way more than Sam would."

Andy sighed loudly and looked at Gail. "Yeah. I guess." She plucked at the blanket. "You know my first thought? When I was looking up at Nick with the knife?" Obediently, Gail shook her head. "I thought, what if I can't have kids."

Wondering if Andy had seen the other woman with her ripped out trachea, Gail cleared her throat. "Holly read your med report. She said you're fine, but you're going to have a wicked scar." Gail paused. "You know, Holly has a friend in plastics. We could hook you up?" Surely knowing BitchTits had to have some advantages.

The patrol office leaned back and sighed. "I could rock a scar."

Gail smiled. "Yeah, you could. Andy McNally's testament to her own stupidity."

And Andy laughed. She laughed more when Gail noted that Holly's plastics friend specialized in boob jobs, and maybe Andy could get a bump in cup size.

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When Holly got home, Steve was on her couch looking annoyed and Gail was sleeping in her easy chair. "Hello, Steven," she murmured, very confused.


Holly frowned. "If she's really out, nothing will wake her up." Running her fingers through Gail's short hair, Holly surreptitiously checked her wife's temperature. No fever, so this was garden variety exhaustion. "Hand me the afghan, will you?"

Complying, Steve passed it over and watched Holly carefully cover up Gail. "She'd hurt me if I tried that," he mused.

"So you let her sleep sitting up?"

"We were talking about stuff. McNally's been living at my place for the last month."

Holly hesitated. She knew why. They'd told Traci what had happened at hockey practice, but there had been no repeat. "She's still there?"
Grunting, Steve slouched more. "Seriously, how the hell did Gail live with her?"

"I think it was more sleeping on Andy's couch," mused Holly. "Do you know where my daughter is?"

"At the park with the gang, and Andy." The gang was indeed the best way to describe the little groups. Winnie, Leo, and Sophie made up the older and larger group, while Olivia and Vivian the smaller. The Ivs, as Gail teased them, were only two months apart, and both in the same grade. Both were smart enough to be a grade ahead, but Vivian had some socialization issues and Olivia's parents didn't want to pressure her. It worked out well for them.

Holly looked at her phone. It was almost six, which meant they'd be stopping by soon. If Gail was actually that tired, Holly was inclined to let her rest, but Gail kept trying to convince her body to abide by the rhythm of normal life. "How long has she been out?"

Shrugging, Steve stood up. "At least half an hour. You know, she used to have this trick where she could fake sleep. Our parents had her checked for a sleep disease."

"I know," smiled Holly. "She's really asleep this time, though." It had taken a while for Holly to master the art of knowing if her wife was asleep or just lying still. This was asleep. "She hasn't been sleeping well."

The other Peck snorted. "She's never slept well. I think she lived on four hours a night since she was born." He pulled his suit jacket back on. "When she was a baby, she didn't howl in the middle of the night, she just got up and stared."

That was a little creepy. "You remember her as a baby?"

"Well ... I was almost eight. So yes."

Holly wondered how true that was. Vivian had been six when her parents died, and now at seven didn't seem to remember a whole lot. She was probably blocking it out. "Wait, how'd you know she stared?"

"We shared a room," explained Steve. "This was before we moved to the big house. Did you ever see that?"

"Once. I went with Gail to clean out her room."

Steve nodded. "We moved there when she was like... two. Before that, we had this nice place, I think Mom liked it more. But Garbage Pail there used to throw her toys at me to wake me up so I'd get her out of her crib."

Holly grinned at that mental image. Baby Gail was adorable and grumpy. She'd seen the photos. "Time ago, huh?"

He grinned back. "A million years."

"The big double fours is coming up," she teased Steve. "Any plans?"

When Gail had turned 30, Steve made a fuss welcoming her to the third decade since it was the brief time they were in the same decade. When she turned 33, he'd thrown a party at the Penny, much to her annoyance. His birthday was the end of the same month as Holly's, with his and Traci's wedding anniversary jammed in between Holly's birthday and his own. "I should ask her to cook something. Small..." He tilted her head. "She's getting really good at it."
"She needed a hobby," explained Holly. "Do you ever thing we shoved too much into May and June? Two weddings and two birthdays?"

Steve grinned. "It's a fun time. A party every other week!"

"Shut up, Steve," groaned Gail. Holly glanced down and saw the snarly expression of her detective. "Jesus you're loud." Gail's eyes were still closed.

Absently Holly ran her fingers through Gail's hair again. It was soothing for both of them. "Sorry," she murmured to her wife.

On the other hand, Steve was noisy. "Now that your babysitter's home, I can go."

"Might want to wait for your wife," yawned Gail. She made no move to get up or open her eyes.

Steve grunted and pulled out his phone. "Shut up, Gail."

With surprisingly little rancor, Gail replied, "My house." She yawned again and stretched her neck up, tilting her head towards Holly's hand. "Should I cook for the asshole's birthday?"

"Depends on what present you bought him," smiled Holly. When Gail made a frustrated noise, Holly grinned more and kissed her forehead. "Kid'll be home soon. Go nap upstairs?"

"Nah, I'll get up," sighed Gail, stretching her arms up over her head.

It wasn't long before the kids arrived. Only Olivia stayed for dinner, since Frank was stuck on a case and Noelle was working the night shift. Gail ended up making fried chicken, which was appreciated by all, and even had enough for Frank to steal some when he picked up Olivia at eight. Summer schedules meant the parent group in Fifteen often shared the load with each other. The burden still was heavier on Holly and Gail, since Vivian didn't do sleepovers.

Thankfully Olivia hadn't asked. Her parents were cops and, when Noelle told her that Viv's parents picked her up early, she'd only asked if Gail was okay. For their part, they didn't make much of the incident. The therapist suggested just letting Vivian feel like she *could* talk about it, which they did, but not to pressure her. They knew why she was having issues, and she knew.

Of course there was also the whole part where her friends now called her Viv, and she called Olivia Liv, and Holly was fairly certain there was something going on with their growing independence. Gail thought it was natural and lamented that there really wasn't a good way to shorten her name. Remembering a long ago conversation, Holly drawled that she loved Gail's name and won an adorable blush.

Their anniversary was spent out. Izzy Shaw babysat, which went much better for Vivian than sleeping over at someone else's. Privately, Holly wasn't sure there was much sleeping, but that was alright. She and Gail didn't sleep much either, going to a dinner and concert and then a hotel for the night. The hotel was fun, of course, especially the part where they soaked in a hot tub for hours after, and slept the sleep of not having a kid in the next room. Which didn't involve sleeping. They took the late checkout and, giggling like college co-eds, barely made it out on time.

Her 41st birthday was low key. Gail invited a few people over and grilled, prompting Holly to tell her friends that Gail was taking a cooking class. While Gail had been embarrassed, everyone started asking for details about the food and did that mean Gail had made all of it. The detective did not take the compliments graciously, making snide remarks at some of the more obvious questions. But she had indeed cooked everything.
Instead of presents this year, Holly asked for people to donate to a foster children organization for charity, which officially guilted everyone into doing just that. She let Gail enjoy the evil moment, gloating over each person who hadn't considered charity. And then Holly told everyone Gail had baked the cake. From scratch.

The only thing she didn't like about the cooking classes were the pastry components. While most of cooking relied on ingredients and combinations and instinct, baking was a precision sport. The only thing Gail cared for being precise on was her shooting, and that was just because she'd had it drilled into her for her entire life.

She was also an anomaly in the cooking class. Somehow Holly had gotten her into a class filled with single divorced mothers. After the first month, Gail asked if Holly would bail her out if she punched them. The second month improved, weirdly, because she showed up after court and everyone asked if she was dressed up for a date. After explaining she was a detective and insisting she was the dress sort for a date, Gail found herself forced to show pictures of herself and, by extension, Holly out at a show.

Suddenly the 'married to a doctor' lesbian detective with a kid was popular and everyone wanted to talk to her about her glamorous life. It was confusing as hell. But it meant that when she fucked up baking, they were happy to help her out and Gail had rocked the birthday cake for Holly. She thanked the moms by offering to take anyone who was interested to the range.

It was too bad Oliver was married, as this would have been a great way to introduce him to a million moms. Instead, she invited Traci along, which meant Andy came, and at that point Gail figured she may as well ask Chloe and Noelle (who announced it was better than book club). The moms were delighted at the range, joking about how they wanted to send their ex-husbands their paper targets, and demanded to be allowed to buy the police drinks after.

They did not go to the Penny as that would have been too much for their reputations. Instead they went to a pub near the range and had beers and wings. The moms were strangely fun and nice, once they got over being high school snippy about the blue collar cops. And really that didn't take long since they'd actually talked to Gail before, learning about her job.

While she'd not admit it to anyone but Holly, Gail appreciated seeing what 'normal' parents were like. People with normal, 9 to 5 type jobs, who worried about traffic and soccer and annuities.

"Okay, I'll bite," laughed Holly, after Gail told her the saga of a classmate whose sister was a professional performance artist while they ate her donut homework. "Why do you like these new friends of yours?"

"First," Gail said firmly, "they are not my friends. My friends are Traci and John and Rachel and Dov and Chris and that woman on the softball team who plays worse than I do-"

"Mae."

"Right, Mae. And Nick and Ollie. People like that-"

Holly covered her mouth, "What about Andy?"

Throwing her hands up, Gail snarled without any bite. "Girl Guide's my friend when it's convenient-

"Yes, but she went with you and the moms drinking-"
Gail spluttered. "Stop cutting me off!" And Holly stopped, grinning. "Thank you!" With a deep breath, she carried on. "They are not my friends. They're people I know and take a class with and remind me why I'm happy being a cop and being married to you."

There was a long silence from Holly, her lips curved into an amused smile. "So you like them because they make your life look good?" When Gail nodded, Holly beamed. "Okay. A good comparison then." She kissed Gail's nose. "But if you're going to keep baking like this, you're going to have to go to the gym more."

Rolling her eyes, Gail took the plate away from Holly. "Just for that, no more for you, Stewart!"
Dov (July)

Being late was never something Holly enjoyed. "Sorry, traffic was insane."

Her therapist smiled and put a glass of water on the table. "It's fine. Catch your breath." Nodding, Holly fell into the seat. She exhaled loudly and took the water glass. "Doing alright?"

"A little hectic," admitted Holly, sipping the water. "But actually pretty good. School's out, and summer school is a little bit like playing recess all day."

"Vivian must enjoy that."

"She has the same problem Gail does," Holly grimaced. "Forgets how to turn off and have fun."

The therapist nodded. "Still a little stressful for you?" Holly nodded again and leaned back. "Finding a hobby, outside of work, can be very hard when you enjoy your work." They shared a smile. "But you? You're holding up alright?"

Holly bobbed her head back and forth. "I think so. It's been a little tough this last year." The year had been too tight and hectic and ... Too many things shoved into twelve months. "I could use a year where nothing insane happens."

Smiling, the therapist made a note of something. "I think most of us agree with that sentiment. How are things with Gail?"

"Good." That had certainly been a rocky year. " Mostly good. It's up and down most of the time. Right now it's up. She's relaxed. Happy, I think." For the most part, summer was easier for Gail. The sunshine and getting outside seemed to have a direct improvement in her mood. Their life went from birthday to Christmas to birthday to the anniversary of Perik to birthday to wedding anniversary. It rarely gave them a chance to just stop and relax until summer.

"Will she be on the float again this year?"

"She will," grinned Holly. "She's trying to convince me and Vivian to go on it with her." The convincing had already been done, at least to Holly. She was drawing it out a little to tease her wife. The therapist smiled, clearly seeing that as well.

"Still sleeping with the nightlight?"

Holly nodded. They had tried, a few times over the years, to sleep without the nightlight on, but every morning Holly had woken up to find it plugged back in. "Sometimes I don't know if we're making any progress," admitted Holly. "Viv seems to be getting better every day."

"She's also seven, Holly," pointed out the therapist. "Their capacity to rebound and heal is much greater than an adult's. Has she gotten any better about sleepovers or your friend... Sam?"

Flinching, Holly shook her head. "No, and Sam may be cheating on his wife." They had not yet told anyone besides Traci. Holly had dropped a few hints to Marlo, about how Vivian liked Sam's dog, to make sure she knew that Holly knew who Sam was, and what was up. But since that time, Sam had not shown up and Marlo... Had been Marlo. A little standoffish.

At her therapist's prodding, Holly explained the whole story. "That must be uncomfortable." The woman already knew about the whole Andy/Nick/Gail saga, so she knew how strange the situation
was. "Do you feel obligated to tell Andy?"

"I don't know." Holly rolled the glass in her hands. "I don't even know if Sam did anything." Gail had strong opinions about emotional cheating, but even she'd been torn on how to handle this one. "Traci's watching Sam at work so ... I guess maybe nothing if it was just a moment."

"What if it was Gail?"

Holly blinked. "What?"

"What if Gail had a moment? With Nick."

"She won't," Holly said firmly. As someone who had been abandoned and dumped and emotionally cheated on, Gail was probably the last person in the universe who would ever do that.

"But if she did? Think back to when you two were just dating and broke up. Did you ever think she'd go back to men?"

Hesitating, Holly nodded slowly. She had harbored that fear. You couldn't not have that fear with her track record. "Okay. Yeah, maybe a little."

"How would you feel if Gail slipped and was looking at Nick, or Chris, like Sam looked at Marlo?"

Holly tossed the emotions around in her head. "I... Would be really pissed off." Right now, when Gail looked at Nick or Chris, it was like how she looked at Dov or Steve. She loved them dearly, as family, but not like she looked at Holly. If Gail looked at Nick like that, Nick to whom she'd been engaged, it would crush her. "I ... We should tell her. I'd want to know. But ... God, this is going to hurt her so much." Her eyes watered and Holly realized how much this would destroy Andy.

The box of Kleenex slid over. "You're a doctor," noted her therapist. "Sometimes it has to hurt."

"They won't make it," noted Holly, blowing her nose. "Andy... She won't stay with him. Not after this." Sam had already been so distant when Andy had been stabbed, this would end it entirely.

"Would you?"

"Maybe," she sighed. "Gail and I ... We're different. We fight for each other. I'm not leaving her unless she wants me to." Holly looked down at her hands. "I'm done trying to run when I'm afraid or scared. I'm not afraid of Gail hurting me."

Because Gail had hurt her, and would hurt her again. And she had hurt Gail more than once, and she would do it again. Love, life wasn't easy or simple or a fairy tale. She'd been hurt and would be hurt and would hurt and it sucked, but fighting for them as a unit meant pushing through the fights. Talking and letting things remain a disagreement were hard, but it was a hard she'd work through.

Holly sighed. "Not that I like it," she added absently.

"No one really does," noted her therapist.

Slouching in her seat, Holly closed her eyes. "Honestly, if it was Gail, I think it'd hurt more if she went back to Nick more than if she fell for... I don't know, Lisa."

"How many of your exes went back to men?"

"Six. Maybe seven. I haven't talked to Julie in years." Holly sighed. "That scared me a lot when we broke up."

"Six. Maybe seven. I haven't talked to Julie in years." Holly sighed. "That scared me a lot when we broke up."
"Does it scare you now?"

Smiling softly, Holly shook her head. The way Gail looked at her, and only her, made her melt. "Not at all. She won't cheat on me. There's one good thing about Gail having her heart stomped on so many times, I guess."

"That doesn't really mean you're not scared about her leaving you for men."

"No," agreed Holly. "But I just... I know she won't. I'm just not afraid of it anymore."

She couldn't explain why she wasn't afraid of those things anymore. She wasn't even afraid of Gail getting hurt at work. Not that Holly wanted that any more than she liked when they fought, but the fear was gone. She had faith and trust. That didn't mean her therapist let her get away with not talking about it for the rest of the session.

When she got home, still pondering everything, Gail was folding up some of Vivian's clothes and putting them in a paper bag. "Hey, baby," greeted Gail. "We made a cucumber salad and falafel."

"You made falafel?"

"And lamb. I thought I'd grill it. Maybe make some flatbread."

Holly smiled and hung up her jacket. "Speaking of we, where's our small human?"

"Putting her clothes away."

Studying the clothes on the table, Holly frowned. "What does the bag have to do with anything?"

Gail looked amused. "Our small human outgrew her capris. They were knee shorts."

What? Holly blinked a few times. "We just bought them this winter!"

"She's catching up. She's actually Olivia's height now," grinned Gail, putting the clothes in the bag. "Excuse me, Liv." Gail shook her head and put the bag by the door.

"Oh dear," giggled Holly. When Gail came back over, she let her hand run over Holly's shoulders. It was just a simple, gentle, hello. "Other than taking a small human shopping and making me a wonderful dinner, how was your day?"

Gail made an 'eh' noise. "Well. John and I picked up a new case. Someone pulled a stunt with the flags like they did in New York a couple years ago. Avoided all the cameras and messed up a flag at the CN tower. Freaked out folks to the extreme."

"That's a big case," Holly was impressed. That was practically a terrorism level, nationwide case. "How'd you land that?"

"You know what they say about the reward for a good job?"

Of course Holly did. "I made you read that book. And yes. Another job. But this is a big job."

With a laugh, Gail brought a ginger ale over. "Oh, you don't think I can handle it?"

"Har har," snorted Holly, taking the drink. "It's just... Butler usually handles those himself. Or his senior detectives. What's his name?"

"Griggs?"
"That's the one." She knew Gail would handle the case like a champ because she was good at it. No, Gail was great at it (Holly was biased). She was just also a detective constable. John was a full detective and had been since Holly had met him.

"Or his best detectives." Gail was smiling at her and Holly frowned. "I'm not his best detective?"

It was the way Gail said it that made Holly think harder. "Gail?" Holly sat up and focused on her wife.

The big, toothy grin went ear to ear. "Yep," she nodded, clearly pleased with herself.

"Detective?"

"Yep!"

Holly laughed and leaned forward, slapping Gail's leg. "Are you kidding? You made full detective? Why didn't you tell me?"

Smiling way too broadly, Gail took Holly's hand. "I'm telling you now, aren't I?"

Returning the smile, Holly squeezed Gail's hand. "Congratulations, honey." She knew Gail wanted the promotion and had hoped for it, but her name always made things strange. "What did your mother say?"

Gail looked confused. "Nothing? I don't think she knows yet," admitted the cop. "I mean, I haven't told anyone, and it's not public till Friday."

Which meant the only person who knew besides Butler was Holly. She blushed. "Not even Vivian?"

"Psssh," laughed Gail. "I doubt she cares except that it means cake."

"Oh? We get cake?" That meant Gail *made* a cake, and her cakes were amazing.

Gail smiled and kissed Holly's knuckles. "And lamb."

Holly smiled back. "I'm really happy for you, honey," she said, honest and sincerely. She brushed Gail's cheek with one finger from their linked hands, looking at the smile on her wife's face. It was more than just the happiness of earning something and knowing it was her fair and just reward for hard work, though that was new to see in Gail's eyes. Gail *knew* she deserved this promotion.

The answer she'd not been able to phrase in session came upon her suddenly. Holly smiled at Gail's smile, the look of delight and pride that even Holly rarely saw. But there was also joy of being able to share it with someone; joy of sharing it with Holly. And then and there, Holly understood. They were a relationship of mutual respect, a place where they weren't just in love because they were in the same place at the same time in the right way. They gave each other reason to live and succeed. Not in the needy pressurey way, but in the good, inspirational way. They made each other want to be better.

Wasn't that what Gail had said, years ago, when they were in the awkward stage of their returning relationship. That Holly made her better. And right there, in Gail's smile, the smile that reached her eyes and warmed Holly's heart. A real expression of love.

"What's going on in your brain there, nerd?"

"Good things," smiled Holly. She leaned in to kiss Gail softly. She didn't say she loved Gail. She
The sound woke Gail up. No, it was the lack of sound. Something wasn't right. Gail snapped her eyes open and froze when she realized it was pitch black in the room. Her heart pounded and her breath froze. Telling herself to calm down, Gail slid a hand to her left and touched the soft, warm, body of her wife. Oh thank fucking god. She exhaled slowly and sat up.

The house was dead quiet. The streets outside were quiet. There was a hum that you always heard in a house that was just not there anymore. Gail frowned. It was summer. It was already getting hot and sticky in the house. Crap. "The power's out," she muttered, realizing what was going on. Sitting up, Gail reached for her phone, wondering just how bad the outage was, when her phone rang.

Just not the phone in her hand.

It was the old, classic sound of the landline Gail had insisted they have installed, plugged in to the old, classic, rotary phone she had in the bedroom. Holly had laughed at her, but let it go. It was local only, it had the most basic of basic service, but Gail put her foot down. If there was a problem and the cell towers went out, they'd have something. And right now it was ringing.

"Peck," she declared, the moment she picked up the phone, rattling in the nightstand for an emergency flashlight.

"We have a problem." It was Oliver and he began to detail out exactly what had happened. But he only got a couple sentences in before Gail heard a panicked wail from down the hall.

"Hang on, Ollie." Gail wedged the handset to her ear with her shoulder and dragged the phone (long cord, damn that was foresight) down to Vivian's room. She managed to get the light in her hand on before opening the door. "Hey, Viv, it's okay, the power's out."

Her daughter was jammed into the corner of her bed, looking absolutely terrified. "It's dark!"

"I know, I know," soothed Gail, finding the cord was just long enough to get to room, but not the bed. "Come here, it's okay." As soon as she held her arm out, Vivian scrambled and Gail pulled her up into a hug. "Sorry, Ollie, the phone woke her up."

"No no, no, darlin' it's okay. You know I hate even asking this, Gail, but I need everyone."

"Oliver, it's fine." How the hell Gail managed to hold a phone, flashlight, and child on her trip back to the bedroom, she'd never know. "I'm on my way."

Thank god Holly was sitting up, pushing her glasses on with the most confused expression. "Honey, what's going on?"

"Power's out for the Eastern seaboard. All the way down to Washington DC and back up to North Bay." Gail gave up and dropped the flashlight on the bed to better hold Vivian. That made it easier to hang up the phone. "I need to go in," she added, rubbing Vivian's back.

Holly blinked a few times. "Go in?" She frowned, sleep fading away.

"The riots." The summer had been filled, off and on, with protests about pretty much everything. The city had already been faced with two small riots about a professional athlete charged with assault but still playing, and a law change that had some people up in arms about freedoms. Then there were the G-20 summit protests that almost always got violent.
And all that sunk in for Holly. "Oh. G-20 is still here." Then Holly focused on the fact that Vivian was clinging to Gail in what was pretty clearly a panic attack. "Viv, honey, can you come here?" Holly's voice was incredibly gentle and she took hold of Vivian's hand.

With a sniffle, Vivian was convinced to let go of Gail and hang on to Holly instead. Most of the time, Gail felt like the girl was far older than seven. But in the moment of terror here, like the time she'd been too scared to sleep at the Bests overnight, the truth of her age came out. She was still a little girl.

"I need to get the other flashlights," sighed Gail. She looked at her daughter and handed her the flashlight. "Viv, I need you to point that at the hall for me, okay?"

Vivian nodded and did so. It wasn't much light, but it let Gail find the spare flashlight in the linen closet. Once that was on, she came back into the bedroom and dug through her closet to pull out her uniform. There was nothing said from the bed as Gail stepped into the polyester pants and pulled on her sports bra and black shirt. It had been a few years since she'd worn the whole kit for more than just her recertification. She knew it fit her, thank god, that would have been embarrassing, but she just never wore the uniform to work anymore.

The vest and duty belt hung in her gun safe. She wasn't going to leave without those, but she looked back at Holly and saw the grim expression of dislike. Yeah, no one liked this.

"I wasn't expecting the uniform," admitted Holly.

"Ollie needs all hands on deck."

"No, no, I get why, I just … I don't know why I wasn't expecting it." Holly continued to pet Vivian's head, keeping her close.

Tucking her shirt in, Gail sighed. "Been a while." She buckled her belt, pulled on her shoes, and took the flashlight to get her gear. When she came back in, the belt complete with gun and radio, Gail knew Vivian would be staring at her.

"No vest?" Holly sounded worried.

"Yes vest, I just need…" Gail trailed off. "Viv, I need a favor." She held up a silver pen. "Can you write something on my vest?"

That pulled Viv out of her shell a moment. "Write what?"

Gail put her vest on the bed, the inside showing to Vivian. Under the neckline it read, in Gail's print, *I love you, Lunchbox*. Below, a new addition, *And you too, Monkey*. But further down, in careful, precise, print, was a message from Holly. *Come back to me*. When Holly had written it, Gail had teased her for having good handwriting.

While Vivian looked at the words, reaching out to touch them, Holly asked, "When did you add that?"

"Last October." They shared a pained look.

"Lunchbox?" Vivian looked confused.

Holly laughed softly. "That's the first thing Gail ever called me," she explained, smiling.

Muttering an oh, Vivian held her hand out. "Can I have the pen?" Gail handed it over and turned to
the side, letting the girl write in some privacy. She checked her belt and badge, making sure everything was in its proper place. It felt weird. "Okay."

"Can I read it?" Holly's voice was quiet and polite.

"I guess," muttered Vivian and she clicked the pen cap into place.

Both Holly and Gail turned to look. It was short and to the point. **Be safe, Mom.**

Gail smiled. "Thanks, Monkey." She kissed Vivian's head and then gave Holly a more proper kiss. "I'll be safe. I'll come back."

Under the watchful gaze of her family, Gail strapped on the vest and flipped her radio on. "Dispatch, 8727 is 10-8." She hadn't said those words in a couple years. Not like this.

"8727, Dispatch. 1504 needs assistance." The address read off by Dispatch was relatively near the house.

"Dispatch, 8727, 10-4. On my way. ETA 5."

The radio squawked a little more, but it was channel noise sending officers around. "We're going to stay here," Holly said, firmly.

Gail nodded. She wanted to sweep them both into another hug, but it was better not to. She nodded again at the two and used her utility flashlight to make her way downstairs and to the garage. Using the manual override, Gail opened the garage door and backed out, making sure to put her lights on.

Of course Andy was in 1504, AKA's the unit's cursed squad, and was stuck with Gerald, trying to talk down some lunatic with an axe. Their night only got weirder. Chris had a group of kids throwing a chair into a storefront window, Dov had a store owner with a shotgun, and Nick found the morons trying to steal cars. When she asked where Chloe was, Dov gave her a pained look. The perky princess was still undercover.

The night was insane. Gail didn't catch a break until noon, when she took time to call Holly from a pay phone outside the station and confirm her safety as well explain what had happened. A cascading power failure after a prop-plane crashed in upstate New England. No signs of terrorism, but it was going to be another day before things were sorted and full power was back on.

Thankfully, the lab didn't need Holly, or anyone really. It was too dangerous and some things were going to have to slip. Also thankfully there were no deaths, yet. But on the other hand, Gail was stuck at the station, crashing in a cot up by her desk because she was going to get about six hours of rest before rolling back out. Maybe eight, if Oliver loved her enough.

Curling up on the cot, she pulled out her cell phone and turned it on. No bars. Fuck. Gail turned it back off and tried to think of where she'd last seen a pay phone. Oh. She got up and heard John complain that they needed sleep. He'd been called in too, but had been partnered with Andy after the axe-guy knocked Gerald out.

"I'll be right back," she yawned, and went down to the holding cells. Bingo. No one was on the phone, so she called the house line.

"Gail?" Holly picked up the phone on the second ring.

"Hi, baby," she smiled, feeling the first tendrils of tension fade. "I'm okay."
Holly's exhale was way too high pitched. "Oh. Good. Where are you?"

"Fifteen. Cell towers are still out, so I'm calling from booking. Took me longer to find a damn quarter than the phone."

"Smart."

"I have my moments." She yawned. "We've got cots in the bullpen."

"And you want to sleep?"

"For a bit. I'm catching another shift if the power's not back on tonight."

Holly sighed. "If it's not, I think we're going to babysit Olivia and Sophie."

"There's an idea... You may want to get Celery and Ollie's kids too. How's Viv?"

"Not great. She's not sleeping well at all."

"She may do better in the daylight," suggested Gail. "I'll go talk to Ollie."

"Okay. Gail... Please be safe."

She smiled softly. "I will. I'll come home." Gail paused. "Do you want me to talk to Vivian?"

"She'd love to hear from you, but I actually convinced her to sleep." The way Holly spoke, the faintly exasperated tone, made Gail smile. "Go sleep. I love you."

Gail carried the warm words with her to her uncomfortable cot, curling back up under the rough blanket. No one spoke, it was just a room of grumpy, tired, cops. She was woken by Oliver, who had sent his family to Gail's a few hours ago, who was tired and hadn't seemed to sleep much at all, and who reluctantly asked Gail to take a squad with Noelle.

Someone had figured out coffee for the cops, which tasted horrible and was a little smoky and cold, and still it was the best thing Gail had drunk in hours. The protein bar was gross. In the daylight, the city was still preternaturally quiet. When she told Noelle that, the older woman gave her a look, wondering when Gail had evolved to complicated words and blaming Holly. Noelle had left her babies with Holly as well. Gail was pretty sure she had the better end of the deal.

They calmed the city with their presence for the most part. They checked in on the elderly and the homeless, they checked in on stores and hostels. In the daytime, the city was quieter and calmer than the uproarious night had been. They shared news about how the power was out all over, how no one knew really what had happened. When dispatch updated them with the facts about the pilot who'd crashed, they passed it on to people, assuring them it wasn't terrorism, just stupid timing. The hottest days of the year plus the crash put a surge on the system.

At lunchtime of day two, Gail took herself home for a shower, cold but she hardly cared, a change of uniform, and a too short meal with her family. The house was filled with children and young adults, including Leo there with Steve. Even though Steve was on crutches (having proven on his birthday that a man in his forties has no business on a skateboard unless his name was Tony Hawk), Gail felt better knowing someone who could and would use a gun was in the house. She made sure he had the code to her safe, she made sure Vivian understood why she had to go back, and she made sure Holly knew she was coming back.

Night two was a hell of a lot messier. Over 38 degrees, fuck you very much. The inventor of
cotton/poly blends that are heavy on the poly could die and Gail would cheer. The heat made her, in a characteristically uncharitable moment, tell Chris she did not want to be on the gay float that year. Chris pointed out she *never* wanted to be on it anyway and before Gail could insult him, dispatch cut in to their argument. 1504 needed backup and they were nearby.

"Dispatch, 1507, on our way," snapped Chris. Gail was driving. With the power out, gas was at a premium. With low gas resources, the AC and computers were off. That meant no GPS, and Gail was simply a better driver most days than Chris, even now when she didn't patrol regularly. Thank you, Pecks.

"Why the hell does Oliver keep 1504?" She hated that car. It had been stolen, blown up, shot, blow up again, set on fire, and basically everything horrible that might happen to a cop happened in that car. She'd been caught making out with Chris in that car.

Chris braced his hand on the dash. "Gail, all the street lights are out," he warned, probably in response to her speed.

Absently Gail flicked on the siren. People scattered. "We're good," she laughed. She had greatly missed this part of being a cop. The swagger of the uniform and the delight of power. Oh, Gail Peck knew she wasn't a good person at heart. She was vain, jealous, selfish, and a little bit possessive.

Fine. A lot possessive.

The point was those were things she knew about herself. The power hungry bit was definitely a Peck trait. Unlike her mother, who had been a bit power *mad*, Gail just really loved the feeling of control and empowerment. Moderately evil. Half evil. Mean. Bitchy. The uniform brought it all back.

They pulled up to where 1504 was parked and Dov was trying to calm people down. Gail flipped on the speaker. "Attention, losers. It's hot, no ones had a good shower in two days, and we're all pissed off. So back away from the officer, stop beating on each other, and go the hell home before I have to send 50,000 volts up your junk."

Her angry cadence surprised the crowd enough that they were able to convince them to disperse. For a moment Gail felt like things were going to be just fine and stretched her arms high above her head, surveying the street.

"Gail! Look out!" Chris grabbed her arm as she saw the car speeding towards them. Her eyes locked on the plates even as her partner pulled her down and into the relative protection found behind their squad. Relative was right. The crunch and scream from the other side was evidence that things were taking a turn for the worse.

"Son of a bitch! Dispatch, 1507, some jackass just crashed into 1504 and took off." She rattled off the plate and the directions.

Chris was on his feet first. "Dov!" His panicked voice told her everything she needed.

"Charge it with a hit and run, 8721 is down. Repeat, 8721 is down. Request immediate medical assistance."

Toting Vivian up the stairs, Holly grinned when her daughter asked if she could shower later. "Yes. Everyone's going to nap. Then we'll make dinner and go back to sleep, honey."

"Can I sleep with you guys?"
Holly was about to say yes when she caught sight of Gail in the bedroom, passed out face down and shirtless. "Not right now," temporized Holly. "Gail's really tired and needs to sleep."

Yawning, Vivian accepted this and let Holly tuck her in. "I like your lab," she said, before drifting off.

Earlier that morning, the lab had called asking for Holly's help. Feeling horrible about the prospect of abandoning her daughter, Holly made the executive decision to take Vivian with her to the lab. She'd worried that Gail would yell, but after the news from the second night that Dov had been run over, Holly decided she didn't really care. The group of children migrated to Frank and Noelle's, with Steve and Celery remained in charge.

It was a relief to be away from that many small people, to be back in her element of the office, and Vivian was just morbid enough by nature to think that spending the day with Holly at the lab was way cooler. None of the three of them liked hanging out with people and, as Vivian pointed out, it was annoying to not have anything new to talk about.

But by tacit agreement with Gail, Vivian had not been allowed in the morgue. And especially not with the power out. Vivian wasn't permitted in Gail's bullpen either, or much of the station, as Gail didn't want her to see some of the evil out there. She'd seen enough at seven years, more than most people ever saw. That rule didn't bother Vivian, who was happy enough to sit by the silent mass-spec and listen to Holly giving old school instructions about how to process the evidence. Most cases had been shelved, but some had deadlines that couldn't be missed, including an active missing persons that started with the power outage, and caused Andy to remark that it was déjà vu.

Andy had been the first of her rotating guards and gave Holly a status on Dov. His leg was badly broken and he was in the ER, waiting on the power to see if he needed surgery. The power came back on around ten AM, much to everyone's relief. She had Gerald as a guard by then and was delighted to send him back to the station.

Shortly after power was back, Gail called and said she was headed home and please don't wake her up unless Godzilla was attacking. She wasn't even upset about Holly being at the lab, having gotten the news from Steve over the police band that morning. In fact, Gail called it genius.

But now they were all at home, safe, sound, and Holly showered before curling up around Gail. The house had probably still been humid when Gail got home, which would explain why she was mostly naked and not under the covers. Or she was just exhausted. Gail didn't even twitch when Holly ran her hand across the pale back.

Having Gail back in uniform, even for a short while, was tense. She had forgotten about the feeling of terror, knowing Gail was out there on the streets. Holly pressed her face against Gail's shoulder-blade and inhaled deeply. Her wife smelled like their soap and shampoo, but also the unique scent that was Gail's, that Holly loved. Pheromones were a wonderful thing.

Holly reached down to pull the sheet up, but her fingers slid across the dip in Gail's spine, lingering momentarily. God, how she loved touching Gail.

"Told you I'd come home," yawned Gail, her voice thick and sleepy.

"Did I wake you up?" Holly kissed the back of Gail's shoulder again.

"Garage door." Her wife barely moved, clearly fading fast back in to sleep.

Pulling the sheet up, Holly pressed up against Gail's side. "You okay?" Gail mumbled a yes. "Want
"your shirt?" That got a no and Gail's breathing deepened and evened out. Her body went soft and limp, a quiet near-snore the only sound.

Holly could count the number of times she'd watched Gail fall asleep on her hands. There was the time on the couch at the Frat House, a few times at the cottage, once on the back porch, and maybe three or four times at home. The times on drugs didn't count. Every time, she was amazed at the difference between lightly asleep Gail and deeply asleep. She looked so vulnerable and young, making Holly want to protect her.

Closing her eyes, Holly let herself drift off, smiling. She woke up with the sun still up and Gail using her for a pillow. "This is way better," sighed Holly, smiling and working her arm around Gail's waist.

"Yeah," agreed Gail. This time her voice sounded more clear, more awake.

Holly smiled running her fingers up and down Gail's bare back and side. "I don't like you in uniform anymore," she noted, feeling the subtle lumps in Gail's rib cage where she'd broken the bones. That hadn't occurred in uniform but it still made Holly worry. "I was fine, Holly," yawned Gail, draping a leg over Holly's.

"You could have been Dov."

For a while, Gail was silent. Then she picked her head up. "Holly. They weren't aiming at a cop. The idiot was drunk. He could have hit anyone. Dov's fine. Other than being annoyed that Chloe's still undercover." Gail tilted her head. "This is my job."

Exhaling loudly, Holly ran her fingers through her own hair. "I know. I know, honey. I just worry." With a sigh, Gail rested her head on Holly's chest. "You're still sexy as hell in it, don't get me wrong, Gail." Holly smiled and let her hands roam across Gail's back again.

Gail laughed softly. "Thank god." As Holly's hands caressed her back, Gail sighed. "That feels really good."

"Your back is really soft and smooth." Holly's fingers found a scar from a mole removal. It was the only scar on her torso. There were a few on Gail's arms and legs, the usual assortment from childhood. There wasn't a visible scar on her forehead, though there was a tiny lump that only Gail and Holly could find. Holly reached one hand back up, running her thumb across Gail's forehead.

She could feel Gail smiling, her body warm and inviting to touch. As Holly's hands drifted down Gail's sides, the blonde made a pleased noise. Holly rolled them over and kissed Gail's neck, slowly making her way across the pale body. The smell of the shower was gone and all that was left was the unique flavor of Gail, the tang that smelled so good and made Holly want to rub her skin against her own.

The power of pheromones was intense. It drove the chemicals in Holly's brain to surge, yelling at her that she should spend time with Gail and her immune system, mingling germs and making new antibodies. But more than just that, the simple (complex) machinations of initial passion wouldn't last past the early stages if there wasn't more to it all. Her limbic system fired off regularly, dumping serotonin into her system, and the dopamine and oxytocin combined to make her want to bond.

Of course the dopamine had the effect of making her heart race and her breath come shorter, as it did for Gail as well. And the other biological, physical reactions to Holly's hands and lips had an impact on both of them. Holly lost track of time, forgetting the rest of the stupid world and the drama of riots.
and car crashes and everything else. She had Gail, safe and sound, healthy and alive, in her bed, her arms, and her life. Maybe chemistry made her fall in love, but she chose to stay there.

Afterwards, Gail lay on her back, smiling, looking entirely boneless. "If that was because of the uniform, I'm going to wear it more often," she informed Holly, her voice sounding light and breezy, as it nothing tethered her to the planet.

"It's because you're you," smiled Holly, running her fingers through Gail's hair.

"I'll keep being that, then." Gail breathed softly, deeply, and Holly smiled as her wife easily fell back asleep.
"Gail!"

In the kitchen, Gail and Vivian stared at each other in surprise. The shout from the bedroom was angry. Vivian frowned, "What'd you do?"

Gail shrugged. "No idea." She cleared her throat. "Cooking, Holly!"

"Get up here!"

Vivian gave her a side-eye look, suggesting that Gail should very well know what she did. "I can cook."

"Hah, not happening, you're seven." She checked the fish. It was almost done. This could work. "Leave it alone." Gail turned off the burner and trotted up the stairs. She found Holly in the bedroom. "Yes?"

"I have a grey hair," snapped Holly. Gail blinked a few times. "You didn't tell me!"

What the what? "Baby, I ... You have a lot of grey hairs." Holly's hair had been losing that battle recently, much to Holly's vocal annoyance.

But her wife snapped. "Not there!" And she gestured down with both hands.

Gail stared and then looked down. What on earth was she talking about? Down. Oh. That hair. "Oh."

"You knew!"

Temporizing, Gail pointed out the obvious. "Did you want me to stop and tell you when I saw it?" Holly glared. "Yes, I noticed. And ... I forgot."

Holly snorted. "You? No, not buying that one, Peck."

Gail rolled her eyes. "Come on, I'm a little busy when I'm down there. I kept trying to remember to tell you, but I got distracted." Reaching over, Gail caught Holly's waist with her hands and tugged her closer. "Yes, you've got a couple grey hairs."

Her wife was pouting. "I'm old," she complained, draping her arms over Gail's shoulders.

"You are forty-one, you geek," Gail laughed softly.

"I'll be the meaning of life next year," Holly whinged, sounding depressed.

Smiling, Gail kissed her nose. "I'll get you a towel." When Holly startled, Gail laughed. "What? I read the Hitchhiker books."

Pressing her forehead to Gail's shoulder and laughing softly, Holly felt warm and comfortable. "My mother started going grey at my age," she complained.

"Holly," sighed Gail. "You're not old. And you're beautiful. I don't care that you have some grey hairs."
"I know." Holly paused. "It's just ... She's seven. When she's 18, I'm going to be 52. I'll be 57 when she's out of college. You'll be 50... We're insane."

Okay, that was a little startling. Gail hadn't ever mathed things out. It didn't make her older to Vivian than her own parents were to her, though. She tried to be cheerful and point out the good parts, "And you'll be the chief medical examiner, and I'll be an Inspector."

"Hah!" Holly's laugh cut her off. "You will be in charge of Major Crimes."

"Organized Crimes, Major Case Squad," corrected Gail, grinning.

"Fine, you'll be in charge of Organized Crime and be Steve's boss." They both smiled at that idea. "It feels like a million years away and like it's going to be tomorrow," admitted Holly, stepping away and tying her hair back in a ponytail.

"It's both," agreed Gail. "But I'm your plus one for all this, Holly. That's what those old people said."

Holly blinked, "What old people?"

Well now, wasn't that startling? "Walter and Constance... Wow. Okay, remember the wedding? Frank and-" She stopped when Holly gave her an 'are you stupid?' look worthy of the Pecks. "Right. You see, that was the day we had the old people who got robbed. And I was interviewing these two totally ancient people who were frenemies and hated each other but they were plus ones... Because life was too long to go at it alone."

After a long moment, Holly quirked her lips into that half smile. "That was why you asked me out?" She looked a second from laughter.

Gail huffed. "I did not ask you out. You were just the least annoying person... Shut up," she laughed. Okay, fine. She had asked Holly out. And Holly laughed.

"That's where plus one comes from? You are so cute," She leaned in and kissed Gail softly, a brief touch of lips. "And insane."

"And hungry. Come on, the fish is ready and Vivian threatened to cook."

With a grimace, Holly agreed to be right down. As soon as Gail walked back into the kitchen, the kid asked, "What'd you do?"

"Forgot to tell her something," shrugged Gail. "No big deal." She paused. "She's feeling old."

"Well you guys are old," opined Vivian. Gail yelped and laughed.

She felt incredibly old four days later when Butler sent her and John to take point on a terrorist threat at the stock exchange. They'd done the usual rounds, interviewing and asking questions. Back in 2006, a coordinated attack had been planned on multiple locations in and around Toronto. Gail had not been on the force at the time, which meant she knew about it second-hand from her parents. As soon as Butler gave them the assignment, she'd pulled up the old cases.

But that wasn't this. Which was good, she supposed, except for the part where 33 felt ancient compared to the people rocketing around the stock floor.

"Yeah, I don't get it," grumbled John. He was closer to Steve and Holly's ages than Gail's, but his hair was still jet black. Gail suspected dye.
"The people on the floor there? Yeah, too much Red Bull." She yawned. Gail hadn't caught up enough on sleep since the last month.

John nodded. "Exactly. This year has been rough."

"Last year was rough." Gail rubbed her shoulder. It was never going to get easier or go slower. Life went at this speed. As fast as the floor moved, it reflected reality. Too fast, too hectic, and ... Totally perfect for a cover. "I could use this as a base of operations. Pass notes on paper with the stock slips."

Her partner tilted his head. "Fair enough." John looked around. "Can't slip a gun in."

"Threat doesn't mean gun. Put anthrax on those papers. One cut, boom, take it all down."

"You are devious, Peck."

"Thank you," she smirked. "Why'd you go to guns?"

John exhaled. "I was thinking about the gun runners your brother tumbled on to before the G-20. That was just a month ago. If I had to take a second pick to shut down more than just Canada..."

True. The stock exchange would have a trickle down effect. "Let's go look for vantage points then. Pick folks off from the outside."

They went up to the roof and looked for good shooting points, arguing as to the likelihood of a good sniper or a decent one. After an hour, all they had was an idea that the building across the street was a nice vantage point. They broke for lunch and bumped into a detective from Twenty-Seven on the way to the car.

"Peck. Simmons." Marlo Cruz, in a grey suit with a pale blue shirt, jerked her chin in greeting.

Somehow, Gail managed not to make a snide comment on the shirt color. She had on a black shirt and her green jacket over jeans, in deference to how the Stock Exchange felt about a dress code. "Cruz," she smiled, thinly. "How's the knee?"


"I wouldn't know," smirked Gail. "What brings you down here?" She glanced at Marlo's lack of partner, not seeing anyone around.

Jerking her thumb at the Stock Exchange, Marlo explained, "I'm your backup. Another threat letter came in so they wanted more eyes on it."

Gail snorted. "Aren't you in IA?"

"Maybe I'm checking one of you out for promotion," offered Marlo. She and Gail shared a smirk. Yeah, that was the side of Marlo she'd always liked.

"Must be a slow day," John laughed. "Listen, we're breaking for lunch. If I don't feed my partner regularly, she'll go feral." Gail barred her teeth at John but did not deny the jibe.

"I remember that from working with her."

There was a flash of a smile from John as they reached their cars. "This is a lunch conversation." He leaned on his car. "I'll catch you up, you tell me Peck's secrets from her patrol days." Oh for fuck's sake, he was flirting with Marlo. Well. Better him than Sam.
Gail rolled her eyes and opened her mouth to tell John off when there was a loud, resounding, bang and an echo. Her brain moved slower than her body, grabbing John's arm and pulling him down. She'd processed the sound and its direction instinctively. Thank god for years of training, her gun was out and her eyes on the building they'd picked out just minutes before. "John, you okay?"

"Yeah," he grunted, pulling out his gun and unlocked the car door with a bwip from the keyfob. "Eyes on the shooter?"

"Nothing yet. Cruz?" There was no reply.

Another shot went off and John dropped his keys, not even opening the door to grab the radio. "Son of a bitch," he snapped and scanned the crowd. "Get out of the way," John shouted at the crowd.

Gail cracked the car door. "Marlo, you see anything?" Again, no reply over the screaming bystanders. Gail turned and swore when she saw Marlo on her back, hand pressing against the right shoulder of her pale shirt, trying to stem the flow of blood. "10-00! Officer down!" Jamming her gun in her holster, Gail lunged for Marlo and felt the shockwave of a bullet zing past her and carom off the sidewalk.

About ten years of Gail's life just vanished in the adrenaline rush and she fell backwards. Holy hell, that was close. "You okay?" John's voice was tight and high-pitched.

Her mouth was dry. "Yeah, please tell me you can see him." But John could not. Fuck. Fuck procedure. John couldn't shoot unless they had line of sight, which was unlikely but they couldn't leave Marlo lying there. She stuck her head out and saw a person move. There was another shot.

"Peck! Get back here!"

"That's a handgun," she snapped, looking in the direction of the shot. The flash of motion caught her eye. "Black hoodie, grey backpack, sunglasses!" Another shot rang out and Gail moved. She just … moved. It was pure instinct, but she dove into danger and covered Marlo with her own body. God damn it! "Cruz, you with me?"

Making a pained noise, Marlo nodded. "Didn't see him." Neither had Gail until just then, but she was sure the shot had been a rifle the first time. Had he switched? When did he switch? No, wait, the first shot had been from a steeper angle.

"This is the police," bellowed John, rising so his head was above the hood of the car. "Put the gun down!" The dumb-ass fired a shot at the car.

Gail was so, so glad they'd taken John's car. "This is gonna hurt like hell," she warned, and looped both hands under Marlo's armpits to haul her back as a rifle shot cracked again, hitting the engine of John's car. "Mother fu- two shooters? What the hell!? Intel didn't say today!"

"Didn't say not today," groaned Marlo, pushing with her feet to speed things up. "Shit that hurts." There were tears sparking in her eyes, agony in her face.

Beside her, John fired off two shots. Shit. "You got him, Simmons?"

Another shot from the handgun rang out. "Nope!" Now that she wasn't panicking as much, Gail could hear the difference between the reports.

Behind the car, in relative safety, Gail opened the door and reached for the radio and the small first aid kit they kept in the centre console. "Dispatch, 8727. We're at the stock exchange, shots fired, officer down. Two gunmen, one with rifle, one with a handgun. We need a bus, fast." She rattled off
a description and pulled out gauze. That wasn't going to cut it, looking at the blood flow from Marlo's shoulder.

"Copy 8727. 1504 en route to your position. 10-00 reported. ETF dispatched."

Awesome. They were stuck waiting for a clear scene before they could get an ambulance out there. "Dispatch, really need that bus now." Gail kicked her brain for the numbers. "637451, Cruz is losing a lotta blood and I had to move her."

"10-4," replied Dispatch, sounding entirely unhappy. At least they were all on the same page.

"You remember my badge number?" Cruz was starting to look white.

Gail sneered, "Don't flatter yourself. I remember everyone's." She pulled Marlo's shirt open and eyed the wound. Was that bone? "John, how we doing?"

Her partner grunted. "Where's the damn backup?" They couldn't even hear sirens yet. Another rifle shot went off, hitting the car. "Come on! This is a new car, asshole!"

They'd both lost their cars just over a year ago in that stupid case. "Keep your eyes on the handgun," snapped Gail, digging in the kit. She pulled on gloves and found the box she was looking for.

John exchanged shots again and swore. "Damn it," he snarled. Gail winced. She knew John's tones too well right now.

"Dispatch, need a second bus. One shooter down." Gail unwrapped a tampon.

Marlo focused on her. "What're you doing with that?"

"Tamponade," she explained, pulling a Holly-esque babble from god knows where. "It's from French, tampion or tanpon. Means a stopper, piece of cloth used to plug up a hole." Gail pushed it into the hole. "They work real good for field dressings." Pressing gauze on top of it, Gail pulled Marlo's left hand back. "Hold onto that, okay?"

"Good thing this was your car," grumbled Marlo.

The sirens finally picked up as Gail pulled her gloves off. "Perks of a good partner, Cruz. John keeps 'em for me." She looked at her partner and drew her gun. "John, sit down. I'll cover."

There was no argument as John slid down, looking distinctly green. "Did I get him?"

"Looks like." She could see the man lying on his back, a pool of blood spreading. Fuck. She was going to lose John to SIU for a while for this. "Keep Marlo awake, okay?"

And they just had to wait until 1504 and that damn bus.

"Hey! Mom! Mom's on TV!"

The moment her brain deconstructed what Vivian had just said, Holly snapped her head up so fast it made her dizzy. Gail was on TV? "Hit pause!" She ran from the kitchen, slipping on the wood floor, and careening into the easy chair. Vivian was seated on the couch, eyes bright, the TV in a state of pause with a news person making a rather awkward face.

"It just started," explained Vivian, having rewound to the beginning of the news cycle. She was one of the only kids Holly knew who liked the news. Hell, Vivian even told people CBC was her
favorite broadcast channel, and listed to the NPR from the States every chance she got. Holly's father had laughed, noting that as a child Holly had done the same thing, much to Gail's amusement. So watching the news was not abnormal for her.

Seeing the blonde Peck on TV was totally abnormal. Gail detested public speaking, but she stood behind a podium, a little grimy and a smear of something reddish-brown on the arm of her green jacket. Oh dear god. They'd been trying to take half-days, or work from home days, in the summer. The idea was to spend time with Vivian but also to try and relax a little. Life was so hectic, they were going to miss things if they didn't slow down now and then. Of course, work didn't make that always possible. Like today, Gail was just supposed to be working on case research, not getting blood on her clothes.

"Press play, Viv," she said quietly, sitting on the couch. If she spoke any louder, her voice would shake. "Please."

Vivian looked at her concerned and scooted next to Holly, taking her hand and pressing play. "Mom looks okay," she whispered.

"She does." Holly stared at the TV as the reporter explained there had been a deadly shootout at the stock exchange, resulting in the death of civilians and police. Then the reporter said that Detective Peck of the Major Case Squad was on scene to explain.

The camera focused on Gail who looked a little grey. "—ETF responded promptly and efficiently. The first gunman was subdued by ETF, following the reports of the on-site officers." Clamoring drowned out Gail's next few words. "Yes, there was a second gunman, armed with a handgun. He was shot in the process of the take down and has been taken to the hospital. He's in critical condition."

Someone shouted out that there were rumors of a police officer being killed. Gail nodded and glanced at the podium. Her phone was probably there, giving her updates. "An officer was shot and killed by the first shooter," confirmed Gail. "Another officer was also shot, but is in stable condition."

Holly stared at the screen, looking for John, but she couldn't find him. Exhaling shakily, Holly leaned back and tried to calm herself down, which worked until they showed amateur footage of the shooting. "It's Mom!" Vivian pointed at the blonde in a green jacket, moving out from behind a car to grab someone. The shot detective... Was that Marlo? Holly could just make out John's head behind a car, his navy blue Taurus, not Gail's brownish-red Chevy. There were holes in the hood of the car.

They watched the rest of the news bit until it looped and started over. The whole time Gail was answering questions, though most of her replies were that she couldn't say at this time. Gail was clearly physically okay. Holly reached for her phone and yelped when it rang, tossing it into the air, prompting Vivian to laugh a little. "Do not tell Gail," sighed Holly, thumbing her phone to answer it as soon as she saw it was Gail. "I already saw it on TV."

"Oh good," breathed Gail, loudly. "I'm stuck here for a couple hours at least, until Jarvis or Butler get here."

"You're okay?"

"Except for public speaking, yeah. I feel like I'm gonna puke."

Holly smiled. That was her Gail, thank god. "You looked good. Really professional." Gail snorted.
"Who was shot?"

There was the briefest of pauses before Gail remarked, "I can't talk here."

"Oh. Right." Holly pressed the heel of her free hand to her breastbone. God, it hurt thinking about how Gail might have been hurt. She wasn't wearing her vest on the TV, and probably hadn't had it on at all. And John... "It looked like Marlo..."

Gail laughed an unfunny sound. "Right. It is."

Closing her eyes, Holly grimaced. That was better than John, at least. "Will you come right home?"

"No... Actually I'm going to the ER and then I have to get debriefed. Can you pick me up later?"

"Of course." It didn't matter when or where, Holly would be there.

There was a pause. "Hey. I'm okay," Gail said, incredibly gently. It was surreal to hear that Gail on the phone, knowing where she was and what she was doing. Normally Holly only got to hear the sweet and tender Gail when it was just them.

"I know, I know," sighed Holly. "I saw you on TV. You look fine. I just... Hate when you're shot at."

Gail snorted. "You hate it? I could have done without it." Someone shouted on Gail's side of the phone. "I need to go take care of this. I love you, I'll see you soon."

"I love you too, honey." The phone clicked off and Holly pressed it against her chest for a moment. She exhaled slowly.

A smaller hand crept into her free hand. "Is Mom okay?"

Holly put her phone down and pulled Vivian into a hug. "She's fine, honey. She's fine. I just worry about her."

The girl didn't communicate with hugs, but she had her arms around Holly and snuggled up like... like a child. "Mom was scared too, when you got sick," Vivian said, her voice way too grown up. The dichotomy was painful.

"I don't want to scare you too, honey," sighed Holly.

But it was impossible not to worry.

She'd spent way too much time in the hospital recently, decided Gail. SUI had checked her gun, determined she'd not fired at all, asked why, and promptly let her go. Since Gail had ended up being the on-site talking head for the news, they just recommended she take some time off after. It was, in a word, a clusterfuck of a situation.

Leaning on the admit desk, Gail tried to dredge up a smile. "Hi, I'm Detective Peck. I wanted to check on the detective who was shot, Cruz?" It took a few more questions, but finally a nurse who looked a bit more scrubby showed up.

The nurse introduced herself as the head nurse for surgeries and looked at Gail curiously. "You the one who did triage?"

"Uh with the tampon? Yeah."
"That saved her life," the nurse said firmly. "What gave you that idea?"

Gail sighed. "My... I'm married to a doctor. You pick up weird stuff."

With a laugh, the nurse led her down the hall. "Tell me about it. I'm married to an insurance adjuster."

"Not as useful to your work," mused Gail.

"You'd be surprised. I hand out a lot of cards." They shared a smirk and the nurse opened a door to a restricted hallway. "Ms.- Detective Cruz came out of the ER just fine, only minor surgery needed. The blood loss was minimal, considering, but the bullet was lodged in her shoulder."

Gail winced. "That's not good."

"No, it's not. The doctor said its unlikely she'll regain more than a 50% of range motion."

Which meant the end of a career. "Have you told her?" The nurse nodded and opened the door to Marlo's room. Muttering a thanks, Gail stepped in and sat down next to Marlo's bed, watching her sleep. God, Gail wanted a nap. She yawned and pulled out her phone, texting Holly to say she was free to go any time.

"She never shot anyone on SWAT," muttered Sam, startling her. "Never got shot either."

Gail frowned and looked over. "Ironic, I guess," she said slowly.

"How bad is it?"

She studied his face and saw more concern for Marlo then she'd ever seen for Andy, except perhaps when she'd been undercover with Nick. Wasn't that telling? "They had to dig the bullet out of the bone."

Sam huffed. "Look, Peck, it's complicated—"

"Oh for fuck's sake, Sam, I know, alright?" Gail grimaced. When he opened his mouth to tell her she didn't (probably), she added, "I know about the baby." It was gratifying to see Sam pale. The stupid thing was she'd known about that for years. "She left an ultrasound in the station. I can put two and two together, Swarek." Dov had agonized over the photo for days before showing Gail. At the time she'd been desperate to ignore the fact that Holly was leaving and latched on to that. Of course, Holly had ended up staying, and Gail was too wrapped up in her own personal drama to really care much about something that had happened a couple years ago to people she didn't really care about that much.

Looked deflated, Sam fell into the other chair. "She had an abortion. Didn't tell me."

She and Dov had sorted that out as well. "Yeah? Would you?" He looked stunned. "Come on, you and Andy were all... being you and Andy, fucking over Nick and Marlo." She watched Sam look at Marlo. "I don't like you very much."

"You don't like anyone, Peck."

"No," Gail replied, miffed. It was inaccurate, as Holly would say. "I don't like many people. I actively dislike you. There's a difference."

Sam eyed her. "I thought you were mad at Andy about Nick."
"I was," she admitted. "That was six years ago." Six years, a girlfriend, a wife, a kid, and a hell of a lot of personal growth.

"You're different," Sam noted.

"I'll take that as a compliment," she sighed. "You really want to be that guy?"

Frowning, Sam looked away. "You don't understand —"

"Oh screw you, Sam. I do. Okay? And so does Andy." She understood because of Andy, Andy did because of Jo Rosatti. It was a lesson that you never forgot. When someone falls out of love with you, when someone walks away, it was one of those scars that never healed. "I'll make this easy. You tell Andy by next week, or I will."

Muttering that maybe Gail hadn't changed all that much, Sam agreed to tell her. She left the room and checked her phone. Nothing from Holly, so she texted Traci to say she'd threatened Sam.

**Attagirl. When can we tell Andy?**

**I gave him till next week.**

**That was nice.**

**Marlo's not coming back.**

There was no reply for a while and her phone rang. "Hey, Traci. She's alive, just her arm..."

"Jesus, you can't say it like that." Traci huffed. "Steve said you were on the news. You okay?"

"I didn't puke," offered Gail, gamely.

"That's progress," her sister-in-law agreed. "Where are you?"

"St. Pats. I was checking on the shooter and Marlo before I left." She paused. "You heard about Bailey?" ETF Sgt. Bailey had found the boobytraps on the stairs leading up to the shooters nest. That had actually been more terrifying than the rifle shots. All of the sudden a random explosion she hadn't been ready for made Gail nearly piss herself.

"Yeah," sighed Traci. She didn't want to talk about it. Hadn't Traci kind of dated him once? Huh. "Are you coming back to the station or the Penny?"

Gail shook her head. "No, actually... The shooter took out John's car."

With a half laugh, half groan, Traci asked, "You need a ride?"

"No, Holly's picking me up. I think." Gail frowned and glanced down the hallway, half expecting to see Holly there. "I'll call a uni if I have to." Traci laughed and hung up.

Gail sighed and pocketed her phone. She'd already talked to Butler about the situation and how John would be stuck in SIU hell for days. Since ETF had taken down, but not out, the rifleman, he'd been transported to the division already and would be interrogated by Butler himself. The dead shooter was headed to the lab. Gail grimaced and sat down by the admit desk.

She needed a nap. Gail closed her eyes and leaned back taking a moment to process her day. Listening to the ebb and flow of the hospital, she wished she could relax in the noise.
"Hi, we're looking for Detective Peck?" That was a voice that was normally very relaxing. Gail smiled and looked up. Holly was leaning on the counter looking harried. She couldn't see Gail from her angle. "She's the blonde detective, not the one who was shot."

Strange. Holly sounded actually scared. No… that was the sound of someone holding panic at bay. What was wrong? "Hey," Gail leaned around and waved.

Holly stuttered to a stop and her eyes were wide. "Gail?"

A smaller, brown, head poked around behind Holly. "Mom!"

As soon as Gail stood up, Holly slammed into her, hugging her so hard it hurt. "Whoa, Holly, hey," gasped Gail. Instinctively she wrapped an arm around Holly, extending the other out towards Vivian. "Hey, kiddo. I'm okay."

Holly was shaking a little. "They showed the shooting on TV," she whispered into Gail's ear. "And you're not in your vest." The arms tightened.

Oh crap. Gail glanced down at Vivian, who took her hand and mouthed that Holly had been scared. Why would Holly be that scared if she'd already seen Gail on TV and talked to her on the phone? Why would being in a hospital practically give her wife a panic attack? Panic attack. Of course.

Back when Holly had gone back to work after her little Ebola Adventure, everyone had wondered why Holly hadn't freaked out. Gail had speculated that whatever psychological damage their was, would come out weirdly later on.

Here was the weirdly later on. It was a hospital and someone was hurt. It was a hospital and a detective was shot at. Of course Holly was flipping out. "Hey, hey, Holly, I'm okay," she whispered. "I didn't get hurt. I'm fine."

Nodding, Holly held her close. "Where's John? Please... Don't tell me John's the dead-"

"Hey, hey, no. John's fine. He's with SIU." Gail pressed her cheek against Holly's. "We're both fine. Marlo's ... Going to live. Thanks to you."

"Me?" Holly sniffled wetly and let go a little, looking lost.

Gail smiled. "Tamponade." It took a moment, but Holly exhaled a breathy laugh. "Come on, give me the keys and let's go home."

"You don't have to go in?" Holly finally let go, taking Gail's free hand in her own.

Shaking her head, Gail led her back down the hall. "Gave my statement before the news... Did you record me?" She got a dirty look from Holly and grinned. They were going to be alright.

They both dropped Vivian off at school for the first day of the new year. Gail was taking the week off, after the shooting, for stress. Amusingly it meant Gail was sleeping most of the day away for a change. John was benched for at least a month, having the shakes badly after killing the second gunman. When Rachel found out, she went to check on him. They were just friends now, but maybe Gail's habit of staying friends with exes was rubbing off.

School was a fun day for Vivian, meeting new kids. Olivia, Matty, and Vivian were all in the same class, however their fourth cohort in crime, Christina, had moved to Guelph over the summer. That didn't depress the kids too much as they quickly traded cubbies so they could be in a row. It was amusing to watch the way too grown up Vivian awkwardly interact with the other kids. She clearly
held herself apart, only pulled in by Olivia, who dragged her along to everything.

Some new parents introduced themselves, expressing a little surprise to hear that the two were a detective and a pathologist. After the sixth "Oh! Like Rizzoli & Isles!" comment, Gail started making snippy replies and Holly didn't even try to keep her in check. The teachers at least were apologetic. Most of them were the same as before, with the whole open floor plan and schooling. All that had changed from the year before was where Vivian put her backpack and where her desk was. They did have two classrooms, but it seemed they'd keep the kids together.

When it was time for the parents to leave, Vivian called Gail and Holly by their names, telling them she wanted to stay till at least four. It prompted one father to remark on how independent the kids were. "Though," he added, "I don't know if I'd like my girls calling me by my name."

"She calls us what she wants," Gail replied, thinly. Gently touching Gail's hand, Holly murmured that they should go get coffee. Even though Gail had been catching up on sleep, she was still wound up a little. Being shot at by a high powered rifle apparently did that.

"Oh that's right, she's not your real-" Before Gail could react, Holly found herself moving and stabbing the man in the chest with her finger. "She's our daughter. Don't even think about finishing that sentence. I don't care if you're trying to say she's not ours because we adopted or because we're lesbians but if you ever say that in front of my daughter, you will regret every life choice you've ever made." The man stumbled back, startled, and was surrounded by other parents. If he expected support, what he got was a dozen adults telling him that family units were whatever combination they came in, and he shouldn't judge.

Of all the things Gail could have done, laughing was not what Holly expected. "Come on, Rocky," she said, taking Holly's hand. "I want to hit up the Farmer's Market after I drop you off."

Holly huffed. "Why are you so calm?" As they walked to the car, Gail shrugged. "Did I unload on that guy?"

"He was an ass," agreed Gail. "Mom league to the defense though." She leaned towards Holly, bumping shoulders. The tomboyish motion made Holly giggle. Gail was mature but childish, and it was one of the things Holly loved dearly about her. The dichotomy of Gail Peck. "How come I'm not allowed to go to your cake shop?"

"You'd never leave. Or we'd be broke and they'd be rich." Holly smiled and bumped her shoulder into Gail's, amused.

Grumping in good humor, Gail drove them to a small coffee shop and they sat outside, watching people and sharing a scone. While Holly knew she had work pouring out her inbox, she really enjoyed the moments where she got to just exist with Gail. They said nothing, like they did so many times up at the cottage, just being near each other and sharing space.

When she got into the office, Katie warned her the boss was on the rampage. Tony charged into her office not an hour into the day. "Good, we need to talk."

As he closed the door, Holly arched her eyebrows. "Make yourself at home," she muttered.

"I have a problem," he sighed, plopping onto her couch. "And I hate throwing you into the middle of it when you've had such a rough year, but ... You're okay, right? I mean, you and your wife and the kid?"

"We're all good." Holly was used to Tony's blather. He was a good boss and a great scientist, but he
didn't really get people. None of them did, which was why they had the jobs they had.

Tony nodded. "Good, good. So- and you're staying here. Right?" She nodded, confused. "I have a problem."

"So you said."

"The mayor's office called. They want me to hire a new Medical Director."

Holly's heart hit the bottom. A new Medical Director. "I see," she said slowly, not seeing a thing. She was the Medical Director. She reported directly to Tony. She was on equal footing with that moron, Jenkins, the Assistant ME. Had her performance been that terrible since she'd come back to work? She'd thought she was doing well.

But Tony waved his hands. "God, no, I'm screwing this up. Let- okay. I don't need a new Medical Director, except I really do."

She screwed up her face. "Okay, you've lost me. Am I being fired?"

"God no! Are you insane? Do you have any idea how much I rely on you?" Allowing as she did, Holly nodded and let Tony go on. "Look. I need you to— God. I'm planning to retire in the next few years."

That she knew. "Not looking forward to that," she admitted. Gail had suggested she arm wrestle Jenkins for the top spot, but Holly knew she'd be second pick. The Assistant ME was always top choice.

Tony looked worried. "You're not... But my assistant will probably take over."

"Tony, I know you're not a people guy, but you can't have missed that Jenkins and I are oil and water."

He blinked a few times. "I fired Jenkins this morning."

Now she blinked. "What the what?"

"Jenkins. Fired. Cleaning out his desk. Sayonara." Tony grunted and leaned back. "The Mayor wants me to hire this professor of forensics from McGill."

"Margery Gillingham?" Holly's eyes went wide. "She's a genius, Tony! Christ, she's the person you make a TV show for!"

He nodded. "So so, yes, I gathered that. So you'll do it?"

"I... Do what Tony?"

"Interview her. With me, of course."

Interview someone to take over her job. Holly winced. "I suppose."

"I know it'll be tough," he sighed. "Taking on new people and fitting in your new role. But the jobs are really similar, so that should help."

Holly frowned. "Being Medical Director isn't that much like being a professor."

Her boss stared at her. "What on earth are you talking about?"
She stared back. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about you being the Assistant ME and me being forced to replace you with some crazy Québécois."

Holly blinked more. Her as the Assistant ME? And Tony still planning to retire... Which made her the Chief within five years. Three was more likely. This was what she wanted. This position, this goal, this plan. Her eyes widened. "You want me to take over from you?"

Tony nodded. "Can't think of anyone better. Hell, if I hadn't had to promote you to Medical Director, you'd have been my assistant all along. But... Well it gave you some experience. I was going to just recommend you anyway when I retired, but this is easier, politically speaking. God, I will not miss that."

Grinning ear to ear, Holly felt nothing but joy. Assistant Chief Medical Examiner of Toronto. Hell yes!
She really couldn't pinpoint what set her off, but McNally's idiot rookie wasn't helping. She didn't have John back from SIU and his suspension for shooting the kid with the handgun, which meant she was flying solo, which meant she borrowed a uniform. Gail could have grabbed another detective, but the case was so small and minor, she figured it would be fine with Andy and her rookie. That was her mistake.

The rookie fucking up was on Andy. The idiot drew his gun on their scammer. He was just a fucking scammer, unarmed, but the minute the gun came out, the suspect threw his iPad into the rookie's face, knocking him down and the idiot jerked off a round. That scared the fuck out of everyone and Gail stumbled in shock. Without their guns drawn, Gail and Andy grabbed the suspect and subdued him, but Gail had words for the rookie.

"What the fucking hell were you thinking?! Why was your finger on the trigger? He wasn't even armed!" She could feel her blood pounding, and not in the good way, as she backed the rookie to the wall, her fist gripping his tie. "In what universe was that a good idea? You discharged your weapon without aiming!"

A steady hand touched her shoulder. "Detective," said Oliver, calmly. "I've got this."

Gail stayed still for a moment, registering that she really was losing it on the rookie. She was unloading anger, which was about to turn into something vile if she let it. Oliver said her first name, carefully, and Gail snapped. "Give me. A second."

The entire room went silent. "I'm sorry," whispered the rookie.

"Shut. Up." Gail closed her eyes for a moment. Then she slowly opened her hand, swallowing the unfamiliar feeling under her rage. "Right," she growled, dropping the tie and stepping back.

"You want to wait for me in my office?" Oliver's hand stayed on her shoulder, but it was not restrictive. He was just letting her know he was there. She managed a nod and went to Oliver's office, slamming the door and sitting on the couch.

Breathe. Gail was supposed to concentrate on her breathing. In through the nose, hold it, out through the mouth. Pause. Repeat. It wasn't really helping her not be angry. She closed her eyes and tried to focus on the feeling under the rage. The emotion was maddeningly familiar. Gail pounded her fists on her knees and then it clicked. Oh. That was terror.

Pegging the emotion didn't help her any. She was still mad. Very mad.

The office door opened. Oliver said nothing for a moment, putting down a mug on the coffee table and then sitting beside her. When Gail didn't say anything either, he cleared his throat. "You okay, darling?"

Gail shook her head. "Yes," she said, in opposition to the head shake.

"I've never seen you that angry, Gail," Oliver said gently. "You and Holly okay?"

She had to laugh a little. "It's ... Yes, we're fine." Gail exhaled, shakily.

Wisely, Oliver said, "It was the shooting. You just got shot at by the rifle a week ago, and the gun today. Darling, it's normal to get scared."
"Ollie, can you just ... Can you not?" She covered her face with her hands for a moment. She really just wanted quiet for a moment, maybe she could get her head to shut up. Stupid head.

And Oliver, wise, caring, clever, Oliver, knew that. His hand gently rested between her shoulder blades. "When did you stop talking to me?"

"I never talked to you," muttered Gail.

"You did about Sophie."

"That was different." And a long time ago. Sophie was a teenager now. Oliver inhaled, as if he was going to say something, and Gail cut him off. "I'm still in therapy, Ollie," she whispered.

His hand twitched. "Perik?" His voice was barely a whisper. Gail nodded and then shook her head. "You're gonna have to unpack that, darlin' Peck."

Why was his voice so comforting? Gail sighed. "It's not just Perik," she managed, slowly.

And he asked, carefully, "Do you want me to call Holly?"

"No," Gail said firmly. "I'll talk to her tonight." That was something much, much easier. Talking to Holly. "Sometimes my head screws up. The, um, the anger thing."

Oliver was quiet for a while. "This isn't new," he said with a bit of surprise. She nodded at him. "You were scared. And you didn't know how to feel. So you got angry." She nodded, morosely. Oliver's hand gently patted her back. "I'm sorry you had it worse," he finally sighed.

She laughed softly. "That's pretty subjective, Ollie."

"True!" He let go and fell back, slouching into the couch. "I can't go out there, do my thing anymore. You ... You're way braver, Gail. You go back every day."

"Can't get in a taxi, though," she pointed out.

"You put your uniform on when I needed you this summer."

They both winced, thinking about Dov, probably. "I hate undercover," she muttered.

"Churches still freak me out. But I bet, I bet if someone decked me like Ford did, I bet I'd feel like you did."

Gail snorted. "You heard about the guy who slammed the door in my face?" He nodded, looking a little embarrassed. Gail didn't clearly remember anything about that moment. She remembered the door coming at her, but the next thing that was a good memory was John pulling her off the guy so they could cuff him. She hadn't even registered that she'd blackened her eye until she got home and Holly made her put ice on it.

Smiling at her fondly, Oliver patted her leg. "It's good. That rook is scared to shit about not having his gun in control."

"He should be," muttered Gail. "Holly would have vivisected him if he'd shot me."

They both paused and laughed. "Drink your tea, darlin', and tell me something nice."

She picked up the tea. "Viv started second grade."
"Ah! The age I met you!" His eyes twinkled. Gail laughed and shoved Oliver's shoulder.

When she recapped the day for Holly, as they cleaned up the house after dinner, her wife's face grew unhappy. "Are you okay?"

Gail nodded. "I think so. It's been a while since I just ... Lost myself. I called my therapist, though. Just because. She said it was a mostly normal reaction." Exhaling, Holly nodded back and leaned back against the counter, her hands on her hips and her head down. "I don't think it's getting worse," Gail added, suddenly worried.

"No, oh, God, honey no!" Holly's head popped up and she looked concerned. "It's just not... I wish it would go away."

Sighing, Gail leaned her shoulder against the fridge and looked at Holly's shoes. "I'm sorry." She hated the feeling of being weak like this, of not recognizing feelings. Of course, at her best, she'd never been in great touch with them anyway, so it wasn't totally unexpected. Reflexively, Gail folded her arms across herself. Vulnerable. She felt vulnerable and she hated it.

But Holly looked softer. Her expression was almost tender. "Not for me. For you." Turning to face Gail, Holly braced one hand on the counter and cupped Gail's face with the other. "You hate this," she added.

"Bit, yeah," agreed Gail, unhappily.

"I don't think less of you, honey. You're incredible." Holly's thumb brushed across Gail's cheekbone. "You're brave and you keep going out there."

Gail sighed. "That's what Oliver said."

"He's right." Holly's hand eased down, the thumb running over Gail's lips. "You're brave."

"You said that already."

"You needed to hear it again." That may be true. She didn't feel brave. Gail closed her eyes and leaned her head into Holly's hand. "You're not broken. You're brave. A little insane and bitchy, but I'm really fond of that." Gail puffed a laugh. "I'm going to kiss you," Holly informed her.

Smiling, Gail unfolded her arms and leaned in to kiss Holly slowly. "How come you put up with me?"

Blithely, Holly replied, "The sex." Gail laughed and cupped Holly's face in her hands to kiss her again. "You're still the weird, hate-people, girl I fell in love with, Gail," smiled Holly. "All those things you call broken make you interesting and deep and wonderful. And dark. But I love your dark."

"I'm pretty sure that makes you insane," teased Gail.

Holly didn't deny that, she just smiled and took hold of one of Gail's hands. They didn't say anything else, just walked up to the bedroom. The easy part of life was this. Having someone for support, someone who listened to you and you listened to them. It was safe here, at home, with family.

She sighed and stared at the nightlight, trying to remember when she slept in the dark. Back when she lived at home with her parents, all the lights went off. The alarm was on every night, but the lights were off and the house was quiet. Here the house was quiet too, they had a more basic alarm system, but night-lights were always on. Before that, her closet light was on. Before that ... Her
mother would come into her room, after Perik, and turn off the lights. And Gail would wait, get back up, and turn on the nightstand light again. Nick ... He slept with his bathroom light on. It was coincidental. Nick had trouble sleeping in the dark after the army. Not that she'd stayed at his place much. She was always gone in the night.

By contrast, Holly had gone out and bought night-lights after one night seeing Gail have a nightmare. They weren't even sleeping together then. She bought them again when they got back together, before they even really starting dating again. Gail slipped out of bed and walked over to the little light, switching it off and sitting on the end of the bed.

The bed dipped a little later, Holly sat down next to her, skin still warm from her shower. "Hey."

"Hey." She leaned into Holly's shoulder.

Holly's fingers sought out Gail's, lacing through hers. "Is that on purpose?"

"Yeah," nodded Gail, looking at the light.

The hand squeezed hers. "Okay, honey." Holly pressed her lips to Gail's forehead and got under the covers. Gail scooted under and curled against Holly, breathing in her nearness. Switching off her bedside light, Holly found Gail's hand again and squeezed.

Sometime in the night, Gail woke up with a start. She knew why it was dark right away. "I turned the light off," she told herself softly, eyes adjusting to the light from the outside. Holly was still soundly asleep, sprawled in the middle of the bed, a hand gripping Gail's nightgown. There was the faintest worry line creasing Holly's forehead, and Gail reached over to smooth it out with her thumb. With a happy sigh, Holly's lips curved into a smile, and she slept on.

Gail tried to figure out why she woke up. She didn't have a nightmare. There wasn't a sticky sweatiness to the bedclothes and she didn't have the thick headache. This was just normal insomnia. Gravy. Settling back down, Gail closed her eyes and listened to Holly's deep breathing until she drifted off again.

The knock on her office door was familiar and Holly smiled as she looked up. "Hey- oh. Nick." She had expected to see Gail, the only person she knew who used that particular cadence on a door. To find her wife's ex-fiancé standing there in uniform was perplexing. If it had been Steve, she would have understood. But Nick?

"Hi, Holly." Not Dr. Stewart. Nick, like Gail, was always very precise with that. If they were on the job, she was a doctor. Ergo Nick had a personal favor. "Can I come in for a second?"

She waved her hand at the couch and Nick quietly closed the door behind himself. "Sure. You're always welcome." It wasn't true, but she wanted it to be.

"Wow. Gail said you got promoted to the same job. I didn't think that came with a new office."

Holly looked around. "It was a shock to me too," she admitted. "Kinda dig the view, though. If you squint just right, you can see Fifteen."

Nick went to the window, oriented himself off some unknown landmark, and stared intently. "Oh hey, you can. That's the car Duncan parked this morning."

"You must have amazing vision," laughed Holly.
"Twenty/fifteen. And Gail still out shoots me with a pistol."

"She practices a lot." Holly leaned back in her chair. "You okay?" She couldn't fathom why Nick would show up to talk to her. They weren't exactly bosom buddies. Holly still resented Nick a little and, if she were being truthful, was a bit jealous of Nick and Gail's friendship. She knew Gail would never leave her for him, but irrational feelings were, by their definition, irrational.

Nick looked over his shoulder and nodded. "Are you?" When Holly looked confused, he explained, "Gail's been ... Intense. She gets that way, sometimes. I saw it when her mother got pissed off about college. Gail just bottles things up."

So Nick, seeing Gail had been in one of those moods, came to check on Holly. It was sweet. Weird and incestuous in the way Fifteen tended to be, but sweet. "Nick, we're fine."

He sat down and laced his fingers together. "If I tell you I still love her, will that- yeah, yeah it did."

Holly knew her face was giving her away. She did not have a poker face. McNally cleaned her out the last time they played poker, even after Gail swore not to reveal her tells. Right now she knew that stupid, illogical, irrational jealousy was peeking out. "It's not you."

"Wow, you do not lie well."

She scowled. "I know what you mean, Nick. I know you mean you love her like Oliver and Dov do. It's just... " When Holly trailed off, Nick nodded.

"We were engaged. We're really close. We work together a lot. I get it, Holly. Honestly, there's nothing romantic with Gail. We were toxic as a couple. I've had some pretty awesome relationship collapses since then. Like Andy? Yikes. But me and Gail were just bad for each other." There was a way he said it that caught Holly's attention. Was Nick still hung up on Andy? That would make sense, she supposed. "It doesn't matter, Holly. She loves you. And it's just... I know loving her can be rough."

That was weirder. He was offering to be a shoulder. "Thank you," she said slowly, trying to figure out how to get out of the embarrassing conversation.

"Is she okay? After being shot at by that rifle, I know she's been wound up." When Holly nodded, Nick tilted his head. "Really? I asked and she told me to fuck off."

Holly smiled. That was her wife. "She's okay. Honestly. She's talking about it, working through it."

"And you and Vivian are okay? She's not doing anything stupid?"

Holly shook her head. "She's baking a lot more, which is funny because she hates it, but she's okay. Oliver and Noelle take her shooting. Vivian makes her come to the batting cages with us. She's really okay."

His soft eyes studied her for a while. Nick was a warm person. He had a boy-scout smile, but not in the way that Chris did. Where Chris was gentle and innocent, Nick was the warm protector. He wanted to be the guy who shielded you, who stood between you and danger. And you couldn't do that with Gail. Gail had to be in front, she had to be first. She had to be the one between you and harm's way. But in the moments where she was scared, she had to trust you to be able to shield her. Gail needed someone to be strong enough to know she needed them without having to say it.

And Holly needed someone who would move the world for her. Holly wanted someone who would pick her, who would sacrifice for her, and who would stay by her. When she tried to run, Holly
needed someone to stay her with a hand or a look or a roll of the eyes. When she was scared, she needed a rock. Gail was her rock and she was Gail's port in the storm.

Right then she saw in Nick what had both attracted Gail to him and what drove them apart. He wanted to make sure Holly was protected from Gail. Just in case.

Before Nick could form a reply, Holly smiled. "I promise, Nick. She's good. We're good. It's really sweet you're worried."

Nick exhaled loudly. "Okay. If you need anything, call. Either of you. Promise?"

She promised and watched Nick leave. In part she was amused. Gail used to protest that no one cared about her, no one would watch out for her. The truth was everyone, from Nick and Oliver to Andy and of course Holly would all watch her back. They would all protect her. They'd all go to the line for each other. Even for Gail.

Back after they'd gotten married, Andy had shown up out of the blue to tell her a weird, convoluted story about how Gail was not easy to get on with, but she was a good person. That Andy had wanted Gail's blessing for her and Nick because she really liked Gail and wanted to keep her as a friend. Because Gail as a friend was the best kind of friend you could have. Gail was loyal and would fight for you. Gail was the friend who would take the bullet for you.

They all knew that. And yet Gail wouldn't trust them. Oh she trusted them to watch her back on the street. She couldn't trust them with her real self, though. Gail trusted them with the cop, not the woman. Gail barely trusted Holly with the woman, after some of the things she'd said and done. It was so incredibly precious to Holly that Gail had given her heart to Holly the second time. It was more cherished than the first time, when Gail reached out to her. She wasn't the only previously straight girl Holly had slept with, which meant she really did know how it was a massive moment of trust.

And Gail, god, Gail trusted her. Twice. With everything. With all the damage the world had done to her, with all the abuse she'd taken, she still reached out to Holly and trusted and love her.

And in return she trusted Gail. Someone who supported her and loved her. Got her humor. She loved that first about Gail. That was someone she could tell dark stories to, make bad jokes, and she'd laugh. Gail changed her for the better on top of it. Without ever asking her to change, Gail slowly and subtly changed Holly into a different kind of person.

That said, she didn't bring up her little chat with Nick. Gail probably wouldn't mind, but sometimes you needed to keep things in your back pocket. Besides, she and Nick were going to have to forge some sort of friendship. It was irrational and illogical to be irritated by him all the time. Especially when Gail still loved him like family. So she did try. She reached out to Nick, asking him to keep an eye on Gail when she was having a bad day and, in turn, listening to him lament about how he was sure Sam was cheating on Andy.

It was only a few days later when the news of the divorce hit the precinct. Gail warned Holly with a text that, as requested, Sam confessed everything to Andy. Holly sent back a photo of Swarek with a black eye. Apparently Andy decked him, which wasn't funny, except it totally was. Swarek knew well why he was in the doghouse and made no complaint or comment about it to anyone. Not even his friend Oliver was in his corner for this fight.

The shoulder Andy cried on was first Traci's, then Holly's, and finally Nick's. That only made things hard for poor Nick, who still held a candle for Andy. In turn, Nick complained to Holly that it was hard to be a breakup buddy when you still loved someone. Years. He'd loved her for years. When
Holly remarked on that to Gail one night, the blonde muttered it was gratifying.

"Gratifying?" Holly startled, picking up the wool blanket. Even if it was winter, they liked to sit outside for a bit in the quiet.

Gail nodded, opening the door for her. "Given the whole drama, knowing he's still in love with her makes me feel better about it."

This may be why Holly still felt uncomfortable around Nick, she realized. "He's not yours anymore," she noted.

"I'm a bad person, Holly," sighed Gail, sitting on the swinging bench. "I'm really possessive."

Snuggling up, Holly pulled the blanket around them and rested her head on Gail's shoulder. "Sometimes," agreed Holly.

With a soft laugh, Gail wrapped an arm around Holly. "Did you ever date anyone who fell in love with someone else?"

"No," Holly admitted. "I had a major crush on this girl in my math class when I was dating my last boyfriend." Gail laughed. Of course she laughed. "Shut up, Peck. You can sleep outside."

"Oh so you were the bad girlfriend," she teased.

And Holly admitted to it. "Terrible, terrible girlfriend. Turns out I didn't like men."

Gail smiled and looked over their backyard. "Well. I think your ex-boyfriends would probably be happy to know you still like women."

That was something Holly could understand actually. "I certainly appreciate knowing at least some of my ex-girlfriends are still lesbians." Under the blanket, her hand found Gail's left, rubbing the ring. "So you're saying it's easier dealing with Nick still being in love with Andy because you guys split up over it?"

"Like I said, I'm a bad person."

"Nah," smiled Holly, leaning in as much as she could without being in Gail's lap. "It's one of the things I liked about you, you know."

"Liked?" Of course Gail caught on to the tense.

Since becoming a detective, Gail's normal ability to memorize conversations had taken a new life. Holly had complained to Elaine, who apologized but said Gail was born that way. Then she told a lovely story about six year old Gail telling the teacher she was boring and had taught them that the exact same way the day before. And then reciting it. Amused, Holly teased Gail about it for a while. She had gotten used to Gail's weird memory trick, and thankfully it wasn't something she pulled on Holly much anymore. Once Gail had done that, back when they were still dating the second time, and Holly had dropped Gail off at the Frat House without so much as a kiss good night. Gail's apology had been sincere. She'd not meant it to come out like an attack, reciting Holly's misspoken words that had so amused her. That was the last time Gail had done it to Holly, and she never brought it up in an argument.

"Shush," sighed Holly, poking Gail's ribs. "It's what I liked about you when I met you. The way you were honest and hated fakers. And didn't flinch when I said I was a lesbian."
Gail snorted. "It wasn't a shock." And Gail didn't have much of a gaydar. She just didn't care enough to take that much of an interest in people. Holly sighed and shook her head.

They sat in the cool evening, watching their breath puff, saying nothing more of things. It was easier than she'd thought, and harder too. Being a parent and having a family was draining and time consuming, it took away from some of the things she wanted to do, but she liked being a unit. Something more than just having fun. Not that fun wasn't fun, but who knew family was more fun? Well, besides her parents who'd been hinting at it for ages.

For whatever reason, Nick called her and not Gail a few weeks later, asking her to pick him up from a bar. Not the Penny. It was such an odd, out of the blue, request to hear at one in the afternoon, Holly found herself on the way before she'd really processed what had been asked. Nick had stopped drinking over a year ago... No longer. Since around the time Gail's car was blown up, he'd been sober. Why would he be at a bar today?

Halfway to the bar, she knew she had to ask someone, but not Gail. Tapping in the number, she gnawed her lip until the woman answered. "Hey, Holly. Something wrong?"

"No, no, it's ... Um. Hi, Andy."

"Hi," replied the confused Andy McNally. "I just saw Gail a minute ago, she was talking to Traci."

"I was calling you actually," admitted Holly. She lied poorly. Terribly, in fact. Gail said it was adorable, but it meant she had to stick close to the truth today. "Is... Is today an anniversary of anything I should remember? I've just got this nagging feeling, like I forgot something."

Andy hesitated. "Uh, well kind of. It's not a happy anniversary though," she mumbled. "Hang on, lemme get somewhere- Jesus, Duncan take him to lockup. And shower. You smell." There was the sound of a door closing. "Okay. So. Was Gail acting weird?"

It was really sweet how they were all concerned about Gail. "No," Holly said firmly. "No, she's fine. Why? Did I forget something really important?"

"It's almost our ten years."

That surprised Holly. "Really? Do you get a watch or something?"

Andy laughed. There was something refreshing about her honest laugh. "I think we do, actually," she admitted.

But Nick was three years behind them. "That's not it. Elaine was hinting about that a few days ago. You know how Gail hates parties."

"Hates them in her name," agreed Andy. "There is one other thing."

Holly sighed. "And it's not good?"

"I don't know," Andy confessed. "Did she tell you about getting suspended?"

"Yes, of course." Holly knew that story well. The moral of the story was that Gail didn't use her Peck Powers unless she had to. Weirdly, Holly was pretty sure Gail had used them for her sake. "Is that today?"

"Tomorrow. Think that's it?"
Frowning, Holly pulled up at the bar. Once again she found herself wishing for Gail's ability to recall conversations. Holly could do lectures and books, but conversations engaged her brain in a different way. Not a way that leant itself to memorization. "I guess..."

There was a strange laugh from Andy. "Wow, you're a terrible liar."

"Ugh, don't start, Andy." But if even Andy, who apparently did not do well pretending to be a prostitute as a rookie, could see it, the game was up. "I'm hanging up now."

"Hey, wait. Holly... Thank you."

"Me?"

"Gail told me that you saw Sam and Marlo and... Just thank you."

That had been months ago. Six months of holding that secret. "I should have told you right away."

But Andy surprised her. "No. Gail was right. Sam... Sam has this way he gets, with no plan, go with the flow, and sometimes it looks different than what it was." She sighed. "I'm pissed at him, but it's kind of a fitting end, I guess. And... You have no reason to care. But you did."

"You're Gail's friend, Andy. She'd do the same for mine." Holly tried to picture Gail doing the same for Lisa and smiled.

"That's... Gail's a good friend. Don't tell her I said that."

"Wouldn't dare," smiled Holly. "Thanks, Andy." They hung up and she groaned. Why had she called Andy? She'd forgotten, somehow, that Andy and Nick had that weird thing. God knew Andy didn't need any more of that shit.

Taking a deep breath, Holly got out of her car and went into the bar. She didn't see Nick's truck or motorcycle anywhere, which was a good sign. Privately, Holly loved the motorcycle and knew how to ride them. A million years ago, she'd had her own crotch rocket. When Gail found that out, she'd bullied Nick into loaning her his bike and picked Holly up for a date on it, which was how Holly found out Gail also knew how to ride. That had been a good day.

But the bike wasn't here. Holly glanced around the dimly lit bar. "Hey, I'm looking for a guy. Dark blonde hair, looks like he was the quarterback?" The bartender pointed over to a corner. "Thanks... Is he paid up?" The bartender nodded. Clearly not a conversationalist.

When Holly got to Nick's table, he smiled up at her, blearily. "You came."

"Not sure why," she admitted.

"Yeah," he agreed. "Thought about calling Chris."

But Chris was in Timmins, visiting his ex and her son. All this time and he still loved Christian. "That wouldn't have done you any good. You going to puke in my car?" Nick shook his head and pushed himself up.

Unlike Gail, who tended to be cheerful and bouncy when drunk, Nick was clearly on the depressed drunk end of things. He was silent as he slid into the passenger seat, resting his head against the window. Holly shook her head, thankful she actually had his address in her phone. That was something Gail had done, putting in the numbers and addresses for all her close friends into both Holly and Vivian's phones. Just in case.
"I always thought you'd have a truck. Or an SUV," said Nick, out of nowhere.

"Why's that?" Holly liked her little car, though Gail wanted to replace it with something with all wheel drive. And heated seats. Around February, Holly tended to agree.

"Not really gay. This is … boring. Normal. You're not boring."

Holly smiled. "Thank you?"

"Welcome." He looked at her. "I had a really bad day."

She nodded. "I kind of guessed. I thought you stopped drinking."

Grimacing, Nick looked away. "Fell off. Hard… It's hard to want to be myself. I don't like myself today."

It sounded a lot like Gail used to. Maybe that was why the two were still friends. It certainly explained why Gail fell back into his orbit when he showed back up. Someone else who understood what it was like to hate yourself. But wouldn't that also explain why the two had been toxic? They fed the bad parts of each other. When Gail looked at Holly like she was the universe's most precious gift, it made Holly want to be better. Mutual inspiration, pushing each other up.

She sighed a little. "Drinking's not going to help that, Nick."

"No," he agreed. "Gail said she didn't want to be friends with a drunk."

"Sounds like her," smiled Holly. "Is that why you didn't call her?"

He nodded. "Kinda. She doesn't… I killed people."

What the hell were you supposed to say to that? People? Not 'a person' (though Holly knew Nick was the one who shot Ford in the precinct years ago). That clearly wasn't the only person he shot. She almost asked if he'd killed someone recently, but realistically Gail would have told her about that. If she knew… Gail was a Peck. She'd know. "I'm sorry," she said carefully.

Nick looked back at her. "Gail hasn't. It's good. Killing someone… it eats you."

Reflexively, Holly shuddered at the thought of her Gail dealing with that. It might break her. "Yeah," muttered Nick, clearly following along with her thought. "Today. Today a friend of mine died. Because I... Because of me."

Her head snapped over to look at him. "What!?"

"Years ago," waved Nick, slumping in the seat.

"Jesus, don't scare me, Nick." She felt bad for her natural, angry, reaction and started to apologize when Nick laughed. "How is that funny?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "It's not funny. Nothing's funny. Today... Today I was the reason my friend died. He took my place on patrol, Ricky Chavez." Nick sighed. "Because the week before I'd killed a guy and the day before I didn't kill a guy and he shot one of my buddies and I needed a break and Ricky wanted to help." He wiped his face. "I was Andy's breakup buddy. And she tried to be mine."

Holly thought about that for a moment. She remembered the time Gail had brought a drunk Nick home to sleep it off, saying it was the anniversary of his army buddy who died. And that was...
Tomorrow. Except it wasn't. It was today. "Awkward."

"You said it."

She pulled up at Nick's apartment and frowned. "I don't think you should be alone, Nick..."

He shrugged. "No booze at home. Bring me to your place, Gail'll yell at me and Vivian'll be weird... Poor kid. Did her dad hit her?"

"Not that we know," sighed Holly. But he was right. Vivian wouldn't deal well with drunk Nick in the house. She gave up for a moment, hauling Nick upstairs and letting him fall on his bed.

Face planted in the pillow, Nick sighed. "I killed Ford, that guy who took Oliver." She nodded, tugging his shoes off. "I killed a lot of people in Afghanistan. It sits on you." With Holly's urging, Nick got out of his jacket. She drew the line at his jeans. He didn't wear a big buckle and would cope. "And then... Then she wants to talk to me."

"She?"

"Girl Guide."

Only Gail called Andy that. "Andy? She needs a breakup buddy?" The man on the bed grunted. God. That was worse than Gail helping her pack. At least there really wasn't anyone else besides Gail for Holly. She looked around the room and wrinkled her nose. Boys were so gross and fusty. The apartment was gross.

"I know that look," muttered Nick, looking up at her. "You're thinking you can't understand how Gail ever came over here." When Holly smiled sheepishly, he returned the look. "She didn't. I mean. She did. Twice. Once she told me that my sheets gave her a rash. Second time she left in the middle of the night right after... Usually I went to her place and she'd kick me out at night or early in the morning. Only spent the whole night a couple times... And tried to kill her with tomatoes and eggs."

"She's allergic and she hates eggs," remarked Holly, surprised. "How- how did. Oh." She remembered Gail telling her how she didn't like staying over at Nick's when she felt weird. He didn't know she had nightmares still.

Nick muttered something that sounded like 'hah.' He rolled over. "Dizzy." Squeezing his eyes closed, Nick looked green. "You're good for her. Is she good for you?"

She leaned against Nick's doorframe. "I think so," she said shyly. "She makes me think differently. Like I'm more than just a brain and a geeky nerd. Or a lesbian. She redefines me and I like... I really like how I look to her. She makes me feel complete." Wrapping her arms around herself, Holly couldn't help the smile on her face. The way Gail managed to be protective without being restrictive, the way she listened and said what she felt, those were not always there in their relationship. But the awe and amazement... Gail cut into her heart like a scalpel. So sharp, Holly hadn't known she was bleeding until Gail walked away and the agony threatened to consume her. The blonde didn't let people close, but she let Holly in and God, how much a fool she'd been to not see how fragile that made Gail.

The man on the mattress was silent for a while. "S'how I feel about Andy." His eyes remained closed. "Can you lock up? I wanna sleep."

"Sure. Keys?"

"Spare's on the hook."
Pushing off from the door frame, Holly took a moment to tidy. Okay, fine, Holly checked his house for alcohol or worse before putting his car and motorcycle keys in a ziplock bag and tossing them into the freezer. She'd done that for Lisa more than once when she'd been on a bender. Taking Nick's phone, she plugged it in and found a scrap of paper to leave him a note saying she'd brought him home, call if he had questions. She frowned at the gun safe. She could move that, but he'd probably freak out. She had to just hope on this one. Nick hadn't seemed suicidal.

"If you hurt yourself, Nicholas, Gail will never forgive me," she growled.

"Won't," mumbled Nick from the bedroom.

"Call me in the morning for your keys." Holly sighed and let herself out, taking Nick's spare house keys with her.

She didn't tell Gail. Couldn't. But something had changed between her and Nick. Something deep and weird was different. She couldn't find herself able to feel jealous of his connection with Gail, for one. Now, when she saw Gail and Nick goofing around, she saw friends with a multitude of connections. In Nick, she saw the angry Gail who once was, but also the fun Gail who loved life and didn't worry overly much about the way it looked. The consequences, certainly, but she didn't worry about how people saw her.

Because Gail could see herself reflected in Holly's eyes just as clearly as Holly saw herself in Gail's. In each other's eyes, they were perfect.

Some afternoon later, they ran into Nick at the park. Gail was actually on the jungle gym with Vivian, playing a game Holly didn't pretend to understand but took photos of them. Nick smirked at her, bringing over cocoas as a peace offering. "You are so smitten," he teased.

"Shut up," blushed Holly, taking a cocoa. "She's just really cute."

"Yeah, she is." They watched Gail and Vivian for a moment before Nick spoke again. "Thank you. For picking me up and listening."

Holly shook her head. "You're always going to be a part of Gail's life. I may as well get used to it."

Beside her, he startled. "Oh my god. You were really jealous? Of me and Gail?"

"My wife can hurt you in very novel ways, Nicholas."

He said no more. Not even when Gail came over with Vivian on her back, demanding her cocoa, but only after kissing Holly. Holly and Nick shared a brief look of sheepish understanding. They knew what it was like to care about Gail. They would always have that in common.

Their new friendship, such as it was, did not go unnoticed. Chris joined them as a sort of group of people who loved Gail club. It was curiously easier to think about Gail and her dangerous job, knowing that her two exes had her back. There was more faith in the force, she'd told Nick, and then broke into giggles and made a Jedi joke that the man caught and teased her about for a while.

She sat with him when Gail and the rest of her rookie class had a small ceremony to celebrate ten years on the force, getting watches and handshakes. Ten years. Vivian, pulled out of school to share the fun, was in awe that they'd been doing that longer than she'd been alive, which did not help anyone feel young. But at ten years, Nick remarked that they were very different. Andy and Chris were TOs, Gail and Traci were detectives, and Dov was Oliver's right hand man, filling in to lead parade and run the show some times. He was due to make white shirt any day.
And that year, at Gail's annual shoot out birthday, Vivian had happily helped score everyone, flaunting both her math skills and the cool watch Gail had given her. Nick, who had 'won' the year before (and came within five points of Gail), told her she was the only seven year old who had that cool of a watch. He and Vivian seemed to turn the corner of friendship, with her calling him an uncle, just like she did to Oliver.

While he didn't do well at hiding the longing in his eyes for Andy, Uncle Nick was definitely a part of their family now.
"Mom, where do babies come from?"

Gail blinked a few times. "That's a complicated question, kiddo. What brought that on?"

Buckling herself in to the booster seat in the car, Vivian shrugged. "Matty's mom's pregnant. I asked Holly, but she got all weird and I don't understand it."

Smothering a smirk, Gail checked the buckles and closed the door. Holly had some weird points of discomfort, including nudity and apparently talking to kids about sex. "Well. How about you tell me what you know, and I'll help straighten it out."

That was accepted and Vivian explained that she knew it involved a man and a woman, which Holly had told her, but when she'd asked Holly about how sex factored in, she got all weird. "And Matty said that you get babies from sex, but you and Holly have sex, but you're not trying to have a baby."

Sighing, Gail started the car. "Well. Making a baby can involve sex. Most of the time, a couple has to have have sex to make one. But there are other ways."

"That's what Mom said," sighed Vivian.

"She's a doctor, Viv. She should know. But sex doesn't mean there's going to be a baby. There are ... There are ways to make sure that doesn't happen."

"Is that what you and Holly do?"

"In a ... Yes." It was true, in a manner of speaking.

With a huff, Vivian complained, "You're leaving stuff out."

Gail eyed her daughter via the rearview mirror. "You know how sometimes there's stuff that you're not ready for? Like algebra?"

Vivian tilted her head. "Because I don't know the other stuff good enough so it won't make sense even if you tell me?"

"Exactly. Sex and babies is kind of one of those. And sex is something... Okay, pretty much every grown up has sex." When Vivian made a grossed out face, Gail laughed. "See, that face is how I know you're not ready for it yet."

A soft 'oh' came from the back seat. "When will I be old enough? When I stop thinking that kissing's gross?"

"Mmm, before that actually."

"Why do you guys kiss?"

"It feels good," Gail grinned. "As yes, so does sex."

The silence from the backseat lasted until they got to the house. "Mom said there was an egg and a … sperm and they meet up and make a baby."

Gail was clearly going to have to harass Holly about not warning her to this conversation. "That's
true," she confirmed. "Get your backpack."

"I get how it happens… But how does it happen?"

It was really hard not to laugh at the abject honesty from the girl. "I'm gonna warn you, kiddo, it involves a penis." For a moment, Vivian looked appalled, but then it seemed enlightenment kicked in. Homework, which was usually the first order of business once home, was delayed to have a chat about sex and babies.

At six, Vivian really had only sorted out that there was kissing and touching. Now she understood a little more, but that meant Gail had to explain about bad touches, and permission, and those sorts of things. Once Vivian seemed alright with it, Gail texted Holly.

*Thanks for the warning that the Monkey wants to know about sex.*

Her phone rang a moment later. Holly's very sheepish voice came down the line, "Uh, sorry?"

"You better be. No warning? Really? You suck."

"I was a little shell shocked!"

"It's just sex, Holly," laughed Gail. She was only a little annoyed. It wasn't like Holly was prudish about sex, but she was certainly a little more apprehensive about talking to kids about it. "And FYI, she knows how to spell it."

There was a slight pause before Holly chuckled. "Not with a C then?"

Gail grinned. "We also had the good touch, bad touch chat, by the way."

"Oh, yeah, that would have been good. Gail, I just don't— How do you even know how to explain that?"

"It's sex, Holly. It's not a big mystery. We do it because it feels good and it makes us feel good, and sometimes you end up with a baby." Silence. "You totally gave her the ovum and sperm talk, didn't you?"

In a low voice, Holly muttered, "No." Before Gail could tease her, Holly added, "Not exactly... I did consider it."

She couldn't help teasing, "Maybe I should give you the sex talk."

"I'm pretty sure I know how it works," snapped Holly, clearly uncomfortable. "I'm hanging up so I can finish work. Some of us have busy jobs."

"Some of us are doing paperwork in the kitchen. I love how everyone thinks that I have to be out on the streets to do my job," sassed Gail. "I have the ability to do my job and my job." The moment she said it, though, she winced. They were perilously close to the land of an argument.

Holly's tone was tight. "I'm hanging up now, Gail."

Yeah, way to piss off your wife, sighed Gail. Why not just imply you were a better parent? What could possibly go wrong? Gail felt like an idiot. "Sorry, that wasn't funny."

"No, it wasn't." Holly sighed. "I love you. You're annoying me right now, honey."

"Sorry. I love you, too." And Holly hung up. Gail made a face at her phone, but mostly at herself.
"Note to self," she muttered. "Sometimes you are not funny, Peck."

With a long sigh, Gail bent her head to her work. Vivian came back from her room and turned on the TV, alerting Gail to the time. It was time for the six PM news, and her weird kid wanted to watch. That meant, work or not, Gail had to sort out dinner. It was a struggle to do it all. To be a mom and a cop and a wife. She wondered how her parents pulled it off, given their jobs were even more complicated than hers, and they’d had two kids.

For a moment, Gail thought about a second kid. She pondered what it would be like to have a baby, maybe even theirs. It was strange, but Gail had never envisioned herself pregnant. A parent, yes, but giving birth? Hah! The idea of pregnancy never once appealed to her. The idea of Holly being pregnant though, now that was interesting. Thinking about all those lovely curves of Holly’s, accentuated by that roundness pregnant women got, and the boobs. Wow.

She was smiling about that to herself when Holly came home, scowl plastered on her face. "Why is your mother grinning like an idiot?" asked Holly.

"Dunno," admitted Vivian. "There's a measles outbreak again."

Her wife and daughter discussed the news, Holly adding in what she'd gleaned from the radio on the drive home, and Gail finished steaming the vegetables. Quinoa, veggies, and chicken breasts. It was a pretty simple meal, but one everyone liked. "Go set the table, please," Holly asked of Vivian, taking herself upstairs.

A few moments later, table set, Holly returned and tapped Gail's shoulder. "Hey," smiled Gail carefully, putting down the spatula.

"Hey," replied Holly, leaning in for a proper kiss.

Okay. She wasn't in trouble. Still, the warning voice in her head reminded her that incessant teasing was why Nick felt she was a bad girlfriend. She hadn't minded being that to him. Gail did mind being that to Holly. She didn't mean to pick fights, it just sometimes came out that way. "I'm sorry," whispered Gail, tentatively wrapping her hands around Holly's waist.

And Holly smiled softly, leaning in and sliding her hands up Gail's arms, lacing them behind Gail's head. "Apology accepted, provided you're done super-mom'ing today."

"After I serve dinner," agreed Gail.

Holly made a hmmm noise and let go of Gail, picking up the spatula. "Alright. Holly took the plates from Vivian and plated the chicken.

Watching her wife and daughter plate the vegetables and the quinoa, Gail couldn't stop the grin on her face, nor did she really want to. "Mom," muttered Vivian. "How come Mom looks like that?"
"She's happy," laughed Holly.

"She looks scary." Vivian put a wine glass in front of Gail and Holly's places at the table.

"Gail's smiles can be kind of creepy." Holly popped the Rosé wine and brought it over. "You happy, Peck?"

Smiling ear to ear, Gail nodded. "I am very happy, Stewart. And you know my motto is whatever makes me happy." Holly ran a hand through Gail's hair.

They talked about little things through dinner. Gail's cooking class would be over at the end of the year and she had no plans to take another just yet. Holly was going to stick with hockey, but perhaps stop playing softball except with Gail and her Division. That had been a pretty easy argument, Gail just informed the team organizer that she wanted to play with her wife. And honestly, Gail enjoyed the game. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say she liked the barbecues after the game.

For her part, Vivian asked if she could play sports too. Olivia was joining a youth soccer team and Vivian was interested. Of course Holly perked up at that, promising to get that set up for her, no matter how much Gail rolled her eyes. After dinner, Gail went over case notes while Holly read up on new procedures and Vivian built something with her Legos and Star Wars toys.

"Mom?"

It was weird how Gail could tell which one of them Vivian meant when she said that. "What's up, Monkey?" Gail marked her place in the notes and looked up.

Vivian looked up over the plastic brick construction. "I get how it works. But ... How does it work?"

Her mind was blank. "How what works? Sorry, I ..." Gail trailed off as the clue dropped. "Oh." She put down the case folder and scooted forward, resting her elbows on their knees. "What part?"

"Well. If they're not trying to have babies, then why do people do it?"

"It feels good," smiled Gail. Out of the corner of her eye, Gail caught Holly's head lifting out from the journal looking confused.

Frowning, Vivian clicked a block into place. "Is that all?"

"Pretty much. It feels real good and when it's with the right person, it's kinda awesome." Gail jerked her chin at Holly, still smiling.

"You've had sex with people other'n Holly?" That seemed to surprise the girl.

Well, she wasn't going to lie to her daughter about this. "Yes. And Holly dated people before me, too."

There was a look of shock on Vivian's face. "Dating means sex?"

"When you're a grown up, yes. When you're Sophie's age, it means kissing and holding hands usually." On the couch, Holly sat up a little, listening in but not interrupting.

"You guys do that too." They both nodded and Vivian frowned. "I don't get it. It doesn't sound fun at all. It sounds ... messy."

Holly laughed and covered her face. "Hush," warned Gail. "It is," she told Vivian. "It's messy, it can be kinda gross, but it's fun. And one day you might start thinking it sounds fun instead of so gross."
Looking doubtful, Vivian eyed Holly. "Is she telling the truth?" When Holly nodded, the girl frowned. "It's weird," she finally decided.

"Very," agreed Gail. "It's also getting up near bed time for small humans. Wanna wrap up your epic build there?"

Vivian argued to leave it out for the night, which Gail agreed to if all the loose pieces were picked up and put in the bucket. Without further argument, Vivian went upstairs to shower and change into her jammies.

They managed to wait until the shower was on before they broke into giggles. "Why are you so much better than I am at that?" Holly lifted her glasses to wipe at her eyes.

Gail tossed her file onto the coffee table. "My mother is surprisingly enlightened about sex," she grinned. "I was on the pill when I was fourteen."

"Wait ... You didn't have sex till you were fifteen."

"This is true," admitted Gail. "But she wanted me to be ready. Don't get pregnant before you're sure, but there's nothing wrong with sex." Gail shrugged. "You know... I didn't go off the pill until you and I got serious the second time."

Holly shook her head, amused. "The second time?" Getting up, Holly sauntered over and stood in front of Gail. "I'm hurt. I thought you knew you were gay after we slept together."

Smiling up at her wife, Gail wrapped her hands around the back of Holly's thighs and pulled her a little closer. There was a brief hesitation before Holly sat in Gail's lap, hands on Gail's shoulders. "I also knew I was the queen of bad choices and tequila," murmured Gail. She craned her neck a little and was pleased to have Holly meet her partway, lips soft. "I used to be stupid."

"You still are," smiled Holly. "You say things without thinking, you try to be perfect at everything until you burn out." She kissed Gail again. "And you're incredibly smart, a brilliant detective, a great mom, a wonderful wife. And I love you."

They shifted into an easy cuddle, Holly's head nestled in to the hollow of her shoulder. She'd hated cuddling before, she realized, stroking Holly's hair. She thought that she hated being cute, being truthful, being taken care of, being treated tenderly. She'd kind of wanted it with Nick, or really she'd wanted to want it. But she hadn't. Smiling, Gail took Holly's left hand and rubbed her thumb over the gold band. It was everything she was supposed to want, supposed to have, in order to be a perfect Peck. Married, a house, two cars, a kid. None of it was the way she envisioned it as a child.

"This is way better," she sighed, squeezing Holly's hand.

"Better than what?"

"Everything."

Holly generally didn't see people she knew at a hospital, even when she was friends with doctors. And any time she did, it was cause for worry. So when Holly spotted a familiar face sitting in a curtain area, she did a double take. "Chloe?"

Her friend looked over. "Holly! Hi, everything okay?"

"I could ask you the same," she laughed, gesturing.
Chloe looked at herself. "Oh, it's nothing, I made an arrest."

It had been a few weeks since Holly had seen Chloe, though that wasn't too weird. Most of Chloe's work was undercover these days, which had started to put a small strain on her relationship with Dov. Arrests didn't usually end up in the ER though, "Hard take down?"

Lifting her shirt, Chloe showed off a nasty bruise. "He had a baseball bat. I threw up so they made me come here."

It looked terrible. "Spleen?" Holly was guessing based on the location, but a hit to the spleen would make you vomit and be a ticket to an ER.

Chloe was impressed. "That's what they worried about. I had an ultrasound."

"Lucky you, but hey, you're done in time for Christmas!"

"Missed Chanukah, though," laughed Chloe. "I'll surprise Dov tonight."

That meant Chloe didn't know about Dov's news, that he'd passed the sergeants exam. Well, Holly would hold on to that. "He'll be happy to see you," promised Holly.

"What about you?"

"Oh, just an autopsy." Holly shrugged. "Nothing untoward either, but it doesn't hurt to check."

A doctor stepped in just then. "Okay, Detective, we'll have you out of here in a second, I just want to go over your results- oh. Sorry." The young man looked at Holly, confused.

"I'll get going," she grinned at Chloe.

But her friend gave her a slightly pleading look. "Can you stay? Translate?"

Clearly Chloe was bored and Holly wondered how long she'd been here. "Sure," smiled Holly, sitting down.

The doctor looked uncomfortable. "She's the Medical Director," explained Chloe. "And my friend."

"Oooohkay," muttered the doctor. "Well. You didn't break anything. Minor bruising but your liver and spleen are just fine. If you're in any pain, take over the counter acetaminophen. No aspirin or NSAIDs."

Holly blinked. Aspirin made sense, but why NSAID? "Sorry, Chloe do you have a history of heart problems?"

"No," replied the redhead, confused. "I have a stupid blood clot in my neck, which is why I also have an ex-husband. Why?"

"NSAID."

"Oh!" The doctor cut her off. "Sorry, I should have said first, the baby's fine."

Her inner Gail said 'what the what?' Holly turned to look at Chloe, who was wide eyed and stunned. "Baby?" Holly tried to keep her voice neither suggestive nor surprised.

"Baby?" Chloe looked dumbfounded. "I'm pregnant?!"
The doctor babbled until Holly reached over and took his clipboard. "And they said I had terrible bedside manner," muttered Holly, reading the charts. "Okay, Chloe, you're fine. Your spleen is bruised, hence the vomiting, but there's no internal bleeding so you're good to go. If the pain starts to move up to your left shoulder, go back to the hospital." She glanced up as Chloe moved her left arm up and down, checking the pain level one presumed. Gail did the same thing the moment she had an injury. She'd poke at it to assess its status.

"No pain. Good. So ... Uh the other thing?"

Holly cleared her throat. "Yeah, uh, you're pregnant. Looks like two months." She frowned, "Did you not notice you were late or did you spot?"

"Did I ... What? No! I mean yes, I noticed. I was late, but that happens a lot." Chloe started to wave her hands by her face. "How can I be pregnant?! I'm on the pill!"

The doctor cut in. "Are you having regular intercourse-"

"Stop," snapped Holly, in her best Gail voice. "Go away. You're not helping." The man snapped his mouth closed and slunk off. As Holly closed the curtain, she caught the eye of a nurse who was smirking. "Chloe, honey, do me a favor and try to breathe."

Chloe nodded a few times and, hands still waving. "Breathe. Inhale, exhale." Holly put the clipboard down and caught Chloe's hands, breathing loud enough for Chloe to catch on and breathe in sync. Thank god. "Okay. Breathing. Pregnant. Oh god..."

Hushing Chloe much more gently than the doctor, Holly asked, "You're on the pill?" Nodding, Chloe just kept breathing aloud. "And you're late a lot?"

"Not a lot a lot," frowned Chloe. "Just, sometimes. When I'm undercover mostly." Holly tried not to let her 'are you stupid?' expression show, but Chloe caught it. "What?" She snarled almost as good as Gail did sometimes.

Holly coughed. She hated this part of being a doctor. People made you be a doctor for them. "Chloe, when you're stressed enough to make your period late on the pill, you, ah, lower its effectiveness. She waited for the words to sink in, for Chloe's eyes to go wide with realization. "You weren't using a condom?"

"Not with Dov," she yelped, making it hard for Holly not to laugh. "Oh my god. Frank's gonna kill me!"

That was right. Frank was Chloe's godfather. She really was perky Gail-light. "Seeing as I went to his wedding where he was already a father, Chloe, I think out of wedlock babies are okay." Then she paused. "Unless ... It's ... It is Dov's? Right?"

Chloe's eyes widened even more, something Holly hadn't felt was possible. "Oh my god!" The yell was so loud, conversation around them stopped. Chloe started to slap Holly's hands. "You've been living with Gail too long," she wailed. "Of course it's Dov's! Oh my god I hate you!"

Holding her hands up to protect her face, Holly defended herself verbally, "You said you didn't use condoms with Dov! So the obvious inferring is-"

But Chloe was laughing now. "Oh, oh I did. I'm sorry," she stammered. "Oh my god." Chloe's voice dropped to a whisper. "I'm pregnant."

"Yeah, yeah you are," exhaled Holly. They shared a look and Chloe broke first, laughing. Holly had
always liked that about Chloe, that she'd laugh. This was a laugh to express all the insane feelings of the moment. "So, Holly's a great name," she started.

Chloe smothered a smirk. "Oh my god. Stop." But she was clearly not upset with the whole thing. "What am I going to tell Dov?"

"Start small," suggested Holly. "Not that I've actually had this conversation before… When I did with Gail, it was hypothetical and we ended up talking about immaculate conception." Holly sighed. "Mind, I was talking about artificial insemination, but I don't think Gail would have the patience for that and—"

"Hey, has anyone told you that you babble, Dr. Stewart?" Chloe's eyes were bright and amused.

With a sheepish grin, Holly nodded. "Gail does. Often. It's when I'm nervous."

"Why are you nervous?" Chloe ran her hands through her hair and laughed again. "Oh my god. I can't... I'm gonna be a mom!" The bubbly woman grabbed Holly's hands. "Dov's going to be a dad," she squealed and bounced.

They ended up hugging, which was how people like Chloe communicated. "Okay, Mom. You want a ride home, or is there a... What do you call it? A relay?"


"Or... Why don't you come over to my place? I was going to pick up Viv and go home after this anyway." That made Chloe look relieved, so that was what they did. Vivian liked Chloe anyway, which made it much easier. The girl happily chatted away with Chloe, telling her about school and how much she hated French. Of course Chloe, like Gail, was fluent in French and spent the car ride talking to her in the language. It was interesting that while Vivian was quite comfortable talking to Chloe, she told her absolutely nothing about herself.

When they got home, Holly took a moment to text Gail.

Chloe's at our place. She's pregnant. Can you bring Dov over?

The reply was nearly immediate.

Can I tell him?

No!

Spoilsport. I'll bring him over after shift.

That settled, Holly pulled out leftovers and fed the cop while nagging her kid to do her homework. Chloe wanted to talk, though she waited until Vivian was situated. "How hard is it?"

"Being a parent? Insane. Med school was easier," sighed Holly.

"Do you... Are you guys happy?"

Holly glanced at Vivian, who was studiously playing with her pencil instead of doing math. "Vivian, do you need help?"

"No!" The girl stopped spinning the pencil and bent her head down, scribbling away.

"I'm happy," she smiled, watching Vivian work. "It's... It's like being in love. You don't realize
you've got this empty part of you until there someone is, filling it. And maybe you didn't plan for this, or want it, or dream about it, but you think your life would be less without it."

Chloe was quiet for a while. "That is so romantic," she sighed loudly. "You really love her and Gail."

Blushing, Holly picked up her glass. "In totally different ways. But you love Dov, right?"

"I do," nodded Chloe. "He's cute and he's funny and he likes a lot of the things that I do. But he's not like me. He's serious. I'm goofy. I'm a free spirit."

Holly nodded. "His parents were hippies. I bet he sees the best of them in you."

Now Chloe blushed, but she smiled shyly. "God, I hope so. We've never even talked about this!"

A few hours (and one video game challenge from Vivian) later, Gail arrived with Dov, telling him that Holly had a present for him. The man complained, loudly, until he saw Chloe on the couch. He stood there, wearing the white uniform shirt a little awkwardly, eyes wide.

They only had eyes for each other and, a moment later, only arms for each other. Dov swept her into a hug, spinning her around and laughing before kissing her. Both Gail and Vivian complained it was gross, which made Vivian giggle.

"You're home," Dov spoke quietly, as if he was afraid he'd wake up.

"You made sergeant." Chloe smoothed her hands on his shirt.

"Night shift stuff," he shrugged. "Oliver has the big office. I'm just his backup."

"Night shift is good, you can get used to being up at night."

Dov frowned and looked over at Holly and Gail. "Did that make sense to you?" When they both nodded, he looked back at Chloe. "Why night?"

Looking at his collar, Chloe cleared her throat. "Well. We never talked about this."

As she hemmed and hawed, Gail snapped. "Oh for god's sake, Chloe! Tell him!"

Holly broke out in the giggles. "You are so impatient," she laughed and pulled Gail's head in to kiss.

"Tell me what? What's going on?"

Ignoring them all, Chloe cleared her throat. "Dov, I'm pregnant."

It took hours to calm Dov down, and longer to get them to go home. Gail ended up feeding them dinner, which she didn't seem to really mind, but it was quite a while before they got the house quiet and to themselves. After tucking in Vivian, Holly lay on the couch with her arms around Gail's waist, one hand lightly resting on her wife's stomach. "I had a dream once about you being pregnant," she admitted.

Gail twisted her head to look up. "Me pregnant? Other than the part where you have wait on me hand and foot, that would be horrible."

Grinning, Holly spread her fingers out, covering the majority of Gail's stomach. "Yeah but you had this glow and your skin was amazing."
"Oh my god, you had a sex dream about pregnant me?" Gail laughed.

Holly blushed. "Gail bloom big with seed," she joked, appropriating the quote from James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

"You are such an over-educated freak," giggled Gail. "And here I thought I'd have all the pregnancy news."

News? "Well I know you aren't pregnant," teased Holly, poking Gail's stomach again.

With a snort, Gail laid out her news. "Celery is." Holly blinked. "Yeah, I know. Oliver was ... Ollie was not expecting this."

"The perils of heterosexuality," grinned Holly.

"Glad to be beyond it." Gail yawned and settled down, her body relaxing more. Holly started to gently toy with Gail's short hair. It was almost all the way back to its natural color now, as Gail had been slowly adding in the color as it grew out. But for whatever reason, it was still soft to the touch. When it had been long and bleached, the ends were pretty fried.

Linking their hands on her stomach, Gail sighed happily. Holly wondered aloud, "Is Oliver happy?"

"Yes and no. I mean, he has a kid in college, two in high school, and now a baby. Celery was really embarrassed." Gail started to rub her thumb along the inside of Holly's wrist, which was incredibly distracting. "You'd look pretty, pregnant," mused Gail. "All curvy and your boobs... Mmmmmm."

Holly laughed and slapped Gail's hands. "Seriously? You went to the boobs?"

"I like your boobs," protested Gail, laughing. She turned, shifting around to straddle one of Holly's thighs. "You'd have that glow," she muttered, leaning in to kiss Holly's neck. "But mostly the boobs." One hand moved up and cupped a breast.

Yeah, it was very hard to keep talking about that. "Stop talking," smiled Holly, gripping the back of Gail's head and letting her head loll back onto the arm of the couch. Gail attentively kissed the other side of Holly's neck, her hand gently squeezing the breast in hand. God, she was good at that.

A creak on the stairs snapped Holly's mind back out of the sex-haze. "Again?" The very grumbly voice of a seven (almost eight) year old drifted down. It was like cold water.

Sighing, Gail kissed Holly's lips before replying. "You're supposed to be asleep, you know."

"I know, but every night?"

The hand on her breast went away, but not before Gail ran her thumb over Holly's nipple. Damn it, Gail! "Not every night," countered Gail, easing off Holly careful. "You okay?"

Vivian nodded. "Can't sleep."

Gail pushed her hair away from her face. "Well. Do you want a story?"

"Can I just sit with you guys for a while?"

They made room on the couch for Vivian, the girl curling up against Holly's side, and Gail finding a late night cooking show. Before the first commercial break, Vivian was asleep. Holly sighed and brushed the girl's hair away from her face. Every once in a while, Holly worried she was too old to be Vivian's parent or too busy or just not right at all. But even on nights like this, where the kid cock-
blocked her from sex with Gail, she didn't regret the choice.

There was something wonderful about the completeness she felt in this moment. She didn't think she needed it. In many ways, she probably didn't. But at the same time, having it was right for them now. It wouldn't have been right years ago. It may not have been right at all had they not taken the journey they did. Holly leaned into Gail, smiling, content.

The following morning, Gail was out the door early on call, leaving Holly to hustle Vivian through the morning rush. While Vivian was generally as tractable as Gail in the early part of the day unless she really wanted to be up, that morning was fraught with more push back. It reached a surprising and startling moment when Vivian groused that she didn't have to do what Holly said.

"That's a cute idea, Viv. Go get your backpack, please," sighed Holly, putting the dishes in the washer.

"I don't," grumbled Vivian, hunched and sulky.

"You do have to go to school." Holly glanced over, frowning and wondering where this was coming from. "Come on, we're going to be late."

There was a pause, an inhale, and then words Holly had never expected to hear. "I don't have to do what you say. You're not my real mom," snapped the girl and it was more abrupt than last night's interruption. This was intentionally mean, something rather novel from the seven year old, and nothing at all welcome.

That hit Holly hard. It was like the moment Gail walked out on her at the Penny. Unexpectedly a slap in the face, metaphorically a punch in the gut. Holly wasn't prepared for hearing that and she looked down at the girl in absolute shock. "Excuse me?" she said, at a loss to what else she could possibly say.

The surly look on Vivian's face shifted and then tightened. "You're not. My mom."

Good lord, she sounded just like Gail at her worst. Holly swallowed and reminded herself that kids were sometimes irrational and lashed out to hurt people when they were having problems processing something. Biting back every single sassy reply that came to mind, Holly took a deep breath. Cats in trees. "Did something happen at school, Vivian?"

"No." The taciturn reply was bitter but it had the briefest hesitation. Something had happened, just not at school.

Holly sat down at the kitchen table, bringing herself more on a height level with her daughter. "What happened?"

Thankfully, children were not known for having poker faces, not even kids who'd been through a lot, like Vivian. Her expression wavered between angry and upset. "Nothing," she muttered and started to stomp past Holly.

Reaching out, Holly touched Vivian's arm gently, remembering the first night Gail had a breakdown in her home. This felt like that. "Honey," she said quietly. Apparently it was reflexive. Just by hearing the word, Vivian stopped and looked at Holly; there were tears in the girl's eyes. "Hey, it's okay," Holly added, as gently as she could.

"No it's not," sniffled Vivian, fighting a loosing battle against the tears.

Holly leaned a little forward. "You don't have to tell me what you're mad about, honey, but I wish
you would. I love you and I hate seeing you so upset." That broke the dam and Vivian lost her struggle to not cry. A full on wail came out, the girl letting herself be pulled into a hug. No, No, Vivian fell into the hug, clearly wanting to be held.

It was not the first time Holly had told Vivian she loved her. It was entirely true, too. She adored the girl and couldn't imagine her life without Vivian or Gail. They each filled voids Holly hadn't known she had in her soul. Gail eased an aching of loneliness and Vivian created and cured a want of a future. Suddenly she could see herself, old and grey, sitting with Gail and her white hair, while Vivian and her children cavorted at the cabin.

Yes, she loved the child dearly. When Vivian hurt, it made her hurt. She was terrified every day about her being in pain, feeling guilty about stealing moments with Gail, and the worst thing was her mother and Gail's mother both said that was normal. Guilt and terror were, apparently, parental constants. So now, seeing the girl she adored in pain, sobbing to the point that she couldn't get out words and barely got in air, pummeled Holly's gut so much more than the angry lashing about how Holly wasn't her mother.

This was being a parent.

She'd deal with work and any fallout later, and frankly Holly didn't give a shit. Collecting Vivian into her lap, Holly tried to be soothing and comforting, rocking gently as if that might help. It was like the time Gail had that first panic attack in the living room after the hair cut. Cats. Trees. Right.

Eventually Vivian hiccuped to a stop, breathing thickly. "You won't want me anymore," she mumbled into Holly's shoulder.

As Gail would say, what the what? "Honey, why do you think that? Of course we want you." She stroked Vivian's hair.

"Not if you have your own baby."

The conversation was taking an odd turn. Gail had once remarked that conversations with Vivian tended to take weird left turns if you weren't watching out. "Wha- Honey, we're not having a baby."

Vivian inhaled a wet, snot filled, breath. "That's how come you're having sex."

Oh dear god. Holly wanted to laugh at how hilarious the misunderstanding was. "Oh, honey. No, no." She held the girl closer.

"I heard you talking last night," complained Vivian, trying to pull away.

Holly loosened her hold. "Last night?" She and Gail had joked about babies and pregnancy, but of course it might not be as obvious to a child. "Oh, honey, look at me, okay?"

After wiping her face with her sleeve, Vivian sniffled and looked at Holly. She was confused, upset... No she was hurt and angry. Holly gently held her shoulders and tried to project trustworthiness. "Kay," the girl managed.

"Gail and I are not getting pregnant, we're not having a baby. We're not adopting another child. We're not fostering anyone else. We already talked to Anne about it. It wouldn't be fair to you or anyone else. And if we ever did, we would talk to you first, because this is your family."

Skeptical, Vivian rubbed her nose with her sleeve again. "But ... But what if you have an accident, like Uncle Ollie or Chloe?"
Oh, how Holly wanted to laugh. "Sweetheart, two women can't get each other accidentally pregnant."

When she recounted the conversation to Gail that afternoon at lunch, the blonde had laughed with her at the absurdity of the situation. Clearly, she admitted, there was some of her sex talk that needed a little refinement.
While Vivian had begged and pleaded to stay up till midnight, Gail fought for an afternoon nap like they'd had the year before, and then they'd meet everyone out by the lake to watch the fireworks. Vivian had argued she'd nap if they did, so Holly dragged Gail to their bedroom. They did nap, eventually, but first there had to be some seriously relaxing kisses and cuddles.

Holly loved the cuddly Peck and Gail didn't mind being cuddly with her. It wasn't something she'd liked with anyone else, not in bed at least, but there was something comforting about Holly curled around her. Something to do with her scent, or the smoothness of her skin. Or maybe it was just that Holly fit beside her in a way no one else had before. With guys there had always been a second meaning for a cuddle. It was a prelude to sex. And with Holly (maybe women in general?) it was just to be there and be near her.

With Holly curled up on Gail's side, her head resting on Gail's shoulder, Gail's arm was free to wrap around her wife and breathe in her nearness. Her fingers slipped under Holly's shirt, lightly touching her hip and lower back. Even with all the hockey and running, there was an increasing softness to Holly's body. Age was catching up with them more and more.

The power outage that summer had reminded Gail she wasn't a kid anymore. 34. She was almost the age Holly had been when they met. Six years. Gail smiled, letting her fingertips slide across Holly's skin. Six years ago, Gail was in a dark place. Single, broken hearted, damaged, and alone, she'd resigned herself to be a grumpy spinster, dedicated to her career.

Asleep, Holly shifted, rolling over and away from Gail, making happy noises. Gail moved to lie on her side and admire Holly's form. This weird woman who, like Chloe, knew who she was and didn't hide it. A crazy pathologist who could sass as much as Gail did, who was just as morbid and unimpressed by abject happiness. Who loved Gail for who she was and didn't try to change her. Gail propped herself up on her elbow. Change happened anyway. Good change. Growth change. She reached over and rested her hand on Holly's hip again, her thumb sliding under the shirt.

"You're s'posed to be sleeping," yawned Holly, curving her spine as she stretched.

"You're pretty," Gail noted. She curled around Holly as the big spoon. "Its hard to sleep with a pretty lady in bed with me."

Holly hummed softly and snuggled back. "Sleep."

With a soft kiss to Holly's neck, Gail settled against Holly more and closed her eyes. She slipped off into sleep faster than she thought she might, dreaming of Holly. Around an hour later she woke up a little hot and bothered to a darker room and her hand down Holly's flannel pants. Whoops. Sometimes the body had it's own mind, but at least her hand was just on Holly's thigh.

When she started to ease her hand out, contemplating a cold shower, Holly grumbled, "Tease."

"Thought you were asleep," whispered Gail, letting her hand move back and pressing herself closer.

"Hard to sleep when a pretty lady has her hand down my pants." Holly reached down to cover Gail's hand with her own.

With a smile, Gail kissed Holly's neck with the intention of going further when her phone rang. "Oh come on," groaned Gail. But she was on call again. With a reluctant kiss to Holly's shoulder, Gail freed her hand and reached behind her for her phone. Andy. "Damn it, McNally," she snarled.
"Don't you have tonight off?"

The annoying brunette whinged, "Please tell me you're doing something family friendly tonight."

What? "Family- yeah, we're going to the lakeshore with Viv and Steve and Ollie and ... All them." Holly was drawing a finger down Gail's arm, distracting her a little.

"Can I come?"

"Call Chris, he has the address." Gail rolled her eyes and flopped onto her back, closing her eyes as Holly's fingers toyed with the collar of her shirt.

"Are you bringing cookies? The cooking thing-"

"McNally? Seriously. You can come. Bring something to drink." Her voice hit a whine as Holly stopped touching her. No!

"Who's coming?"

God damn it. Gail turned to Holly to apologize and her mouth went dry. Holly was shirtless, her back to Gail, dropping shirt and flannel pants off the side of the bed. Oh god. "McNally," she croaked. "I am trying to do something R-rated before we go out." Holly glanced over her shoulder and smiled.

Andy had the grace to pause. "Oh. Sorry."

"If you call me again, I will bribe Oliver to put you in 1504 all of next year." Without waiting for an answer, Gail hung up the phone and dropped it on her nightstand. "Jesus, Holly," she whispered, reaching over.

And Holly got out of bed. "I'm going to shower," she informed Gail, stretching.

Gail groaned and flopped face first into the bed. "Holly, you're killing me! I've got blue balls!"

"Women can't get that, Gail," sassed Holly.

"I'm gonna have to take care of this myself, Holly," whinged Gail.

The water turned on. "I think you should shower instead."

"It's not even five!" Gail sighed and refused to look up. The plan was to nap till eight, have dinner, and go. They'd only dozed an hour, for fucks sake. And now Gail was uncomfortably turned on.

"Please tell me you don't have Vivian's shower aversion," laughed Holly.

Wait... What? Gail picked up her head. "What?"

"I plan on taking two showers."

What the what? Oh. Oh. Gail wriggled out of the bed and hopped to her feet. Three things had to happen. First she poked her head out the bedroom door. Vivian's door was closed. She was probably reading or playing something in her room. Good enough. Secondly Gail closed their door and locked it. Thirdly she switched her phone to Do Not Disturb. Dispatch, Butler, and John's numbers would come through.

They did nap, eventually, nakedly, which meant when Holly woke up a bit later, she was horny as
hell and made sure Gail woke up too. Not that Gail minded in the least. There was, as Chloe had horrifyingly put it once, sweet sapphic lady loving, and then there was good old fucking. They both had their place in life, as did everything in between.

After, Gail smiled blissfully, stretched across the bed while Holly took her second shower. Her entire body felt energized and relaxed. "Hey, Holly?"

"Do you want to hop in after me?"

"Yes but... I met you six years ago." When Holly didn't reply, Gail rolled over to look at the shower. Finally Holly replied, "Yeah, it was six years." She sounded a little stunned, as if the passage of time had snuck up on her.

Gail smiled. "Good six years," she said firmly. "Best six years of my life."

There was a laugh from the bathroom. "Even the Penny disaster?"

"Even that," confirmed Gail. "I probably wouldn't have grown up without it."

"Something would have happened." Holly sounded so certain of it, Gail was surprised. She was never so sure.

The what-ifs hung in Gail's mind a little. What if she hadn't slept with Blackstone? Nick still would have been in love with Andy. Even if she'd married him, it would have ended badly. What if Chris had listened when Gail tried to explain her and Dov? He still would have left her, because he was simple but not stupid and she was a bad girlfriend. What if she'd kissed Dov back? What if she'd never seen Holly being so weird and cool?

Holly stuck her head out of the bathroom. "Shower?"

"I love your weird." Blinking, Holly's eyes tried to focus on Gail and failed. No glasses. "I love that you are very, very, weird. I love that you think it's okay to joke about death and pain, but you still respect people, even when they're dead. I love your laugh and your smile, and ... I love you."

After a moment, Holly quirked her lips into the off centre, goofy smile that melted Gail's resolve every time. "You already married me, silly."

"And getting in your pants is surprisingly easy," teased Gail as she walked into the bathroom. "But I love you, Holly. I really love you and I am insanely lucky."

Holly smiled. "Okay." She was blushing. "What brought that on?"

"Nothing. I just ... I think I should say it more often." Gail picked up Holly's glasses and handed them over.

There was a brief kiss as they exchanged positions and Gail turned the water hotter. "You tell me you love me every time you go on the street," mused Holly. "I never asked why."

It was horribly morbid and Gail sighed. "Well. I just thought, if I died out there, you would know the last thing I said to you was I love you."

Holly pulled the shower curtain back to frown at her. "That's why? You want to be sure I remember that?" When Gail nodded, Holly huffed and moved out of sight. "You are incredibly weird, Gail, and romantic."
Good. That went over well. They tossed the sheets in the wash and Gail made dinner while Holly wrangled Vivian up and dressed. Since they were planning a night out, Vivian was allowed to have evening caffeine, taking it in the form of tea. When asked why tea and not a soda, Vivian replied she drank tea because that was how Gail did things. At the lake shore, they met up with Frank, Noelle, Sophie, and Liv. Immediately Liv and Viv started chatting away about things and Gail heard wisps of the subject. Oh Jesus.

She caught hold of Noelle's arm. "Uh, warning. Viv's been asking about sex lately. And babies."

Noelle eyed her youngest daughter. "That's an improvement from the dread Not My Moms."

Rolling her eyes, Gail agreed. That day, and the next few, had been difficult and stressful. Holly had taken the words remarkably well, better than Gail would have, but they still stung. "You were right. That was horrible. But they were related. She was afraid that we were having sex so we'd have a baby and not want her anymore."

There was a brief pause while Noelle digested that and then she laughed. "She didn't get that you two... Oh that's funny." They shared an amused grin right until Noelle followed the thought to a logical conclusion. "Uh oh."

Because Olivia was a surprise baby. Olivia was conceived on accident, by two adults using protection. "It's only gonna get worse. You hear about Chloe?"

Noelle pinched her nose. "You mean Celery?"

"Hah, no. I mean Princess of Nerd Kingdom, Chloe Price." Gail grinned and explained about that.

They were still laughing when Andy, Chris, Dov and Chloe arrived. Over the next half hour, all the groups came with their kids. Oliver brought all three of his, Izzy having come home from art college to visit, and confessed that yes, Celery was pregnant. That prompted Chloe to fess up, much to most people's surprise. Traci was not shocked and just nodded. She and Steve had decided not to have their own. Gail knew it was because Traci wasn't really interested in more, and that Steve was terrified of being their father.

As they got closer to fireworks, Vivian begged 'Uncle' Chris to sit on his shoulders, saying he had the best ones for watching fireworks. She'd started calling him an uncle after a summer barbecue when he'd helped her win an egg carrying race. Of course, being Uncle Chris broke the man's heart a little, and she was immediately lifted up, even when Nick offered. When Vivian opined that Nick's shoulders weren't as cool, the adults broke up laughing.

It was a memory Gail held close not even two months later when the station was in an uproar.

Numbers were down, enough that Butler asked her and John to go to Parade and see where they could help out. Of course, Oliver had decided to do speed traps, so Gail happily handed over a list of cars and plates the D's were looking at suspiciously. Her brother had a good case from guns and gangs to hunt for, while she just had a few stuck in the research angle. Needing a break, she picked up one of Steve's cases and grabbed Chloe to help her translate. They were trudging through suspects, narrowing things down based on text messages (no one was better than Chloe at the colloquialisms) when her phone rang.

"Peck," she muttered absently.

"Is this Gail Peck?"

"Speaking." There was something to the background noise that caught her attention. Something
chilled her spine.

"This is St. Pats Hospital." Gail's blood went cold. "You're listed as the emergency contact for Officer Chris Diaz?"

She stuttered, "I ... I am." That was right. Chris made her the contact after she moved in with Holly because he thought she'd be able to figure out medical things faster. "What happened?" Both Steve and Chloe looked up at her, their eyes wide. Gail had to close hers to listen. Chris was in the ER, going into surgery, but they needed his medical proxy in case things took a turn for the worse. "Look, nurse whoever you are, shut up. I'm married to a doctor. Tell. Me. What. Happened."

The nurse cleared her throat. "I ... Ma'am I don't know. I'm just the-"

"Then you put someone on the phone who does," snarled Gail. She summoned the anger, the bitch from deep within herself. The voice that made things happen.

A moment later she had a nurse giving her details. Chris had been in a car accident. He'd been in a car, driven by another officer, and the car had spun out of control and wrapped around a tree. "The other officer is here as well. But... Mrs. Peck, I'd get here now. It doesn't look good."

"It's Detective Peck," Gail corrected absently. "I'll be there in twenty." She was already up and moving for her bag.

Steve coughed. "Hey, little sister, you went real pale there. Who's in the ER?"

She stared at him and then Chloe. Words were no good just now. She signed the name-sign they'd made up for him, for Chris. Steve startled and nodded, making the sign of a dove. "They're not singing," muttered Gail. Thank god it's not Holly, she thought absently as she headed out the door and down the hall.

"Gail," shouted Oliver, spotting her. "The hospital-

"I already know, Ollie," she shouted back.

Before Oliver could stop her, Gail ran on reflex and took herself to the hospital. Thank god she could drive through Toronto on auto-pilot. She knew the city well and she knew the stupid hospital well enough. She'd seen far too much of it in the last year.

The news was worse than she'd thought. Chris was in surgery already, a bevy of broken bones and damaged internal organs. But worst of all was the damage to his head. His head had apparently connected with the tree, at speed. The doctor explained that Chris had reactive pupils, so there was hope and a good chance he'd survive but he'd need multiple surgeries.

It was overwhelming. She took the paperwork and sat in the hallway with it, trying to wrap her mind around what had happened. Numb. She felt numb in a totally different way than she had after Perik. This was the fear she'd felt when Chris was stabbed coupled with the terror of Holly in isolation. God. Thank God it wasn't Holly! That actually helped her settle her mind. It wasn't Holly, she had someone to lean on. Gail actually looked at the paperwork now, reading over things.

After six years with Holly, nearly seven, she knew how to read medical jargon. Gail thought she understood how bad it was and how risky things like surgery were. But the doctors made sure she did, going over everything multiple times the options. Had Wes and Dov been this overwhelmed?

"Look, doc, is his best chance to drill into his head or not?"
The doctor hesitated. "If the swelling doesn't go down, yes."

"And how long until we know if it'll go down?" There was no answer promptly and Gail knew they didn't know. "You did a CT or whatever, right? Was there bleeding?"

"No, but the swelling can make that hard to diagnose."

Gail took a slow breath. "Okay. Okay, when you do the next one, if the swelling doesn't go down, then we decide." And Gail was going to call Holly before then. She needed the doctor in the wife.

When the doctor looked relieved, Gail felt she made the right call for now. She watched the medical professional head off and turned to spot uniforms and a familiar face. Sarah Mills. The woman practically led SUI these days. "Detective Peck?"

"Inspector Mills," she replied tiredly.

"What on earth are you doing here?"

"You heard about the accident?" When Sarah nodded, Gail went on. "Apparently I'm still Chris's emergency contact. Long time ago..." She shrugged. "You?"

Sarah's eyes flicked to the uniformed officer, a blonde, kind of cute looking guy. "This is Officer Samuels' third major incident with a vehicle."

Samuels? She focused on him. "Aaron Samuels? From my class at the academy?"

"Did you know him?"

"No," Gail replied honestly. Aaron Samuels. She knew that name. That had been Chris' roommate's name, back in the academy. They'd been good bro friends up until they'd split to go to Fifteen and Twenty Seven. Chris had run into him again when he'd done the mounted training and had been livid about it for some reason. "You hauling him off?"

"When the doctors release him. He had a CT and some X-Rays."

Gail nodded. "Do you know what happened?"

There was a small pause, a look to say that they shouldn't be having this sort of conversation, and then Sarah explained. "Samuels was driving. A suspect in a smuggling case had sped through the speed trap and they went after him. Samuels lost control of the car."

"Third time."

"Second with Diaz," the SIU detective mused. Gail blinked a few times and Sarah narrowed her eyes. "If you can think of anything..."

"Of course," nodded Gail, and she meant it. Chris was a case now. Saving his life may depend on knowing the facts. Something about Samuels nagged her but she couldn't place it just then. She watch Sarah Mills haul him off and frowned. Three car accidents, second with Chris? When would that have been? Probably the academy. She'd not really known her classmates back then, as much her choice as theirs.

Lost in thought, she didn't even notice the phone in her hand was ringing until a nurse suggested she answer it. Gail saw Oliver's name and thumbed the phone on. He started talking before she could. "I'm holding back all of Fifteen, darlin', so you better keep me in the loop."
"It's not good, Ollie," she admitted. "Brain swelling and he's pretty busted up."

"Is he awake?"

"No, but his, uh, his brain looks like it's still working."

Oliver was quiet. "Looks like?"

"His head went through the window and into the tree... Look, don't bring everyone over. I'm here. I'm gonna call Holly, I promise I'll keep you updated."

"Dov wants to."

"God no, not Dov, Ollie." She couldn't deal with him right now.

Bless him, Oliver laughed. "Chloe told him that Chris picked you for a reason, and she's sitting on him."

"I really don't want to know about their sex life, Oliver," she groaned.

He laughed again. "There's my Peck." Promising to keep everyone out of the hospital, Oliver told Gail she could ask him anything and hung up.

The phone call with Holly was less heartening. After hearing what happened, Holly demanded Gail go look at his charts and read it off to her. There was a grim feeling on the line when Holly said he needed the surgery, but not to get her hopes up. "Traumatic brain injuries are... There's a good chance he'll never wake up, Gail."

She winced. "How much of a chance?"

"I'm not that kind of specialist, but I know one. Went to college with him, he's head up at TGH."

Gail chewed her lip. "Call him? Please? I... This is Chris."

"Of course," promised Holly. "I would if it was Lisa or Rachel."

"We all know there's no sign of brain activity in Lisa," sassed Gail. "I'll have them do the surgery and... I guess go to the Penny and catch everyone up. I'm not going to do anyone any good here, and he'll be in a medical coma for weeks."

"Probably a month," Holly remarked, in that absent doctor kind of way. "I'll meet you at home and we can go to the Penny. Sophie can watch the girls at her place, right?"

Almost fifteen. Sophie was more than capable of babysitting Liv and Viv, especially since they were less trouble together than Liv was alone. On her own, Olivia Best was a handful. "Thank you."

"Hey, I like Chris too. He's like... He's a big giant teddy bear." Gail laughed softly when Holly admitted that. She'd often felt that way too. "Do you need me to come over to the hospital?"

With a deep sigh, Gail decided not. "No, not today. I can do this."

Hours later, she dragged herself to the Penny. Gail had stopped at home to dump her gear and make a few phone calls before asking a relay to take her back to the station so she could catch up the staff on the situation. She hadn't anticipated enjoying the call to Chris's mother. She'd never met the woman, but she knew that Chris had been abused by her as a child, mentally if not physically. It was so different than the crap she'd gone through. Gail had managed to still have a childhood, while
Chris had been forced to grow up. Different kinds of abuse.

At the Penny, Fifteen had made the bar somber. No music played, no one was being rowdy. They were all sitting quietly, waiting. Even Holly was there already. When she walked in, all eyes went to Gail.

"The surgery went fine, but there's a lot of brain swelling. They're putting him in a coma in a couple days if it doesn't go down." A ripple went through the room. "The top neuro guy from Toronto General is coming over tomorrow to take a look. He's going to, um, help decide where to go."

As soon as Gail came over to the tables where her friends sat, Dov spoke up. "What happened? Why's SIU involved?"

Of course they knew. Gail glanced at her brother who shrugged. Idiot. "Another officer was driving the car, from Twenty-Seven. Samuels." Under the table, Holly looped her fingers through Gail's.

Turning to Chloe, Dov asked, "Know him?"

It was Andy who replied. "Don't you remember? He was Chris' bro when we were in the academy."

"Yeah, that was a decade ago," snapped Dov. "What's he like now?"

Chloe sighed. "Dov, come on, I haven't worked with him in five years!" She crossed her arms over her chest and then looked down. Chloe's baby bump had just shown up. She was just four months pregnant but the bump was there and she had a cute little glow. Not that Gail would say it out loud. "He was never a TO. He wasn't even... So he's in your class, that puts him four years ahead of me, right? No one ever made him the lead of a rookie."

That was interesting.

"Who's got the case?" Oliver looked thoughtful over his beer as he asked.

"Mills," replied Steve. "I called her, she wouldn't say anything except that they're looking into his past."

Gail kept her information, about this being the third accident, to herself for now. She wanted to tell her friends this wasn't their case to solve, but she wanted to know what happened. Staring at her brother, she decided she wanted to know, "Steve, can you get the accident report?"

He nodded. "Of course. It'll be in the system already as a prelim. It's a joint between us and them, so I'll get it from Miller. He's the D on record."

That surprised Andy. "You can just do that?"

"On the QT," shrugged Steve. "It's a Peck lesson, McNally. You gotta play the system right, trade favors. Build up a horde of people who will help you whenever. Kind of like you guys and Gail."

When he sipped his beer, Gail felt the eyes on her rookie class on her. She blinked a few times. "Oh. That's what Mom meant," she muttered. The idea of befriending her classmates to her benefit was never a plan Gail had formed. No wonder Elaine had chastised her back then.

Steve looked amused. "I think having friends works better."

"Well you don't have any left," teased Gail. Steve was the most successful of his rookie class and currently the only one left at Fifteen.
Nick, seated across from Gail, frowned. "I don't like that we're treating this like a crime. Accidents happen. Dov broke his leg over the summer."

But Andy was looking thoughtful and perplexed. "They had a fight... When we were at mounted training." She sighed. "I can't remember what it was about."

"Tell Gail if you do," suggested Traci. She frowned and then asked, "How are things?"

"The divorce went through." Andy sipped her pint. "And I signed my new lease."

Gail smirked. "Can we have the party before you've lived there six months? Oh, and Dov and Chris totally used that fondue pot before you got it." They laughed at that memory.

"He and Denise used to give people salad bowls and tongs," smiled Dov. "For wedding presents. To enjoy your salad days. Whatever that meant."

"God, Denise that shrew," groaned Gail. "Do I have to call her? I already talked to his mother."

Oliver frowned. "Christian?" When she nodded, he sighed. "I think not yet. Hold on to that one, darlin'. Maybe Chris can call him when it's all over."

But. As they walked to Gail's car, Holly finally spoke up. "The odds aren't good, honey."

"I know," muttered Gail. "Will you drive?" Holly nodded and they walked in silence back to the station. It was just easier to park there. "Why did he pick me?"

Holly hesitated. "Well. You're a realist." Gail screwed up her face and her wife went on. "You won't let him linger if he's in pain. You'll make sure he has a dignified, painless death. If he's never going to wake up, you'll let him go. If heroic measures have to happen... You'll know when to stop."

Shoving her hands into her pockets, Gail huffed. "Me? I don't think so. If it was you, I'd be yelling at them to do everything possible. Invent something."

"I love you too," smiled Holly, leaning over to bump her shoulder into Gail's. "We're different. You married me."

In that moment, Gail could see her life if she'd married Chris. A desk job. A boring life. No accolades or praises. Children that came at the cost of a career. And she'd hate him. She'd look back at eight years, at eighteen, and think her mother hadn't pushed her enough. Because as much as her damaged psyche was the result of Elaine Peck, she could feel her mother's hand on many things that had happened.

She should probably ask her mother about that. Not that it really mattered. Your parents were supposed to shape who you are. Gail sighed and shook her head. "Yeah, I guess."

"Wow. Way to make me feel special," Holly half teased.

"You know what I mean, Stewart." Gail tried to sound sullen, but she couldn't help but smile. Holly knew how to make her smile. "I did marry you." Pulling a hand out of her pocket, she reached over to take Holly's hand and squeeze it. "And I'm glad I did."

Vivian picked up on the mood right away. Given her druthers, Gail would have delayed telling her until they got home, but at just eight, Vivian was attentive to the emotions of her parents. "What happened?" In the moment Gail hesitated, Vivian sighed. "Mom's driving your car, Aunt Noelle hugged you and you didn't fuss, and Uncle Frank looked all serious."
Dear god. Was this what it was like for her parents? Mini detectives... "Viv, it's not a good thing."

Appalled, Vivian asked, "Are you divorcing?"

Both Gail and Holly swiveled to look at the girl. As one they said "No!" rather loudly.

But Gail found herself laughing inappropriately. "Oh Monkey, why do conversations with you never go where I think they will?"

"Gail," sighed Holly, exasperated.

"Eyes on the road, Stewart." Gail turned in her seat. "Viv. Chris was in a real bad car accident today." The expression on her daughter's face bounced between relief and then guilt before finally settling on scared.

"Is he going to be okay?"

"We don't know," Gail caught the surprised look from Holly and shrugged. "I'm not going to lie, Holly. We don't know. Chris is in a coma. Do you know what that means?"

Vivian nodded. "You're asleep, except you can't wake up and you don't mean to be asleep."

"Unconscious," corrected Holly. "You're not asleep, you're unconscious. You don't experience REM or any other sleep behaviors, you don't respond to stimuli. There's a test, the Glasgow Coma Scale. An awake person has a score of 15, which means they can open their eyes, talk, and follow directions. Anything under a 9 is a coma."

Both Gail and Vivian digested that information for a moment. It was pretty much what the doctor at the hospital had said. "What's Uncle Chris' score?"

Holly hesitated but Gail nodded. "5. The lowest is a 3. After that, it's brain death. He's still breathing on his own, which is a good sign. He's responding to pain and he's making noises, which is also good. But ... Remember when you fell on the jungle gym and banged your arm?"

Nodding, Vivian rubbed her forearm. "I had that big hard bruise."

"Chris has one too, but it's inside his head." They waited a little for that to sink in. Gail was grateful to have Holly to explain these things. The woman had a knack for explaining science to the level of her audience, which usually meant cops and detectives, but it translated surprisingly well to children. Once, Holly remarked it wasn't much different from some of the cops. Except for sex. Holly was a failure at sex talk.

"His brain is bruised?"

Damn the kid made the right connections all on her own. In any other circumstances, Gail would have caroled with pride. "That's right," sighed Holly. "And the problem is, when you have a bruise on your arm or leg, it swells up. But your brain is inside your skull, which means it doesn't have room when it swells."

And Vivian understood that too. "What happens when your brain pushes up on the skull? Does that make you have a coma?"

Holly pulled into the garage. "Yes and no. Your brain pushes up and the blood can't get through, neither can oxygen, and your brain needs those to survive. So Chris being in a coma is his body's way of trying to slow things down. It lowers his breathing and his heart rate and blood pressure,
which helps the swelling go down."

They kept talking about the medical situation, something that fascinated Vivian. She seemed rather interested in how complicated the human body was. But finally she stopped asking questions about it and Gail found she had one of her own as she checked on the potatoes in the oven. "Hey, Viv. How do you feel about this?"

The girl chewed her lip, just like Holly. "Scared," she finally said. "It's... When Mom was sick, I was scared too, but that was different."

Holly looked pained and hesitantly squeezed Vivian around the shoulders. "I'm sorry," she said to the child.

Leaning against Holly, Vivian went on. "I dunno. I don't know anyone else who was sick or in the hospital. It's scarier than just having them be dead. There's all this... You have to wait and not know."

Sometimes that kid was too mature, realized Gail with a sigh. She leaned on the counter. "Dead is a lot easier," agreed Gail. "But it's not easy."

"You have to work with lots of hurt people," Vivian said, curiously. "Is it harder 'cause you know them?"

"Well. It's Chris." Hesitating, Gail added, "He signed a paper that says if he gets hurt like this, I'm in charge."

Vivian's eyes widened. "What about his parents?"

"His Dad ran off when he was a kid, and his mom is crazy." Gail shrugged. "Holly's mine, I'm hers, and both of us are yours." The girl pondered that for a moment and then allowed as that made sense. "So. Lots of people are going to want to talk to me about what to do with Chris. What's right and what's best for him. And if it's too scary for you, I'll make sure we don't talk about it here."

Trying to make sure Vivian understood that she was family really meant she was in the family. Decisions were made with family. Especially ones that impacted you directly. Vivian studied Gail's face carefully. She was more thoughtful than Olivia, who was Gail's benchmark for a normal eight year old. "Why did he pick you?"

It was a sensible and logical question. "Chris and I used to date. I lived with him and Dov."

"Did you date Dov?"

Gail smiled. "No." She leaned on the counter. "But Dov and Chris and I are still very good friends."

Nodding, Vivian slid off the stool. "It's less scary to talk about it," she decided.

They watched Vivian get the plates and Holly sighed. Gail reached over to touch her hand. "This could be a long haul," mused Holly in a soft voice.

"I know," replied Gail, equally quietly.

"You know I'm here for you." Holly's thumb rubbed on Gail's ring. A worry stone of sorts. "And not just as translator."

Smiling, Gail squeezed Holly's fingers. She didn't have words that explained how it felt to know that
Holly was sticking around, that she was going to provide unflagging, unfailing support and help. It stopped feeling surprising in the last year, though. Somewhere along the way, it felt normal and natural for Holly's shoulder to be there, metaphorically or otherwise. There was the person who would listen to her and offer advice, even if it was the advice that Gail was a little nuts.

But Vivian was right. Talking about things made them less scary. It was still worrying, but being able to talk about it and express your feelings made them less daunting. So they talked. When Holly's friend the neurosurgeon looked in on the case, he talked more. There were good and bad signs, but frankly they weren't going to know for a while if Chris would wake up.

They went ahead with the surgery. He even arranged to do it himself and explained to Gail exactly what was going to happen. Chris wasn't on life support, yet, which was the best sign possible. The longer he could stay off, the better. But as soon as they had to do that, it was going to be a bigger issue.

For now, they waited.

It was all they could do.
"Holy crap, that's a shiner," announced Holly.

Traci grimaced and put the icepack back on her face. "Thanks, Doc."

"I'm a dead people doctor," Holly reminded her, taking the icepack off again for a better look. "Does this hurt?" She gently probed the orbital bone, making Traci wince but not jerk her head away.

"Ow! Yes!"

The icepack went back on. "Not broken," she declared.

Scowling, Traci pointed out, "You're the dead people doctor."

Holly was inured to Gail's scowls which meant Traci's wasn't all that much to worry about. "Believe me, Pixie Peck's shenanigans and playing hockey means I know how to diagnose a zygomatic fracture. You'll be fine."

"You have zero bedside manner," complained Traci.

It wasn't the first time Holly had been told that. "There's a reason I'm in forensics," she teased and sat down on the chair beside Traci's desk. "What exactly happened? And if you want to put off going over the case notes—"

"God, no." Traci grimaced and tapped on the computer. Technically, Holly was there to go over a murder from a month ago before they went to talk to the lawyers later that week. "This was a different case. Child abduction. The dad went a little off rails."

"Great, because I don't worry about Gail enough," groaned Holly.

Traci glanced over. "Holly," she said gently and then stopped.

Because what did you say? Holly shrugged a little. "I think I'm touchier about it than normal because of Chris." And Marlo being shot. And Dov breaking his leg. And Andy being stabbed. And Holly getting exposed to freaking Ebola. And Gail getting the car blown up. Everything piled on. Once in a while it was too much to take, and right now Holly just wanted to run away from it all. Which was not healthy. Not if you wanted to keep being married and having a family with a really awesome person.

Thankfully, Traci seemed to understand that a little. "You take it better than Dex did."

Holly didn't really know much about Leo's father, except that he was a little older than Traci and did drugs once. Or twice. Steve hated him, which didn't mean much given that both he and Gail had strange reactions to exes. "Maybe because I'm used to it?" That was disturbing, actually.

The remark made Traci take pause. "Leo's used to it now, too," she lamented. "I used to worry about him playing with guns and swords. I was afraid he'd think violence was fun. Now I worry he thinks it's normal."

"Vivian already does," grumbled Holly. But, as Gail was inclined to point out, Vivian came that way. She always thought the world was a little evil and violent.

"She's not afraid of Gail's guns anymore."
"No, but that doesn't make me feel better."

"It should," Traci said firmly, surprising Holly. "Look. She understands that guns are only part of the problem. Sane, stable, people with controlled firearms, like Gail, aren't scary. That's a good thing to know."

That was incredibly reasonable. "I suppose." Holly brushed her hair away from her face. "I never thought I could worry about someone like I do Gail, and now I have someone I worry about even more."

Traci touched her knee. "Welcome to parenthood."

Her eyes felt sharp and wet. Damn it. "We're supposed to be working," Holly complained.

"Sometimes part of working with your technical experts is helping make sure they're in the right frame of mind for tomorrow," Traci said gently. "You okay?"

"Kind of feeling overwhelmed," admitted Holly. She knew the feeling far too well. This weight of the unknown and the personal responsibilities got to be too much and she wanted to be anywhere else. Life could be easier. She could go to New York and be a scientist and not a wife or a mother.

The moment she thought that, Holly was appalled at herself.

Certainly, many times before, she'd thought how much easier life could be if she was single again. Running away from personal drama was something she'd done before. But... Her life was complicated and so was her love and while she could walk away, the idea hurt. Waking up without Gail? Coming home without Vivian? It would be like never talking to her parents again. She couldn't see a life without the people she had today.

Maybe it was because of Chris that she was having doubts and fears. There was someone in her life, someone whom she'd gotten used to and liked a great deal, and he was ... Gone. Not yet, but he would be. Everyone else could delude themselves into thinking he'd wake up. Holly knew better. But right now that was hitting her like a steamroller, flattening her feelings in a bad way.

"Hey, you okay?" Traci looked worried. "You kinda zoned out for a minute."

She was a little freaked out. "Uh ... Yeah. Can I make a call?" Without actually waiting for Traci to say yes, Holly pulled her phone out of her pocket and walked over to a corner of the room.

Gail picked up on the first ring. "Hey," she said brightly. Everything was perfectly fine and sunny over there. She could even hear that smile Gail got.

And Holly exhaled. "I think I'm freaking out," she told Gail, softly. No preamble.

There was a brief pause. "Like chop off your hair freak out?"

"My version."

And thank god, Gail knew exactly what that meant. Gail did stupid things and got in trees, Holly just left the tree. "Okay. Take a deep breath for me." Holly did so, exhaling slowly and shakily. "I can come over to the lab, if you want."

Holly laughed softly. It wasn't a funny laugh at all. "No, I'm supposed to be working with Traci. I'm just ... Everything's kind of hitting me at once?"
"It happens sometimes," agreed Gail, her voice calming. "You downstairs?"

"I am. But… Don't come down." If Gail came downstairs, Holly felt like she'd just spend the day bawling for no real reason, and yet all the reasons. "I just wanted to hear you for a minute."

Gail made a thoughtful sound. "How about I tell you something entertaining. Like we caught an arson, no dbs, but the whole point was to cover up a theft. Except," and Gail drew the word 'except' out for a whole two seconds, "that the stolen item wouldn't have melted because the room it was in? Didn't catch on fire."

Closing her eyes, Holly smiled. She could picture Gail's expression on finding that level of stupidity. "Did the fire not spread right?"

"Fire suppressants in the building. He was stealing a computer from the whatever room."

"Server room?"

"Sounds right," agreed Gail, cheerfully. "We already made an arrest off the security cameras. Best day ever. Guy folded as soon as we opened the door."

It did make Holly feel a little better. A little more normal. "Thank you, honey."

"Any time. Tell me if you need anything tonight, okay?"

Promising to do so, Holly went back to Traci's desk and managed to find her brain for work and go through the motions of the case. Her sister-in-law let it go, letting Holly hide in their work rather than talk about things. And Holly retreated. She ran away from her feelings and her fear, and she kept running until she got home that night.

Pulling into the garage, she was surprised to see Gail's car. It was Wednesday and Vivian always wanted to stay late on Wednesday. But Gail wouldn't have come home and let the car cool down without picking up the kid. Holly touched the hood of the car. Cold. She frowned and went inside, immediately assaulted by the smell of clean. The floor was mopped, the whole place dusted and tidied, no toys all over the floor. The video games were put away, even the new epic fantasy game the duo had been playing almost every night.

The house was also empty. Instead of clattering around the kitchen, the window was open to the brisk spring air and Holly could smell smoke. Curiously, she walked over to the door to the back deck and opened the door. The grill was going, unattended at the moment, and Gail and Vivian were playing catch with a football.

"Mom, you're still doing it wrong," complained Vivian, frustrated. "Put your fingers on the white seam and let it roll off."

"Come on, I'm trying," Gail whinged right back and threw a terrible spiral. It wobbled. Holly laughed loud enough that both her wife and daughter turned. "What are you two doing?"

"Mom! Please teach Mom how to throw a football?"

Throwing her hands up, Gail looked resigned. Vivian threw the ball back and though she fumbled a little, Gail managed to hold on. "That was really good, Viv," Holly said, surprised. "Where did you learn that?"

"Uncle Nick."
Gail attempted another throw back, just as bad as before. "Seriously, I'm doing something wrong."

"You're holding it too close to the middle," smiled Holly, holding up a hand. "Vivian, give it here." She easily caught the ball and placed her hand properly on the laces, walking over to her wife. "Your little finger and the ring finger are in the laces. Thumb underneath, just on the white mark. Index finger near the tip. Bring your arm back, make an L, and ..." She threw the ball to Vivian, a perfect spiral, which the girl had to jump to catch.

Dryly, Gail remarked, "A bit high."

Holly rolled her eyes. "Spiral."

"Whatever." Gail smiled and held a hand out. Taking the hand, Holly stepped in and let Gail hold her close. "Hi, baby."

Sometimes you just needed to be held. Leaning against Gail, those noodle arms that were surprisingly strong around her, Holly felt safe and unafraid. The idea of bolting seemed foolish and unnecessary. She sighed and closed her eyes, forehead resting against Gail's. "Hi."

And Gail held her close. She didn't say anything, just held on and let Holly be. Finally, with a deep breath, Holly let go and leaned back to look at Vivian. The girl was tossing the football up and catching it. "I told her you had a bad day," admitted Gail. "She said we should play sports and make you comfort food."

"She's very smart." Her fingers sought out Gail's, rubbing the ring there. "What's comfort food?"

"Sausage." Gail raised a hand to Vivian, who threw the ball back. As expected, Gail's catch was worse with one hand than with both, but she managed to knock it down.

Vivian laughed. "Mom, you're really bad at sports."

"Ugh, tell me something I don't know." Gail kissed Holly's cheek and let go of her hand to pick up the ball and try again. This time, with Holly's correction, the ball wobbled much less.

When Gail went to check on the food, Holly tossed back and forth with Vivian. The girl really was more adept at sports than Gail, though pretty much everyone was. No one asked how her day was, no one pressured her to talk about anything. They just had a quiet, safe space to be themselves.

The usual routine was shifted, with Vivian setting up the table outside and Holly lighting citronella candles to keep away the bugs. Gail cheerfully presented grilled vegetables and sausages, with garlic bread and beers.

"I don't mean to be picky," Holly said as she eyed the spread. "But the sausages look kind of lumpy."

So Vivian explained, "We stuffed the sausage!"

Beer did not come out of her nose. It was a near miss.

That night, after the mini-human was in bed, the adults sat out on the bench and watched the candles burn down. In the darkness, Holly voiced her fears about Chris and everything else that had happened in the last few years. She told Gail she wished everything could slow down for a while, at least so she could get used to it, but that just wasn't going to happen. And most of all she wished life might see fit to calm down.
"I wish I could bring you to better days," sighed Gail after listening.

"You do." Holly leaned into her wife, absorbing her warmth in all ways possible. "I don't want to run and be a loner. I want to be with you."

Gail made a disagreeing noise. "You know, I didn't think you really were a runner until Ollie's wedding. That was the first time I saw it in you." The wedding freakout had been weird to have in her head.

"I'm really not good when I get overwhelmed," agreed Holly, morosely.

The hand on her waist squeezed her closer, turning her so that her head was against Gail's chest. "You get me out of trees, I help get you out of water," came the suggestion.

Holly laughed. "So you're a cat and I'm a fish?"

"Dolphin." Gail's fingers toyed with Holly's hair. "Mermaid. Seducing me with your charms, making me never want to leave."

"If I'm a mermaid, that makes you a dashing pirate." As soon as she made the joke, she knew where Gail would go.

"Arrrrr."

Yeah. Holly expected that.

What she did not expect was to have to help Oliver pull Gail off of the curly haired blond man at the Penny. They'd gone to celebrate a case being closed a few weeks later, to have a drink, to pick up their kid from the Best's where Sophie was baby sitting Liv and Viv, and to go home to have a nice dinner. Gail had even prepped poisson meunière and had the fish already at home, picking it up on her lunch break.

But instead of that plan, Gail had apparently decided to try and strangle someone Holly didn't even know. All Holly had seen was the guy walked up and started talking to Gail at the bar when she was picking up their drinks. Holly had assumed it was yet another stranger hitting on her wife. That happened a lot and Gail got a perverse pleasure out of introducing Holly as her wife and watching their dumbfounded expressions. No one really messed with the cops in the cop bar, after all.

This time, though, Holly spotted the set to Gail's shoulders right away. Gail was past angry and right into livid. When Holly asked Oliver who the guy was, the genial man frowned and said he wasn't sure. Then, not even a heart beat later, Gail had the guy by his collar and was pushing him against the bar.

Fifteen was in motion, including Holly, in a heartbeat. There was that brief pause where everyone tried to process what was going on, and then there was movement. Holly and Oliver grabbed Gail's arms first, no one getting in their way.

"You son of a bitch," snarled Gail. "You don't deserve to be here."

"Whoa, darlin'," said Oliver, soothingly. "Let's let the guy go."

Andy and Nick grabbed the blonde man, calling him 'Samuels,' and pulling him away as soon as Gail's grip lightened. "Gail, we got this," promised Andy, getting in between Gail and Samuels.

Not knowing what to say, Holly let Oliver be the voice of calm reason. "Let McNally take care of it,
Gail." But the look he shot Holly told her that Oliver had no idea what had happened either.

Under Holly's hand, Gail's arm was stiff and tense. She'd seen her wife explode before, though never at anyone directly. Gail's rage tended to be self-directed. The fact that she did have a temper like that seemed surprising to Dov, who helped usher them back to the table. "Man, I haven't seen a Peck go off like that since Bibby," he said, bewildered.

"Who's Bibby," asked Holly, sitting next to the seething Gail.

"Used to be my brother's partner," growled Gail. "Chris and Andy accused him of beating up his sister's ex, it was ... it was a long time ago."

Her hands weren't shaking, which was good, and Holly gently touched the back of one. Immediately, Gail's hand turned over and held Holly's hand, squeezing it once, firmly. So Holly asked gently, "And who's Samuels?"

Dov's eyes widened. "Aaron Samuels?" When Gail nodded, Dov tensed as if he was about to go after the guy. "That's the son of a bitch who was driving the car," he hissed.

There was no need to say which car. Holly turned and looked at the bar. Andy had already ushered Samuels out, apparently, as neither she nor he (nor Nick) were in sight. "What was he doing here?" Oliver sounded astonished.

"He wanted to apologize to me." Gail's voice was tight, but less rage-filled. "I swear to god, Oliver, I'm going to have that asshole's badge if I'm right." Oliver's eyebrows jumped at the statement and Gail shook her head. "When Andy gets back," she muttered.

Holly gently rubbed her thumb on the back of Gail's hand. "Okay," she said quietly. Her wife gave her a split-second of an apologetic look and Holly just made a faint nod. She trusted Gail a great deal, even in this moment, and could wait. She wasn't scared at all.

When Andy came in, she looked grim and asked to talk to Gail privately for a moment. The two went outside and Dov exhaled. "Wow. I've never seen Gail flip like that."

Frowning, Oliver looked at Holly. "I did. The day Andy's rookie nearly shot the suspect." Holly sighed and nodded at him. Andy had taken the suspect to lockup while Gail unloaded, according to Oliver.

Dov followed the look and asked, carefully, "Are you okay?"

There were so many strange layers in the way he asked the question, and Holly fought not to roll her eyes. "I'm fine, Dov. We're fine. And you have too seen her flip like that before." When Dov looked blank she reminded him, "Softball game? When Sam knocked me silly?"

That made most everyone smile. "I forgot about that," admitted Oliver. "That made sense. Sammy..." He trailed off and scowled. Oliver and Sam had been friends forever. For him, Sam's betrayal of Andy apparently felt like he too had been betrayed. It wasn't the Sam he knew.

"I just mean," Dov said hesitantly. "If Gail, um, did anything."

"Oh my god," laughed Holly. She had no other way to express what she was feeling. "Dov, Gail didn't scare me. Okay? She'd never hurt me, or Vivian, or anyone who didn't actually deserve it. Yes, she gets loud and angry sometimes, but there's a reason."

But Oliver gave her a side-eye look. He knew there were other moments that were scary, when there
was less of a reason. Except, to Holly, there was a reason for those moments. She understood what was going on in that weird, blonde, head of her wife's. She understood a lot more of the damage than anyone else, and it wasn't anything for her to fear.

They were police officers, though. From their eyes, there was an angry person and someone who might get hurt.

"Gail doesn't hurt people," said Nick, firmly. He looked at Holly. "Especially not you." Dov looked a little doubtful and Nick added, "You don't understand her, Dov. She won't. It's not who she is."

Oliver nodded slowly. "She's controlled. But. Nick..."

Shaking his head, firmly, Nick repeated, "Gail doesn't hurt people. It's ... It's a Peck thing, Oliver."

"Pecks can be pretty brutal, Collins," muttered Oliver.

"That's the job," Nick shook his head again. "When we were engaged, her mother made sure I knew what was expected. She ... She sat me down and told me what life was like as a Peck. They don't hurt people, Oliver. I swear. Not like that."

The conversation stalled there as Andy and a grim faced Gail came back in. "I told Mills," she announced, sitting next to Holly and taking her hand. "Samuels was drunk and wrapped his car around a tree back at the academy. Except he didn't say he was drunk. And neither did Chris."

"Chris was in the car the other time?" Dov looked surprised.

Andy nodded. "I heard them arguing about it, at the mounted training." She eased into the seat between Nick and Dov.

Picking up the thread, Gail added, "Samuels was in another car accident right before mounted training. Fell asleep at the wheel, end of a run on nights. They looked into it again, Chris was interviewed."

That didn't sound like Chris. "He lied," Holly said, flatly. And when Andy and Gail nodded, she felt a little ill. Even Chris lied.

On the drive to pick up Vivian, Gail was quiet. Vivian's conversation sustained them through the ride home and into the evening. It was alright for Gail to be lost in thought, after all. Even normal. Holly wanted to shake her and make Gail talk, but she needed to let her wife come to terms with this on her own. She wasn't distancing herself. They sat on the couch with Vivian and watched a basketball game, Gail resting her head on Holly's shoulder.

Running her fingers through Gail's hair, Holly whispered she loved her. They could talk about it later. Some other time when things weren't so raw. But they were there for each other, and that was beyond good. It was perfect.

Sunrise.

She hated sunrise.

No. She hated sneaking into her own house at sunrise.

The garage door was, thankfully, very quiet, and Gail eased her car into her spot without a hitch. Downstairs, a note waited for her on the kitchen island, telling her to eat and charge her phone. Gail
had wisely eaten before she'd left the station so she turned her phone to Do Not Disturb and slipped up to the second floor.

Curled up into the corner of her bed, with the blanket kicked off, Vivian was breathing deeply. Gail took a moment to pull the blanket back up and brush Vivian's hair away from her face.

"Mom?" The girl squinted up.

"C'est moi," smiled Gail. "Go back to sleep, mon singe." Vivian did not argue and snuggled up under her blanket, swiftly dropping back to sleep.

In the master bedroom, Holly was hugging Gail's pillow while managing to take up the entire bed. Yeah, that was her wife. Gail shook her head and put her gun and badge away in the small lockbox in the bedroom. After the last summer, Holly had decided a lockbox there was smart, along with two emergency flashlights. The sound of putting her gear and clothes away didn't wake Holly, nor did Gail's shower.

It wasn't until Gail gently nudged Holly back over to half the bed that her wife stirred. "Hey," she mumbled.

Gail lightly kissed Holly's cheek. "Hey." Taking her pillow back from her wife, Gail shifted until she was snuggled as the little spoon.

Not fully awake, Holly just made a happy noise and wound an arm around Gail's middle, keeping her close. It wasn't quite four in the morning and no one was likely to be up before seven, thank god. Solving a case on a Friday night wasn't all that fun, least of all on this night. "Love you," slurred Holly, her body becoming heavier and more languid as she faded.

"Happy anniversary, Holly," whispered Gail, letting the warmth soothe her into sleep.

She woke up not too much later, feeling unpleasantly tense and taut, as if she'd been about to have a nightmare. Every time she threw off her own sleep schedule, this happened. As the weird tension faded, she became aware of a gentle pressure on her neck. Soft. Warm. Lips. Gail smiled and turned her neck, letting Holly explore more of it. A hand was already caressing the slinky nightgown Gail had put on after her shower, though not yet delving under it to skin. It was just a reminder that Holly was here and Gail was not alone. The lips... Well. That might have been something else.

"You were having a bad dream," whispered Holly, her voice soft and tender.

"Almost." She closed her eyes and concentrated on the gentle hand on her side. "Happy anniversary."

Holly kept her hand moving, gliding soothingly over Gail's hip and stomach. "Happy anniversary. When did you get home?"

"Little after three." Gail exhaled and opened an eye to regard her clock. It was a bit after five. An hour or so of sleep. Awesome. Closing her eyes again, she tried to will her body to relax under Holly's touch.

"Catch your bad guy?" The lips pressed into her shoulder, a soft punctuation.

"Yeah."

"Need to talk about the dream?"
"Nah," sighed Gail, realizing her brain was just not willing to let her go back to sleep. "Don't remember it." Rarely did Gail remember the other part of her interesting wedding day with Holly. Not that she even forgot the interrogation, but it didn't weigh on her very much. No, the memory of that one night did enough of that, shaking her out of moments unexpectedly. The wedding day she remembered mostly for the right reasons. "The courier was sick," she said, abruptly, remembering that with amusement.

A muffled laugh shook her wife. "You'd think they'd have had the plain bands in stock, but no."

Gail grinned and scooted, rolling onto her back to look up at Holly. If she couldn't sleep, she wanted to at least wash away any dream-memories with visions of her wife. "But we wanted the engraving on the inside."

They had, in the end, decided on 'plus one forever' for the rings. No one else had seen that yet, not even Vivian. "It was worth the wait," Holly said firmly, kissing Gail's shoulder again.

"You were worth the wait." Finding Holly still felt like a miracle. Finding the one person who got you, who undergo you when you were angry or scared and up a tree. Finding the person who coaxed you back down and made it safe again. "And the frogs."

"I'm so telling Nick you called him a frog," teased Holly.

"Nick free zone." Gail was firm and it made Holly laugh. "We've been married four years now."

Making a pleased noise, Holly nestled against Gail's shoulder and ran her fingernails over her stomach. "We have been married four years," confirmed the brunette. "And we have an eight year old."

"And you will be forty-two next month."

"Okay, you can shut up now," groaned Holly, her hand stopping.

"Hey, you're about to hit your sexual peak." When Holly gave her a look, Gail added, "I read it in one of your journals."

Holly laughed. "Actually, that's not a fact. Some women have theirs in their 30s, others as young as 26." She kissed Gail's collar. "But I think you have your peak when you're with the right person and you have the best sex ever."

"How unscientific of you," Gail teased.

"Hm, well I am having the best sex of my life with you. We're very compatible." Holly propped herself up and looked down at Gail seriously. "I wouldn't have married you if the sex wasn't good."

And Gail had to laugh. The serious scientist face was beautiful and familiar and something she always loved to see. Watching it tell her that sex was good made Gail smile and love her more. The reasons were undefinable. "Holly Stewart, scientific sex goddess," teased Gail, reaching up to rub her thumb on Holly's cheek.

With that wry, lopsided smile, Holly melted Gail's heart again and again. God, how she loved that smile. It made her days seem warmer and the nights less lonely. She could wrap the memory of that face smiling around herself when she felt the nagging self-doubt of her youth, and knew that someone saw her for who she was. Holly kept smiling as she leaned in to kiss Gail's lips softly and snuggle up against her again. "You're too tense to sleep," she pointed out.
"Tell me something I don't know," complained Gail. Whether or not she remembered the nightmare, her body seemed to always know that sleep was a dangerous thing. Sleep was where the parts of her psyche that weren't all that pretty came out to play. Mostly. Sometimes the bad bits came out in public. "I'm sorry I tried to strangle Samuels at the bar."

Holly shushed her. "You would never hurt anyone who didn't deserve it, honey." An arm snuck across her waist tugging her close and hugging her tightly. "And you didn't hurt him. You scared the hell out of him and you let go."

It scared her sometimes, knowing she could let go and unload on someone like that. "I don't know what I would have done if you and Ollie hadn't grabbed me."

"Broken his nose," said Holly, matter-of-factly. "Someone would have gotten in the way, though. I mean, it was the Penny." The fact that Holly was so blasé about it was strange and comforting. "This is not relaxing you," she chastised. "You're supposed to get some sleep so we can have a nice dinner out with our families and friends."

Gail sighed loudly. "I'm wound up," she admitted. The case was part of it, but it was really everything.

"If you don't get some sleep, honey, you will be grumpy cat Peck all night," said Holly so very softly and warmly that it had a surprising impact. Immediately Gail felt hot. The arm on her middle let go and Holly dragged her fingertips across Gail's silken covered stomach again. The suggestion was clear.

Turning her face to look at Holly, Gail felt a little abashed. "Holly..." Her wife was definitely, definitely, horny morning Holly, whom Gail worshiped, and damn it all, Gail was tired and itchy and a little cranky.

But Holly's hand started drifting lower. "I know." Her voice was warm, but it had that deeper tone that always, always, made Gail tingle. Holly scooted up to kiss Gail's neck in a very non-soothing way, a way that sent shivers down her spine. "Close your eyes," breathed Holly, her breath curling around Gail's ear.

Love was surrendering some of yourself to another person. It was a trust fall, knowing the other would always catch you. Sometimes it was a trust push, letting them shove you off a ledge so they could carry you away. As Holly's hand eased its way down, fingers smoothing over Gail's thighs and then up again, she closed her eyes and let herself fall. That hand knew what she liked and what she loved, but more it knew what she needed right now to relax and let go of the stress of the day. The fingers knew how and where to touch to bring about exactly the amount of relief to wash away the tension. And they did so, so, sweetly and smoothly that Gail found herself whispering nothing but her wife's name in moments. The waves crashed and she drifted away from the trials of the previous day and that long, uncomfortable night, until the last thing she heard was Holly's soft voice promising a happy anniversary.

When she finally came ashore, mind and body feeling equally but not completely rested, Gail was mildly appalled to see that it was after noon. Damn, Holly knew how to play her body. She turned and saw that the bed was empty, but it wasn't shocking. Noon. She could have slept more, still feeling a bit tired, but her stomach made noise to remind her that it required more fuel than the average adult. Gail sighed and got up, taking a shower to jolt the rest of her body into the right degree of wakefulness, before going downstairs.

The weirdly familiar sound of her mother's voice came first, followed by the quiet laugh of her daughter. "Elaine, you're never going to win," admonished Holly, sounding amused.
Gail frowned and as she made the turn on the landing, looked to the living room. Unsurprisingly, Vivian was playing Mario Kart. Surprisingly, so was Elaine. "I will win one game," growled Elaine, and Gail recognized the tone of her own voice in her mother's.

"You haven't yet," pointed out Holly, arms folded and watching the game with delight. "You've been at it for almost two hours. I'd give up."

"Never," informed Elaine.

Vivian laughed again and hit the ramp to zoom ahead.

It was probably good for Elaine to lose at the game, mused Gail, but she couldn't help but interject. "Mom, turn left at the split and hit the yellow lightning bolt. You have to keep on the inner right as you turn to make it, and as soon as you hit the bolt, brake hard and turn the wheel a quarter turn left again."

Her mother did not question the directions and hooted when they resulted in Vivian's speed dropping and her Bowser being shrunken. Elaine's Mario zipped through the tricky shortcut and she overtook the other carts. "It's difficult without actual feedback," grumbled Elaine, carefully turning the wheel minutely as she came around the bend.

"Think of it like that rifle you had with the weird sight, Mom," suggested Gail, and she crossed the room to kiss Holly. "Hi."

"Mom, stop helping her cheat!" Vivian's complaint followed as soon as Elaine showed more skill thanks to the direction.

Holly pulled Gail in for a hug and a second kiss. "She's not cheating any more than when she tells you how to beat Dov. Don't be a sore loser, Viv," admonished Holly, still amused. "Hi," she added to Gail.

"Thank you," Gail said softly, keeping her voice low enough for Holly's ears only.

With a broad smile, Holly kissed Gail's nose. "You're very welcome. Want coffee?"

"God, I love you." Gail shook her head, disbelieving her luck. "Coffee and food. My stomach woke me up." With that smile, Holly went to get Gail something to eat.

"You have the metabolism of your uncle," noted Elaine. "My brother eats and eats and eats."

Gail smiled. "I haven't talked to Uncle Eli in years." Her mother's use of present tense surprised her. "How is he?"

"Good. He sent you two a present, actually. He'd like to see you and Steve again." Elaine paused, "Vivian, do not spoil it."

The girl huffed. "But it's pretty."

Ah. "Diamonds," she said knowingly, though a little shocked. "Is he still working for the family?"

Elaine nodded, her victory complete. She put the controller down. "That game is distressingly complex. Do you think you can get me on the police course?"

"Sure. You can use my car. It's a blast." Gail took the coffee and breakfast croissant from her wife. "Thanks, baby."
"Mom, can we play?" Vivian held up Elaine's discarded controller.

"After I eat, Monkey."

If she'd been asked seven years ago to describe her perfect anniversary, she would have scoffed at the very idea. Being burned by Nick, she never would have married him. Maybe lived in toxic, uncomfortable, sin for years, but never marry. And she'd never have married Chris or Dov (his opiate daydream aside). Holly was different. Holly eased into her heart, silently helping shore up the broken pieces and the holes until it was their heart. She did the same for Holly, finding the worn places and the cracks, the ones that filled Holly with fear and told her to run when overwhelmed, and Gail wove her own net around them.

But even so, four years ago, when Holly suggested they marry, Gail had no real concept of what it would be like. For her parents, an anniversary meant a stilted dinner with grandparents she barely knew. The grandmother for whom she was named was a bitter, angry, alcoholic. The other, the policewoman who held a record for arrests leading to convictions in juveniles (an honor Gail could do without), had nothing but disdain for Elaine. How odd, she could see it clearly now.

Today, an anniversary spent playing games with her daughter, watching her wife try and teach her mother how to properly throw a curve ball, and then having a large dinner with her friends from Fifteen, Holly's med school friends, her own mother and brother, Holly's aunt and cousins... It was perfect.

A few weeks later, nudging right up on Holly's birthday, Gail pushed to make sure she didn't have a repeat of falling into bed at three AM. Sadly that meant bringing her daughter to the office. "Okay, let me grab my files and we're out of here," promised Gail, walking Vivian over to the waiting chairs on the third floor.

"Can I see inside your office?"

Gail looked down at Vivian, hesitantly. "You want to see that?" She knew they'd taken down the murder board that morning, but the idea of her seven year-old wandering around was a little nerve-wracking. Even Traci had said she'd worried about bringing Leo around at that age.

And Vivian nodded. "Holly let me see her office."

"Holly's office isn't in the morgue," muttered Gail. "Okay, but this is just really fast."

Nodding happily, Vivian held her hand as they walked into the office. "What's this?" Griggs, the oldest, burliest, detective on the team looked Vivian up and down.

Vivian's eyes went wide. "Is this Griggs?" Clearly Gail's description worked and she nodded. "Hi, Detective Griggs," said Vivian in her most polite. "I'm Vivian." And of all things, a hand went out.

Clearly the kid wanted to be able to come back. Gail sighed a little, but watched as Griggs solemnly shook her daughter's hand. "You want to skedaddle, Peck. ROPE's coming up soon."


"Good idea," agreed Griggs. "She's what? 38?"

"Holly's 42," announced Vivian and Gail winced. "And Gail'll be 35 in November. Is he really a detective?"
"He was trying to be polite, Monkey," sighed Gail.

Vivian looked perplexed. "By lying?"

"By saying Holly looks younger than she is. It's a compliment."

"Are you sure?" The girl screwed her face up, trying to understand that peculiarity.

The general laughter in the room was not helping. "Yes, I'm sure. Thanks Griggs," she gritted out.

Her boss, Butler, walked up and held out the files. His eyes were twinkling. "Here you go. Hey, Vivian."

The girl smiled. "Hi, Inspector." Vivian had started to warm up to most of the men in Gail's life, except for Sam, which she really didn't worry about. "Are you coming for the party?"

"I am not, I'm going to work so we don't need to call your Mom."

That seemed to satisfy her and Vivian thanked him. "Okay, we're out. Let's bounce and get that cake!"

They made it to the elevator when it went to hell. The doors opened and out came four officers from ROPE, an un-cuffed parolee, and one Inspector. Gail quickly stepped back and to the side, sweeping Vivian with her, getting out of the way. But her eyes met her father's.

"Whoops, sorry Detective," said an officer, hustling the probable criminal past them. "Come on, McGann. Let's get you sorted."

Bill Peck startled, looking at Gail, then Vivian, and then back to Gail. "I'll be right there," he told his officers, lingering in Gail's way so she couldn't easily get to the elevator. Shit.

"Inspector," Gail said coolly, as chilly and icy as she possibly could. The hand on Vivian's shoulder had to be reminded to relax.

"Detective," replied Bill. He looked down at Vivian again. "So. This… How are you, Gail?"

"Really? That's where you're going?"

"I know it's been a long time, but I am-

Gail snarled. "No. Just … No. You don't get to do this. Not here."

The vehemence in her tone surprised her father, making him step back. "Gail."

"No," she repeated, her voice low and quiet. "You don't get to just show up at my work and ask me how I am anymore."

He looked down at Vivian again but Gail never moved her eyes from his face. "And this?"

Now she looked down at her daughter, who was wide eyed but not quite wrapped up in her protective shell again. "My personal life, my family, is not your business, Inspector." She wanted to hurl her anger at him, cut him to shreds with her words, flay him alive for the choice he'd made. But she couldn't. Not here, and not in front of her daughter. Vivian deserved more.

"You're just going to cut me out?"
"You did that yourself," she pointed out, bitterly. "You didn't even come to see me when I was in the fucking hospital. So pardon me for not being really welcoming. You don't get to do this. You don't get to just show up and try to be a parent after five years. You just don't."

At least he looked abashed. "I'm sorry—"

"I said no," snarled Gail. She felt Vivian's hand work it's way into hers and it calmed her down a little. "You want to do this, you man up and pick up your damn phone."

He nodded slowly. "Will you answer?"

A pause. "Yes." She tamped down the aching agony of the conversation. She had no idea what she'd say, but she'd answer.

"You talk to your mother," he said carefully.

"Yeah. I do. Mother changed. She'd rather have me in her life than all the Peck bullshit." Her father flinched. "I'll answer if you call, but don't expect me to forgive and forget."

Bill looked away. "I see."

Did he? She sneered at him and focused. As much as she wanted to rip into him, this wasn't the right place or time. "Excuse us, Inspector." Gail jerked her chin at the elevator and was pleased to see him step back. Gail glanced down. "You ready?"

Vivian nodded, her eyes on Bill with curiosity and distrust. They said nothing more to Bill and stepped into the elevator. When the doors finally closed, Gail exhaled. "Was that your dad?"

Gail nodded. "Sorry," she sighed. Vivian squeezed her hand, but said nothing. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," Vivian said, as if Gail was an idiot. Gail looked down and sighed. "When were you in the hospital?"

She blinked. Conversations with Vivian always went in unexpected directions. Gail couldn't predict how the girl's brain worked. "About six months before we met you, some very angry criminals blew up my car."

Vivian's eyes widened. "You were in the car?"

"Yep. A really awesome ETF tech named Sue got me out before it blew up. I broke my ribs though and had to spend the night in the hospital." It had taken months before Gail could move without pain, too. "When I was there, Elaine came to visit, twice. Bill didn't. He didn't even send a card."

They got off on the bottom floor and walked through the station. She spotted Steve and made the sign for father. He winced and nodded.

As they got in the car, Vivian asked, "Can I learn sign language?"

"Sure. It's harder than French."

"Can't be," scoffed Vivian. Gail smiled and shook her head, getting into the driver's seat. "I already know some."

"Oh yeah? How'd you learn some?"

"Watching you and Mom." Vivian made the sign for mother to punctuate her point.
So Gail showed her some simple signs as she drove them home. They beat Holly home, as planned. "Okay, you start homework, I'll start on the cake." She had a plan for the cake, seeing as it was Holly's 42nd birthday. A flat, long, cake, since that was easier for everyone to cut. The decorations were easy. It was just going to be icing but Gail had spent a few nights at her brother's making sugar art. Steve had been astounded to watch the flowers come to life. When she made the well known "Don't Panic" sign, he broke up laughing.

The sugar had been snuck home the day before and was in a box on a shelf, labeled "For your birthday, no peeking." Holly was trustworthy. If it was Gail or Vivian, it'd have to have stayed at Steve's.

As she lost herself in the zen of baking, Gail felt the annoyance of her father fade away. The balance of concentration and relaxation with cake making blanked her mind and, when she finally put the cake in the oven and started on the icing, Vivian spoke up.

"You're smiling again." The words gave Gail pause and she put the food coloring down. "You've been hurt-angry a lot this year," Vivian added.

Slowly exhaling, Gail turned to look at Vivian. "I'm sorry," she said softly. Hurt-angry was a good way to put it, though. She was hurt and she was angry at the same time. But the last thing she wanted to do was scare her family.

And then Vivian said something unexpected. "I wish I could make you feel better."

Gail felt her heart thud loudly. "Oh, Viv. You do," she said softly. "You and Holly do. It's just a lot of stupid stuff. Sometimes..." She paused and realized she didn't have a way to explain it.

The child did. "Sometimes you're feeling a bunch of things at once and it hurts even when it's not supposed to because it's jumbled up. The good stuff gets mixed up and then when someone does something stupid and hurts you, you get mad."

It hurt then, realizing that the reason Vivian had words for it was because of what she felt at times. She wished Vivian would feel comfortable enough to tell her what she was feeling, and realized that she had to start first. So. "I'm upset because I can't make Chris better and because my own father is a racist and homophobic and hates that I married Holly, which just... it's stupid. Mostly I'm mad at my Dad right now. And... You'd think, Viv, that I'd know not to get my hopes up. But there's a part of me that really wishes he'd change and that he'd call me."

Vivian took that in more thoughtfully that most adults. "He won't," she said softly. "I know, Monkey. I know." Gail put food coloring in the frosting. "He's had years to come around."

Her daughter fell silent and introspective. Every time Gail glanced over, the girl was watching her bake. "It's hard to know who to trust," sighed Vivian, rather explosively.

"Yeah, yeah it is." Gail peered over, wondering how to tell the girl that she should be trusted.

She didn't have to. "I'm really lucky," announced the eight year old. In that moment, Gail knew Vivian knew. This was safe. This was a good place.

Gail smiled and held over a spoon of the frosting for her daughter. "So are we, Viv."
More than once, Gail had joked about how hard it was to be an effective robber these days. So few stores carried cash that you pretty much had to rob a bank to make it effective. People who robbed convenience stores generally made it out with a few hundred at most, which made it high risk and low reward. That was low on the Peck Scale of efficiency. Those thoughts went through her head every time she went to the bank.

She'd swung by out of convenience only, picking up some cash for the week. Holly still liked to pay cash for small things and having the cash meant she stuck with her budget, come hell or high water. Like most people, she barely visited the bank, doing most of her work online. Even Vivian's trust fund was rarely handled in person.

That had been a strange new addition to their lives. Elaine's younger brother had started talking to Steve and Gail, and now a small group of Armstrongs would regularly chat with them. Eli had given them a gift of diamonds, as Gail suspected, but also a gift of ownership shares in the company. Those had been filed away for Vivian, since they lived quite comfortably.

In general, the Armstrongs were nice if intense. Holly could see why Elaine had easily gone from them to the Pecks and thought that their emotional distance was normal. It was a testament to Elaine's ability to grow and change that she'd gotten past it. Uncle Eli wore the scars of his upbringing the same way his sister did, wary about compliments, always looking for an ulterior motive, constantly impressed that Steve and Gail had grown past it all.

Those were the days that Holly called her parents to tell them she loved them.

This was another of those days but for a different reason. And they were the second call. Third if you counted 911.

It started with coffee. "Hey, darlin', is it too much for me to buy you that?"

She grinned and turned to hug Oliver. The only man who could call Gail cute names and get away with it. "Only if I can buy yours."

Confusing the poor barista, they paid for each other's drinks. "What brings you way over here," wondered Oliver as they stepped out into the muggy summer heat.

"I had a meeting with a vendor. They want the lab to buy a chemical sniffer."

"Is it any good?"

"It's interesting, but I'm not sure we need to spend that much money on it. It's especially useful for determining accelerant with arson, so I'm going to talk to the fire department about sharing the costs."

Oliver grinned. "Don't let Gail hear that. She'll rant about how stupid firemen are."

Returning the grin, Holly shook her head. "Too late. Anyone who runs into a burning building? Heard that." She'd also met one of the firefighting Pecks, the possibly gay Shay. Who was totally gay. Shay had joined the hockey team with Holly as well, so they actually saw one another quite a lot.

"She has shed so much of her Peckness, but that..." Oliver shook his head, laughing. "I meant to ask her if she'd make Celery a cake. For the baby."
"She hates cakes," admitted Holly. "I don't know why she makes me one for my birthday." Gail rarely did anything but rant about the pain in the ass that was cake making. That said, she actually made Holly the sugar flowers she'd always admired. Just when you thought Gail wasn't paying attention, she surprised you like that.

Nodding, the man sipped his coffee. "Hoopy Frood. That was cute though."

Holly blushed. "Well... I'm forty-two." That Gail had decorated the cake to remind her of the Hitchhikers books was cute enough. That she called Holly the meaning of her life, in a semi-serious tone that night was something else all together.

"When I was forty-two she called me a dirty old man." Oliver grinned. He'd been 45 when Golly had met him. Three years before that, Gail would have been a just cut loose rookie. Holly could totally see that, and her smile made Oliver smile more. "You make a much better 42 that I do," he added, kissing her cheek.

"Thank you," demurred Holly. "I'll ask her about the cake. Her due date's any day now?"

Oliver nodded. "I can't believe I'm going to be a dad again. I'm over fifty, Holly," he groaned. "You two going to have more?" When she shook her head, Oliver nodded. "Heard you had a weird Christmas."

Lord. "That's putting it mildly," she admitted. "I don't think Viv would handle a sibling right now and... I know Gail would love a billion kids, so she'll probably babysit junior."

"Jerry."

Holly blinked and stared at Oliver. "Jerry?"

"It's a boy." A mix of pride and shock and terror crossed his face. "I got three girls and a boy. I have no idea what to do with a boy."

"I though Celery didn't want to know." Holly boggled at both the fact that Oliver did know the baby's gender and that he was naming it Jerry. How would Gail take that? Was it wrong her first thought was for her wife?

"Sooooooo she told me. Two weeks ago. She was telling me how the tyke was kicking and said he was going to be just like me." Oliver shrugged. "You know Celery. She just knows things." He sighed. "She's going to be a great mom."

That was true. Celery understood people. She knew that Holly was scared sometimes, that Gail felt fractured, and that Vivian needed a haircut to feel better. "Celery's amazing," admitted Holly, sincerely. "And you're a good dad. You raised Gail pretty good," she teased.

Oliver smiled again. "I did. I did. She's like one of my own sometimes." He paused. "You two good?" When Holly nodded he beamed. "Will you tell her? That it's going to be Jerry? With a Y. If Celery's wrong, an I, but..."

"But she won't be wrong," agreed Holly. "I'll tell her." Jerry Shaw. "You're not giving that poor child the middle name Barber, are you?"

"Mm. No. Nutmeg maybe." There was a twinkle to his eyes. The same eyes suddenly grew sharp and he stared at the bank. 'I need to do this thing though, darlin'. Thank you for the coffee!"

Without another kiss, which was odd for Oliver, he jogged across the street and to the bank. Holly
frowned. Why was he going to the bank? Her's was not to wonder why, though, and Holly turned to where she’d parked her car. The screams caught her attention as she reached the corner.

People were streaming out of the bank. Not a lot. Not as many as she could see in the building. "Holy crap," muttered Holly, and she snatched her phone. 911. Report a robbery in progress at a bank. So many things happened on auto-pilot. Holly made sure she was out of the way, out of sight, headed back to the parking garage. The 911 operator took her seriously when she gave her name and said that she thought Sgt. Shaw from Fifteen was in there.

The second call was to Gail. Gail was just as calm as Oliver had seemed, hitting that cop groove where she had orders and directions and you didn't question it. The tone wasn't quite the same as when Holly had her hand on the car door. That had terrified her beyond belief. She didn't know Gail could talk like that, would ever talk like that to her. If that was how Elaine had been as Superintendent Peck, no wonder people were afraid of her.

But Gail had the calm voice, the firm calm you didn't question when you were told to drive back to your office and keep away from the bank. It was the voice you trusted to know what to do, how to do it, and that you were going to be just fine and safe if you listened to her. Holly really liked that voice. That voice protected her and would take a bullet for her without thinking past what her job was.

Sometimes Holly hated the voice. Sometimes she desperately needed it. Today she needed it to not worry about Oliver.

The call to her parents was much later. That came after Gail called her back to say everything was fine, but Oliver blew out his eardrum and was shouting at everyone. And it came after she picked up Vivian from summer school and hugged her close, telling her that she could pick a treat tonight because Holly had a bad day and needed one. It came after Gail was home and gave get the full story, that Oliver had seen the gunman heading in and gone after to try and stop it, giving himself up as hostage, and the idiot gunman fired his gun next to Oliver's head.

When Gail went upstairs to tuck Vivian in, Holly called her dad. "Hey, Holls," he greeted with the cheerful tone he always had.

Not always though. Holly remembered, suddenly, being ten and being sent to stay with her aunt. Lily's sister, the one who still lived in the Toronto area and who had come to their anniversary party. It had been for the summer, which young Holly had delighted in. Two months up in Barrie where there was a beach and a lake every day, and she could ride a bike with her cousins and have fun. It was better than camp. But now, thirty years later, she realized what had happened. Her parents had been so tense and ... She saw the same thing in Gail sometimes. Pain and fear. Uncertainty as to what she felt, what it meant, and worry to how it was seen.

"Dad, you're a really great dad," she told him.

"Well thanks," he laughed. "What brought that on?"

"I ... Today was weird." Sighing, Holly sat down on the bench on the back porch with a glass of wine. "I was talking to Oliver. Did you meet him?"

Her father grunted. "No, but Gail talked about him. Three daughters. And you you went to his wedding? Holl, you hate weddings."

The retort Gail used fell off her tongue. "Technically it was a handfasting," she replied and her father laughed. "His wife is pregnant. Accident."
Brian Stewart made an amused noise. "You were an accident too."

She knew that. "My birthday is six months after your wedding and I was not a premie," sassed Holly. "I've always known that, you ninny."

"Ouch," laughed Brian. "First I'm a great dad, now I'm a ninny. So what happened with Oliver?"

"He ran into a bank where there was a hold up." Her father fell silent. "And I was thinking he's crazy because Izzy, that's his oldest, she's in college. And Winny, the youngest, is going to have a boy and they're naming it after Jerry, who died eight years ago and... And then I realized that him running in there, giving himself up as a hostage, that's... That's why he's a good dad and a great guy and... You are too. And I love you."

Her father exhaled loudly. "I love you too, Holly."

"I know." There was a creak on the deck and she looked over at Gail. Her wife held her own glass on wine but signed, asking if she could sit with. Holly nodded, and a moment later was nestled into Gail. "Say hi to Gail, Daddy."

She held the phone up towards Gail and heard her father say "Hello, trouble."

"Hi, Brian."

Holly pressed the phone back to her ear. "I'm okay, Dad, I just... I want you to know. I mean. You know, right?"

"I do, Holls." He sighed. "Do you want to talk to your mom?"

"Mm. No."

"Okay. Call her later, though. Next week. She's working on a paper."

Holly smiled. "Tell her I love her."

Promising to, and promising he loved her, Brian hung up. "I was," Gail said thoughtfully, sipping her wine. "Premature. Over three months."

Putting her phone down, Holly looked up surprised. "Really? You never said."

"Well I don't remember it," smirked Gail. "But. I was in the hospital until I was almost five months old." She toyed with her wine glass and sat down beside Holly on the swinging bench.

Holly had read many papers about how premature babies had difficulties bonding with their mothers. She'd even seen it happen in her residency. "Elaine never mentioned that."

"She hates making excuses." Gail absently toyed with Holly's hair. "1 and 3/4s of a pound. Steve said the first time he saw me I was a month old and I glared at him."

Instead of all the medical information in her head, Holly was thinking that Gail was supposed to be born in February, not November, and would have been even younger. February would have put her a school year back, a year behind her fellow rookies, and she could have been a very different Gail. She frowned. "Why five months?"

"I have an underdeveloped startle reflex."

Holly sat up and turned around. Gail's expression was serious and almost chagrined. "Okay. That's
funny, knowing you." Holly sat back so she could watch Gail's face. "Do you think that had any impact on you and your mother?"

"Doesn't explain Steve," she pointed out. "I think that it didn't help. But it's complicated." Gail put her feet in Holly's lap, looking thoughtful.

"You don't get angry at that anymore."

"Oh, I'm angry. I'm still pissed at Dad, who by the way, has not called. And part of me keeps waiting for Mom to yank the rug out. But..." Gail paused and eyed Holly, who knew she was grinning.

Holly sipped her wine, "You called her mom."

Her wife looked perplexed. "I did?"

"You did. You have been for a few months." Gail had, according to Steve, called their mother 'mom' once in a while, but they both generally preferred mother.

Gail huffed and shrugged. "I don't hate her anymore. I don't know that I can." Putting down her wine, Holly started to rub Gail's feet. "Mom didn't share the case notes of Perik with social services," Gail explained. "Dad did."

Awkwardly, Holly froze. She had no poker face, but she'd known that Elaine hadn't leaked the notes for a while. She'd always suspected, though never asked aloud if it was so, that Bill had a hand in it, but this? The way Elaine had talked around it, Holly had some faint hope it was just another weird Peck family attack. She'd seen those since. But this was different. This was Gail's own father. "Uh..."

"Ah," sighed Gail and she smiled. "So which part isn't the shock?"

"Your Mom and I talked at the cottage," grumbled Holly. "I'm sorry. I didn't ... She worried about you and wanted me to know ... She wanted me around for you."

Gail arched her eyebrows. "Well. That sounds like Elaine, weirdly. Can't bribe you, may as well trick you into doing what she wanted."

It sounded harsh but accurate. "I didn't know that it was Bill with the papers."

"I was talking to Anne about things. Since we're not fostering anymore and we aren't re-certing, and I joked it would be easier since my mother wasn't in office." Gail exhaled. "She was confused because apparently it was Inspector Peck of Fifteen who filed that particular report."

Holly stared at Gail, confounded. "She really just let your dad get away with that?" And Gail's reply was a simple nod. "What the hell?" She would never pick Elaine as a martyr but Holly had known that what Elaine did was to protect Gail. Apparently it was to protect her from her own father, while taking the blame for all of it, even now.

Gail wiggled a foot. "Their marriage was a contract," she pointed out.

"And you think that was part of their deal?" Take the fall for ruining Gail's chance of adoption to get divorced?

"Makes sense, doesn't it?"

"That is ... grotesque." Holly shuddered, feeling that viscerally. "I can't tell if I want to hug your
mom or hit her."

Gail laughed. "That's how a lot of people feel, Holly."

That was true. Elaine was a love her or hate her person. "What about you? How do you feel about it?"

"I feel bad for my mom," admitted Gail. "Sorry for her."

Holly sighed and nodded a little. "Why did you start calling her Mom?"

The confused expression on her wife's face was almost amusing. She could literally see Gail rewinding through every conversation they'd had recently. "I have no idea," said the blond after a moment.

Smiling, Holly picked up her wine and finished it. "Your mother is turning into a decent human."

"She said she had Stockholm Syndrome," sighed Gail and she finished her wine. "Which I can believe. I have all the fucked up family crap."

Holly stood up and held a hand out to Gail. "Did my dad tell you why he gets freaked in cars?"

When Gail nodded, taking the hand and standing, Holly went on, "They've had their moments too."

"They love you, though. And they don't fuck that up." She kissed Holly's cheek and took her wine glass, heading to the door.

"That's not really fair," noted Holly, opening the door for Gail. "Have you thought about talking to your father? Calling him?"

"No." Gail paused. "Can we not talk about my dad?"

"I just don't want you to paint him as the bad guy." She opened the dishwasher and watched Gail put the glasses in silently. "It's a much more complex situation," she added.

Gail nodded. "I know. And he's not. I'm ... I'm confused about why he did what he did. Why Mom did what she did." She looked up at the stairs. "I can't understand, I can't fathom any of it. I can't see ever thinking that any of it would be a good idea." With a heavy exhale, Gail put her hands on the counter and leaned against it.

Her own sigh wasn't quite as deep or fraught with self doubt, but Holly stepped up and leaned into Gail's back, sliding her hands up to hug Gail's shoulders to her. "I love that about you," noted Holly, resting her cheek against the place where her wife's shoulder blades met.

"You love that I don't understand things?"

"I love that you're trying to. And that you can't understand being mean to kids."

The body in front of her shook with a short laugh. "Fair game on adults though," Gail noted.

"Agreed." Holly squeezed Gail again and stayed there, leaning against her and trying to be comforting.

Gail finally sighed again. "Can I ask a medical question?" When Holly muttered a yes, Gail asked, "How long does it take for a perforated eardrum to heal?"

Holly replied before she thought about it. "Couple months." Then she replied what was asked.
"Oliver?" Gail nodded and everything clicked for Holly in an instant. "He'll be fine. It's not like Chris, honey."

The exhale was shaky. "Okay," whispered Gail. "Does it scare you?"

"Sometimes," Holly admitted and felt Gail stiffen. "A lot of the time. I used to think you were only in danger when you were in uniform. And then I thought it was the badge. But I think I have to accept that you're the person who runs to help others." She kissed Gail's shoulder blade. "And I love that about you."

Her wife inhaled, "But-

"Hush. Yes. It scares me. All the time. I always worry about you. Sometimes it's irrational. But what scares me the most is how much I need you." Holly squeezed Gail close again. "And I had life with you and without you and I want this. I want with. I want the scary stuff. Because I would rather be scared with you than boring and safe. I love you."

Gail was quiet for a long time after that. "Am I allowed to talk?"

"You don't have to."

Her wife turned around and pulled Holly close for a seriously warm hug. "If I ever scare you. Please tell me?" Holly nodded and tangled her fingers in Gail's short hair, holding her still so they could press their cheeks against each other. "I think I'm doing this wrong. I'm supposed to be comforting you after a scary day."


Dov stared at her. "So ... What does it mean?"

They were sitting on the back deck at Gail's with beers. She couldn't think of anyone else to talk about the situation with besides Holly, and her wife had already expressed her thoughts on the matter.

"It means his odds aren't good."

His odds. Chris' odds. Chris was on life support now. He had been for a few days. His lungs had started to be problematic, not firing properly. The hospital had called Gail at dinner to ask of Chris should be put on ventilation. The swelling in his brain had gone down, but not enough. He'd been in a coma for four months. Everyone told her that he was never going to wake up, and frankly, Gail believed them.

She just didn't want to let him go yet. Neither did Dov. That's why he was there to be talked to. "Chloe thinks you should let him go."

"He actually went down the coma scale," snapped Gail, frustrated. "He's more responsive. The swelling just isn't going down fast enough."

Dov nodded. "How long... How long can he be on the machines?"

Technically ... For as long as they could afford. "September." Dov's head snapped up. "I... God okay, when Chris was stabbed he told me that he didn't want to be a machine for more than six months. If he's not waking up by September, if he can't live without the machines, I'm taking him
When she'd told Holly, her wife said that it was too long. Of course, then she told Gail that if she was on a machine, Holly was never taking her off. And Gail had informed her that she would let Holly go after having the, try everything possible, because she couldn't stand seeing Holly like she saw Chris. They'd fought about that, raging a little, until at last they shelved the argument for the time being.

A week later, Holly presented her with updated paperwork to fill out regarding exactly what Gail wanted. She explained she didn't want to let Gail go, but she'd respect the decisions. They spent the end of July deciding exactly how they wanted to live and die in the hospital while enjoying a long weekend at the cottage. It was morbid, watching their daughter swing off the rope into the lake endlessly while deciding how long was too long for a feeding tube, how dead was brain dead, and what should be done with organs.

And when they were done, when they had it all laid out, Holly grabbed Gail's hand and insisted they use the rope swing. Vivian laughed as, for the first time in front of her, Holly swung out over the lake and launched herself into the open air. And Gail... Well Gail took a photo of Holly's windmilling arms and kicking legs, her black hair floating in the air.

But that was then and this was now. That was the cottage where everything was safe and fun and relaxing. This was the city where her friends were stabbed and shot and hit by cars... Where she was kidnapped. She looked over the backyard of her house, the swing set Steve had helped her put together to surprise Holly and Vivian, even though everyone said Viv was too old for it. The city didn't scare her. The city was dangerous and vibrant and it was her home.

"He's not waking up, is he?" Dov's voice was soft and scared.

"Probably not, no." Gail swished the beer bottle in her hand.

Dov nodded. "I thought he'd be the last one of us to die."

Absently, Gail remarked, "I thought I'd be the first." When she felt Dov staring at her, she shrugged. "That's what I was thinking in the trunk of the car. I was thinking ... I was cold. I couldn't make my legs move. My arms barely worked. And Jerry was dead." She sipped her beer. "Oliver's naming his son Jerry."

"Jerry Barber Shaw?"

"Jerry Nutmeg Shaw."

Her friend wrinkled his nose. "Seriously?"

"His wife's name is Celery Sunflower." She grinned.

Dov laughed, the tension bleeding off his shoulders. "Christopher Adam."

She thought about the names for a moment. Of course Christopher Adam. "Epstein or Price?"

"Epstein." And she nodded. "If it's a girl... I wanted to ask ..."

"Absolutely not!" Gail snapped at him. "No, no way are you naming that girl Christina Abigail!"

They both laughed again. "How is Gail not short for anything," he teased.
"Shut up Bear," growled Gail. And then. "Gail Santana." Her friend looked surprised. "The chief's first wife. Died when Steve was a toddler. Antonia was my alcoholic grandmother."

"They hated you."

"I knew that," she sassed. Except they hadn't. Gail Francis Santana was a damned hero. She had been brave, willing to give of herself, and she'd died in the line of duty. Antonia Marie Armstrong (nee Fowler) had survived the devastation of the Great Depression as a young girl, the collapse of her family farm, the suicide of her father. It no longer surprised Gail that Grandma Antonia had been a mean drunk. Life had certainly done a number on her. And Elaine, Elaine had picked those names for her premature daughter on purpose, in defiance of the Peck 'deal,' to give her daughter a silent prayer for a future.

Weird as it was, her mother loved her. Gail sighed and scratched her eyebrow.

Dov rolled his beer bottle between his hands. "You and Holly aren't having more kids, are you?"

"Nah," she replied absently. "Viv doesn't need that stress. It's why we stopped doing the other foster stuff too."

He tilted his head. "Do you regret that?"

Without thinking, Gail replied, "I don't regret a thing. Not about anything."

Her friend looked surprised. "Nothing? Not even taking the fall for all of us?"

"Oh," Gail groaned. "You know what's funny? Five years ago, yeah, I was still pissed about it. You all sucked. It was all of our fuck up. She should have searched him better, Dov should have handled his suspect better, Andy should have led them better, Nick should have been sober, and Chris... Her thoughts trailed off. Chris. "It doesn't matter now, Dov. We've all learned."

"I'm glad you didn't get fired," he said quietly.

She wanted to push, to tell him that words were nice, but would he have done anything? Would any of them have stood up for her? Even at the time, the only one who expressed any sympathy had been Traci. Nick was wrapped up in his own head. "You know why I wasn't? The Perik trial."

Dov's eyes widened. "That was right after... You mean they didn't fire you because of that?"

"Yep," she sighed, popping the P. "Having a fired cop on the stand, the only survivor and witness, wouldn't have helped the case. At all." Gail finished her beer. "That was a bad time."

"We were all in bad places," he agreed. "We're better now."

"Some of us," allowed Gail.

Dov made a face and finished his beer. "Andy."

"Andy."

They shook their heads. "Look. I'll back you. With Chris. You... You're in charge, but I think you're right."

"He's your son, Dov," sighed Gail. "I don't want to do this without you."

"Hey, did you hear me? I, Dov Epstein, think you, Gail Peck, are correct. And awesome." She
couldn't help but smile a little at him and Dov grinned back. "Your awesome doctor wife, your strange but really cool kid, your house, your job... You're the success story."

Gail snorted. "You'll be the head of Fifteen, you know. The next Oliver."

"Not Noelle?"

"Nah, she loves the rookies too much. Sergeant Epstein."

They grinned at each other. It was all horrible and terrible and yet... And yet it was okay. They had each other for support.

She needed that support when she ended up on a triple-Peck case. Drugs (hello Steve), a homicide (hello Traci), and the backyard of a university chancellor (hello Gail), meant all three Pecks were standing by the body when forensics rolled up, led by the pseudo-Peck.

"You guys get a group rate or something?" Holly smirked as she pulled on her gloves.

Gail rolled her eyes. "Care to enlighten us as to method and madness, Dr. Demented?"

"Pistol in the conservatory," quipped Holly, squatting by the body.

"Greenhouse." In the last few months, Vivian had found the original and the new Clue games and they had become regular entries for game night. It had delighted Holly, who found all sorts of great games they could play.

Pushing her glasses up, Holly grinned broadly. "Potato, tomato."

Steve groaned. "Can you be done flirting? Please?"

Her wife had already lost the thread of the game, rolling over the deceased's arm. "Detective Peck, is this a gang marker?"

Both Traci and Gail turned towards Steve. Gail wondered what it might look like to outsiders. Three people who answered to Peck and yet they all knew which one someone meant when they asked for a Peck. Steve leaned over. "Possibly. Nothing common now."

Intrigued, Gail leaned over her brother's shoulder. "That looks familiar," she muttered. A burn, circular, on the kid's forearm was really familiar.

Traci joined them and frowned. "Yeah, kinda does," she agreed with Gail. Frowning, Traci pulled out her phone and started looking at it. She had access to all her old cases. But Gail didn't think this had been a case she'd worked on as a detective.

It felt old. She stepped away from the body, letting Holly and Steve discuss the particulars of gang marks. Letting her brain wander, Gail looked over the scene and the witnesses. The dead man's friend, a junkie, had found him and called 911. You had to give him props for doing the right thing. John had taken Steve's rookie partner over to do the interview, saying it wasn't fair to toss a greenie in with Peckstrom. The rookie had not found it amusing.

"Anything interesting, John-boy?" She rested her hands on her belt, eying the witness.

Her partner shook his head. "Nada."

The witness blustered. "Hey, I told you, that crazy girl. She did it."
Wearily, John asked, "Did you see this girl here?" The mumbled no made Gail smirk. "So she hated your buddy there for honing in on her turf. But you don't know her name or anything.

"They used to run together. Years ago. They both got the same thing." The junkie pulled his sleeve up and pointed at the inside of his forearm.

Gail blinked. "Cigarette burn?"

"Yeah, that's the one."

Damn but that was familiar. "What's this Mata Hari look like?"

The junkie looked confused. "Mata whosit?"

"Never mind," sighed Gail. "What's your crazy girl look like?" The description was sadly generic. Caucasian girl, late teens, brown hair, the burn, angry. Answered to the name of Lewis. Gail stared. A clue dropped. She hustled back over to the body, "Curtis Pane," she said to her brother. "That's his old mark."

"He's still in jail," Traci said slowly. "We arrested him seven years ago, Gail."

"Doc, how old is that scar?" Gail's back brain wanted to call her Holly, but the detective brain was firing on all pistons.

Holly blinked and used her wrist to push her glasses up. "It's not new," she said slowly. As Gail opened her mouth, Holly added, "It could be around a decade old or two years. It depends on the skin growth and deformation, of course with younger—"

Impatient, Gail cut her off, "What if I said it was from a cigarette held to the skin, directly, for between 5 and 10 seconds?"

Her wife frowned. "Then your theory is plausible." Which was Holly for 'yes' sometimes.

Gail pivoted and pointed at Steve, "Videos. Gimme."

"How the hell did you know we had videos?"

"I'm psychic, Steven." He rolled his eyes and pulled out his phone, tapping up the video feed. God bless the future. "Son of a bitch, Jordan Lewis!"

Taking a look, Traci frowned. "Gail, the odds of that are—"

"Look at the face. That's her." Gail was certain. The odds were astronomical, but less if you considered her job and Jordan's life. Now all she had to do was find the girl.

As soon as her wife ran into the waiting room, Holly announced, "Gail, I want a new car."

The collected members of Fifteen broke up into laughter which only got louder when they saw Gail's confused expression. "I missed something," she muttered.

"Celery nearly gave birth in the back of Holly's car," explained Chloe, holding her three week old Christopher.

Holly shuddered. "Birth is absolutely disgusting."
The laughter started up again. "But you're a doctor," teased Andy.

"She's a pathologist," Gail corrected, kissing Holly's forehead. "And god, we have put off your car forever."

They'd put off her car because Gail's Kia had been blown up and then they'd ended up with a kid and moved and adopted and … "You can pick it out, honey, I really don't care." She sighed, "Later though."

With a grin, Gail did not sit down, turning to look at the others. "So? Come on, someone tell me."

The group immediately starting telling the story. Holly had been there and leaned back in her chair, closing her eyes. When her phone rang and it was Celery, she'd been confused. It wasn't like they were besties or anything, though Holly did like her. Their relationship had been odd ever since Celery informed Holly she had negative energy. Things had changed a lot since then, of course, but it did make for some awkward moments. But of course Holly had picked up the phone and been startled that Celery was sure she was 'about to go into labor.' After trying to get a hold of Oliver or even Gail, Holly decided the universe had it in for her, and went to take her wife's friend's wife to the hospital.

"Gail and I delivered a baby once, in a heat wave," announced Dov, taking baby Chris from his partner. They'd not gotten married and didn't seem to be headed that way any time soon.

Holly eyed her wife. "You delivered a baby?"

"Dov delivered a baby. I had my hand crushed," corrected Gail, sitting beside her wife and pretty much bouncing with anticipation.

"You like babies, don't lie." Do was grinning, and as if to prove his point, handed his own over to Gail, who easily nestled the boy in the crook of her arm.

She did like babies. Holly had known that for a long time. "Hey, Little Chris," smiled Gail. "Dov, how the hell can you and Princess there have a kid this cute?"

Andy was aghast, "Don't swear in front of the baby!"

Rolling her eyes, Gail cooed at the baby. It was almost hilarious to see her with a baby. "Your underbelly is showing," whispered Holly, amused. Then she looked at Andy, "Actually, studies have shown it's not the words themselves the way they're used that have a greater impact on infants. Your tone and action—"

Her wife cut her off, "Holly. Science. Blah. No one cares right now." And with that, Gail deposited Little Chris into Andy's waiting arms. Everyone wanted to hold the baby, even Nick, but the baby started to cry and went back to mom fairly fast.

"How long does birth even take?" Andy looked thoughtfully over at Little Chris, currently having a snack under a modesty blanket.

"Mine was fast," remarked Chloe. "Water broke and two hours later we had Chris." On the phone, Dov had announced it was like greased lightning.

Traci chimed in, "I was a few hours, but I was sixteen. Noelle was all day." Her sister-in-law paused and looked over at Gail, who could actually give you the exact time if she thought about it.

The pale hand in hers squeezed once. "Celery's probably waiting for the right signs," joked Gail,
looking amused. "I wonder how freaked Oliver is."

"He was pretty pale when I saw him," Holly noted. The original plan was for a home birth, but when Celery had called her, she was adamant about going to the hospital. It was very odd, Holly had thought at the time. She’d ended up staying with Celery until Oliver got there, not even able to text Gail until after.

Finally, though, finally, Oliver walked in looking shell shocked. Everyone except Chloe stood up, expectantly. "It's a boy," he announced, his voice higher pitched than normal. "Jerry's seven and a half pounds. He was coming out backwards and got all, um, tangled up." Oliver's eyes were a little wild, but he looked around until he spotted Holly. "You, Holly. I love you. Peck, I'm kissing your wife."

Letting go of Holly's hand, Gail laughed as Oliver swept Holly into a huge hug and kissed her cheek. "Ooookay," Holly stuttered. "Oliver, all I did was drive her here."

"And you held her hand until I got here. And you saved Jerry." He hugged her again and then pulled out his phone to show a photo of baby Jerry, angry and yowling with a big bruise on his face. "Forceps," he explained.

"I think Celery did the saving, Oliver," corrected Holly. "She called me."

"Yeah, but you came!"

Gail cut in, "She's really good at that." When Holly looked down at her wife, she saw a soft smile. Once in a while Gail said she loved Holly most because she came when Gail needed her. "Can we see them, or is Celery wiped?"

The phone was being passed around. "Wiped," confirmed Oliver. "But your wife gets dibs." This time Gail made a face. "Yes, you can come, Peck."

Hand in hand, Gail and Holly followed Oliver to the semi private room where Celery was half asleep, baby Jerry tucked into her arms. As soon as she saw Holly, Celery insisted she get to hold the baby first. "I've never held a newborn," hissed Holly as Gail pushed her to a seat.

"What? Not even in med school?"

"I delivered babies," she grimaced. "I didn't hold them!" And yet there she was, in a chair with a not even hour old newborn in her arms. Baby Jerry was a little bruised and a little grumpy, and he looked totally like Winston Churchill. He was also adorable.

Gail leaned over. "He's got Oliver's nose. I am so sorry, Celery," she teased.

"Hey, that's a manly nose. A good nose." Oliver draped his arm over Gail's shoulder. "You married a good one, Gail," he said and kissed her cheek.

"Ew, you're being gross, Oliver." Gail shoved at him. "What's the middle name? Is it Nutmeg? I've got twenty bucks on Nutmeg."

From the bed, Celery spoke up, "Hollis."

Holly felt her heart thud louder and she looked up at Celery, stunned. "What?"

"Jerry Hollis Shaw," smiled Celery. "We're having a Saining when the cord comes off, and I want you to come." Holly looked at Gail who just shrugged and signed that it was up to her.
She was at a loss. "Um. What does that mean?"

Oliver explained, "It's the naming ceremony. And you'd be Jerry's godmother. Sorry, Peck, you got ousted."

"I'll live," Gail laughed. "Jerry Hollis, huh." Reaching over Holly's shoulder, Gail brushed the baby's cheek gently. "You have the most awesome godmother ever. Just so you know." And Gail kissed Holly's forehead.

Realizing she'd been railroaded, Holly sighed. "Okay, but I'm teaching this kid science."

With a deep smile, like she'd known this was the way it was going all along, Celery replied, "I wouldn't have it any other way."
It was horrible. Gail sat in Chris' room, looking at the shell of the man. "You're not waking up, are you?" She sighed and shoved her hands in her jacket pockets. His parents were coming tomorrow, but of all the people out there who were stuck making this decision, it was Gail.

Chris, like most cops, had some sort of will that explained what they wanted done if they were a vegetable. But everyone was fighting Chris's right now. Dov wanted him to stay on life support longer, to wake up and meet his namesake, Little Chris. And Gail... Gail argued he should be allowed to die in peace. With dignity. That was when they found out exactly who had the legal right to make that last choice for him, whose name Chris had written down in case of an emergency and whose he'd written in case of death. If Dov had been his emergency contact, everyone would have thought it was understandable and logical. That the reality was it had been Gail, and she was the one who had to make this call, was not.

Except as Holly pointed out, it was perfectly logical. Gail was the one who could be critical about his, who could think realistically, look at the situation, and make the right call without emotion messing it up. It made Gail feel like people still didn't see her for a real person, someone who had feelings too, but Holly explained that Gail was just stronger than the rest, was all. That helped.

It didn't help that Chris wasn't able to breathe without the ventilator. He couldn't breathe anymore. He was going to die without the machines, and he trusted her, above all else, to let him die.


Sitting down, she stared at him. "I have to sign this. Today. To tell them you're not waking up, and I agree to let them take your organs and unplug you. I knew you were an organ donor," she laughed. "I mean you had to be. You're too nice." Gail picked up the papers and stared. Her wife had filled them out, neatly and efficiently. Like all lesbians and doctors, Holly had terrible handwriting. But she did, sometimes, sit and take the effort to make it easily read.

All that was left was Gail's signatures. "So here's what happens, Chris. I sign this. They unplug you. You die. They harvest." Her voice caught. "They harvest your organs. We bury you near Jerry." She wiped her eyes again. "Ollie named his son Jerry. Three daughters and a son. Can you believe that? Holly and I aren't having any more. Viv... She needs us, not a sibling right now."

Gail toyed with the pen. "How come you did this to me? How come you put me on that stupid form? Huh? Why not Dov? Or ... God, fucking Denise. Okay, fine, I know why you didn't pick her." She laughed softly. "I did call her, you asshole. I may have been mean, though." Leaning back, she added, "Christian's coming. He's eight. About the same age as Viv and Liv. Did you know that? I didn't even think about it until I actually talked to him, like as a person, about this. Andy's picking him and Denise up." She couldn't remember why they'd let Andy do that, considering the last time she'd been around Christian he'd been kidnapped.

She spun the pen around, clicked it, and pressed it to the paper. "You're a real ass, Chris," she
muttered and signed her name, dating the paper. "Do you know how much paperwork there is for this shit?" Six signatures, a dozen initials. "I haven't signed my own name this much since Holly and I bought that house. It's more than it took to adopt Viv."

But she signed them all and put the clipboard down. "I'm really gonna miss you, Chris. You were the best of us." Gail stared at him quietly. She wasn't crying for some reason. That had happened earlier when Holly had gone over the facts of Chris' status with her, addressing the reality that she was going to have to do this. And here she was, doing the unthinkable. Gail was signing a paper to let her friend die.

The nurse came in to collect the paperwork. There was a moment where the nurse looked like she was going to say something, but instead walked out, leaving Gail alone with her thoughts for a while. They were going to unplug him today. Holly had run her through the process, that she would sign the papers and they'd take them and have legal check, and at the appointed time, unplug Chris.

As she sat in the room, waiting for the doctor to come, Dov came in and took the chair next to her. He said nothing. Neither did Andy or Traci, who came in over the next hour. The four of them sat silently, watching the machines breathe for him. What could anyone say? This was the end of their friend. Unlike when Jerry or Luke died, this was planned and calculated.

"Okay," said the doctor as he walked in. "Oh. Sorry. Which one of you is ... Ms. Peck?"

"Detective Peck," said Dov, absently and a little angrily.

Gail stood up, touching his arm. "We're ready."

The doctor looked at the group, clearly confused. "Okay. I just need to go over-"

"No, no, you don't. We know. We're ready." She crossed her arms, shielding herself, and glared at the doctor. He swallowed and nodded, going over to the machine. Beside her, Dov stood up and touched Gail's arm, only to have her jerk away.

"Gail," muttered Traci and she put her hands on Gail's shoulders.

She wanted to shake Traci's hands off, to hide the tension and pain. Traci would know what it meant, she'd know what Gail was feeling just by that touch and she'd mom her. "Don't," muttered Gail. But Traci didn't let go. She held on to Gail's shoulders like a friend.

"Thank you," whispered Traci, leaning on Gail. She needed Gail's strength in that moment. Gail uncrossed her arms and touched Traci's hand. That was easier than being herself in this moment.

Being a rock she could do. It was unthinkable a decade ago. It was unfathomable five years ago. But today, Gail Peck did something she'd never done in her life with anyone but Holly or Vivian. She turned and wrapped an arm around a friend in need. She offered support.

They all ended up holding each other. Gail and Andy held Traci, Dov wrapped his arms around all their shoulders, and they watched the doctor turn off the machines. They watched for minutes or hours, Gail wasn't really sure how long. They watched until finally his breathing stopped and, not long after, the heartbeat faltered and flattened. The doctor turned off the sound but watched the monitors until, on some sign known only to his kind, he touched Chris' neck.

"Time of death," said the doctor, making a note and reading the time aloud before stepping aside. He said something else, something about how a young girl was getting a liver, and a boy a heart, but Gail didn't listen. All she could hear in her head was Chris' laugh.
They ended up at the Penny, a drink at the bar left standing for him, and everyone talked about their favorite Chris stories. Gail nursed her on drink most of the afternoon, asking the bartender to put the drinks in her name on her tab. Eventually she'd drink them, but not tonight. If she got drunk, she'd cry.

"Holding up okay?" Oliver eased in beside her.

"Nope," sighed Gail.

"Yeah. Yeah, you wouldn't. I wouldn't." He exhaled and held out a beer. After a moment, Gail finished her whiskey and took the bottle. She could do that. "You did a good thing, Gail. You did a tough thing." She mumbled she knew that and Oliver leaned in. "I did a bad thing. I called your wife."

Gail blinked and leaned away, looking towards the door. There was Holly, hugging Dov tight. "No, that's a good thing," she smiled.

"You didn't have her at the hospital..."

"That... That was that, Ollie, this is this." She lifted the beer in Holly's direction and watched her hug all the rookies before coming over. "I get the last hugs?"

Her wife leaned in and kissed her. "They need it more. Hi, Oliver."

"Hi, darlin'." Oliver held an arm out and Holly stepped in to hug him as well. "Our girl is tough," he said, looking at Gail proudly.

"She is," agreed Holly. But her look was sad. No, it was sorrowful. She was sorry Gail had to deal with this. "Everyone holding up okay?" Gail shook her head while Oliver nodded. "Oh." Holly smothered a smile.

Gail shook her head at Oliver. "Don't lie to her, Ollie. You don't lie to your wife."

Oliver smiled and gently pushed Holly towards Gail. "Your most awesome wife. You lie to mine all the time."

When Holly gave Gail an arched eyebrow, she shrugged. "I take Oliver out to lamb schwarma sometimes. They're vegetarian at home."

"You're horrible," smiled Holly, touching Gail's face and searching her eyes. Gail shook her head slightly and Holly sighed. They leaned towards each other, touching foreheads. "I'm not sure what to say," she whispered.

"Me neither," Gail admitted. She didn't know what to say at all. Part of her wanted to tell Holly all the thoughts in her head, jumbled as they were. The other part wanted to be quiet for a while. "Can we sit here and listen to stories about Chris for a while?"

Holly nodded. "Sure. Celery's babysitting, though, so we have to bring Oliver home."

"I'll live." She pulled Holly close and held her for a moment. They spent a few hours listening to the stories. Gail didn't offer any of her own. She couldn't.

Six months. Chris had wavered between various coma stages, he'd seemed like he was waking up, and yet at the final judgement of the doctors was that he was never waking up. That brain activity was diminishing. That he couldn't breathe without the machines. That even if he did wake up, he'd
be so damaged as to need 24/7 care. And Holly asked her that important question, the one everyone knew but only Gail would answer. He wouldn't want to live like that.

So they sat there and listened to the stories about Chris. How he was a good man, a man who tried to do the right things when when he messed up, and a good father. How Chris was one of the honest people. How Chris dated a married hooker once. How he did drugs, stopped, and did them again. They talked about his best features and his worst. They talked about him as only people who really loved a person could talk about them.

Finally there was a pause in the stories and Gail felt the weight of responsibility. She'd not said a thing yet to the masses. She shook her head, unable to say anything now. And Traci, bless her, spoke up for her. "Gail told me Chris was the best of us. He wasn't the best shot, he didn't have the best arrest records, and he wasn't comfortable at all uncover as gay hooker." There was general laughter. "But he was the best person of all of us." Traci lifted her glass. "There won't be another Chris Diaz. We will miss you."

"Are you sure I should be here?" Holly had her fingers laced through Gail's, and her wife showed no sign of letting go.

"You were Chris' friend too," Gail said firmly, leading her into Oliver's office.

It was probably that Gail needed the support just now, the shoulder of her wife. As painful as this might be for Holly, it had to be agony for Gail. This was the first of her friends who had died and it had to be in such a painful way for her. But it wasn't something Gail would likely ever ask for.

Of course her wife surprised her. "Please," Gail added, softly, as she opened the door. Her face set as if she expected Holly to say no and leave.

Moments like that, instances where Gail reached out to her and asked for help, for support, were less and less rare these days, but still. Still they broke Holly's heart a little. To see the look on Gail's face, the look that said she still didn't fully trust the world not to abandon her, made Holly want to sweep her wife into her arms and never let her go. She wanted to give her that home, that safe space.

"Gail," sighed Holly, shaking her head. "Of course. Always."

Gail met her eyes for a moment and then looked away, embarrassed. Sitting on the couch already were Dov and Andy. Steve was perched on Oliver's desk, clearly there for Traci who had her arms wrapped around herself tightly. Looking at the group, Gail frowned, "Is Nick coming?"

"He's on his way," promised Oliver.

There was something about the way Oliver looked at Gail when she spoke that distracted Holly. He was looking at her lips more than normal. Had his hearing not quite returned from the summer? Gail had mentioned he'd passed his pistol recertification, but if it was only partial... The hand in hers squeezed sharply. Ugh. Holly really couldn't turn her brain off.

"So. This is it," sighed Andy sadly. "I've never ... I mean, not someone I knew."

"I was. When it was my uncle," Gail said softly. She sat next to Steve on the desk, still holding Holly's hand.

Steve nodded. "That was a trip," he grumbled, a brief flash of anger crossing his face. "It's short. They just call a 10-90 for him, then it's an out of service."
They dwelled on that as Nick walked in and took up a spot by the door. Noelle and Sam lingered outside the door, him clearly not brave enough to come inside and her as company. There was a small string of officers all listening out the door as Oliver turned on the radio, everyone adjusting the black bands around their badges.

"Attention all officers standby while we patch all sub-fleets for an announcement..."

There was a collective silence, the room holding its breath and all sound from the floor below stopping. The room was heavy, pregnant with painful anticipation.

"Dispatch to 8711, 10-90." The room held its breath. "Dispatch to 8711, respond." Silence.
"Attention all officers. Officer Diaz, badge 8711, is not answering his radio."

Oliver closed his eyes and thumbed the radio. "6416 to Dispatch. Show Officer Diaz, 8711, out of service."

"10-4, 6414. 8711 is out of service." There was a pause. "Dispatch to all officers. Please observe a moment of silence for Officer Christopher Diaz, badge 8711. Eleven years, six months in service of Toronto. You will be missed, Chris. Badge 8711, retired." Holly was surprised to hear the hitch in the voice of dispatch.

Reaching over, Oliver turned off the radio. "Chris Diaz. Out of service."

Holly had heard Gail say that more than once, out of service at the end of the day. No. Not out of service. Off service, she said that. Holly sighed and leaned against Gail's shoulder. Letting go of her hand, Gail wrapped an arm around Holly's waist, holding her closer.

"What now?" She'd only seen these on TV.

"Now we go back to work. And tomorrow we go to the funeral. And then..." Gail trailed off.

"And then the day after is normal," explained Oliver. "And it's the worst. Because Chris is dead and everyone expects it to be normal. And it's not."

Gail closed her eyes and Holly rested her cheek on Gail's head. "It's a new normal," Gail offered.

New, but not particularly welcome.

"Hey, Andy, got a second?"

Andy paused with her tea mug raised. " Uh, sure. I'm taking the new rookie out—"

"This'll be fast," promised Gail. She gestured with her head and they stepped over to the side of the break room. "You and Nick. Again. Right?"

Immediately Andy blushed. "I know, it's too fast after Sam, but—"

Jesus, McNally panicked. "That's not what I wanna talk about." Speed rebounds were a thing she understood. Gail took a sip of her own tea. "If you hurt him again, I will break you."

And Andy froze. "What?"

"Nick is my friend, Andy. I like him more than you. He's in love with you. He never fell out of love with you." Gail took a deep breath. "Do not fuck with his heart. He deserves better than that."
Of all things, Andy grew stern. "I don't think it's any of your business, Gail. You cheated on him."

"Yeah, I did," snapped Gail. "I broke his fucking heart. So did you."

Andy looked like she'd been slapped. "He walked away."

"Because you were in love with Sam."

"You never liked me and Sam."

"Oh *f*uck Sam." A few people looked their way and Gail glared them off. "This has nothing to do with Sam, it's about you. Andy, ask Nick how hard I hit," snarled Gail. "Hurt him, you find out first hand."

And Andy stared at her. "What gives you the right-"

"Don't." Time. Time and breakups and broken hearts and a really, really, stupid series of dumb ass choices made on tequila gave Gail not the right but the responsibility. Gail lowered her voice. "Don't hurt Nicholas. He deserves better than what he had with me and a hell of a lot better than you gave him. If you think you can grow the hell up and love him, do it. Otherwise walk away now."

The brief argument made the gossip rounds insanely fast, as Nick showed up on Gail's floor an hour later. He didn't say anything, he just put down a bag of cheese puffs and sat in John's empty chair. She smiled at him and shared the snack food. It wasn't that she had any lingering feelings for Nick, those were long gone. She just loved him like she did Steve and Traci. He was the family she chose to keep around.

"You hit pretty hard," noted Nick, nibbling a cheese puff.

"And whose fault is that?"

He smiled at her. Nick had taught her a lot of useful things. She'd had pistol proficiency when they'd met, but he taught her how to use a rifle as well as she did, not something she enjoyed. Nick had also shown her how to drive a car on two wheels, on ice, as well as a motorcycle, and how to throw a proper punch. And, as unwillingly as she might be to admit it, he taught her a lot about herself.

John cleared his throat. "If you're both hiding from McNally, she went out on a case with Peck. Nash- Peck- damn it, Nash Peck." He rolled his eyes. "Get out of my chair, soldier boy."

Grabbing a spare chair, Gail hauled it over for Nick. "I'm not avoiding anyone. I work here," noted Gail. "So am I a bitch or a hero or a bisexual freak?"

"You should call your wife," suggested John.

Oh good. Bisexual freak. "I know some idiot would hear that wrong," grumbled Gail, pulling out her phone.

"It did sound like you loved me," agreed Nick, smiling.

"Fuck you too," Gail snapped. "I love you like I love Steven."

Nick turned to John. "Which means she gets to beat me up and give me shit, but no one else can. You'd think she was an only child, the way she hoards her toys."

"Just as long as you know your place, Nicholas." Gail grabbed her winter coat and stepped out onto the roof deck, calling Holly.
The phone picked up promptly and Holly asked, "Did you hit Andy yet?"

Why was she ever worried? "No, just threatened her."

"Don't forget to tell Nick not to fuck it up."

Gail smiled. "I won't. Just ... Today's gonna be fun being a bisexual possessive freak."

"You're not bi," laughed Holly.

"I know that, and you know that, and they see I dated Nick and Chris and obviously I'm bi." She sighed loudly.

Humming across the line, Holly pointed out, "You are incredibly possessive. Are you sure you're not an only child?"

"You're not funny, Stewart."

"I'm hilarious, Peck," laughed Holly. "And I've got your back, honey. Go yell at Nick."

It was good that her wife knew she needed to yell at Nick too. "Only change in great ways, Holly."

Taking Nick out in her car, ostensibly to look for Jordan Lewis still, Gail railed into him about the stupidity of dating McNally. Again. It was, she agreed, smarter than dating her the second time, but that was a low bar. Her point, however, was accepted. Nick did not need to have his heart broken, and he needed to be honest with Andy from the start.

Nick, as opposed to Andy, was a little more used to Gail and her moods. But he did ask, "Everything okay?"

Gail glanced over, narrowing her eyes. "What?"

"You ... You know, you nearly took Samuels' head off."

While she'd settled for his badge, Gail had wanted to throttle him. "It's been a really bad year. Couple years."

"You scared Dov."

"Holly told me," Gail hunched her shoulders and looked at the street. In the passenger seat, Nick said nothing more. "I'm okay," she finally sighed. "It's just been sorting out a new normal and I don't like it."

But she thought about that more and more. She had freaked Dov and others and, frankly, herself. It was something that came and went on its own, much to her annoyance. Her therapist wasn't as concerned as Gail, which was making her consider finding a new one, and Gail didn't really want to pester Holly about it.

That left a couple people she trusted enough to talk to, and right now Nick was not one. When she got into John's car the next day, to go check out a witness on a gold theft, Gail spoke up. "How are you always so calm, John?"

"Tai Chi," he replied promptly, starting the car.

Gail wrinkled her nose. "Ew." She slumped in the seat.
"Hey, you asked." John smirked at her. "Why?"

"I need something ... I think I'm going to take yoga again."

"Does it help?"

"It did after Perik. The kidnapping."

John nodded. "I can't imagine why that would make you tense at all," he said dryly. Gail smirked at him. He was a great partner for her in so many ways. "I used to be in a gang."

Well that was new. "Gang? You? Tell me there are pictures." She studied his mercurial face with amusement.

John laughed. "Not a one. I was a drug runner when I was twelve." And yet he'd gone to college for a little while. "When I was sixteen, my mother found out and told me to quit the gang or get out of her house. Next day, she had a heart attack."

Seeing as Gail had talked to his mother on the phone once, she knew the story didn't have a horrible ending. "So you switched from the gang to Tai Chi?"

"I was taking her every day for therapy, so... Everyone in the gang was understanding. It's my mom, you know? But I never went back."

"That's the opposite of this kid I'm looking for," she muttered. And at John's behest, told him about her first encounter with Jordan Lewis. "Really, the only good thing about that was it got Traci back in the Ds."

Her partner frowned. "Why were you back at work before Traci?"

"After Perik? God, I don't know. I got suspended right after, so maybe I should've stayed off." Gail slouched in her seat. "No. I do know. I didn't want my whole life to be defined by him. I didn't want to be this tragic little girl."

John was quiet for a moment. "How'd that work out?"

And she laughed. She had to laugh. "Pretty crappily," Gail admitted. "You know the only reason I didn't lose my badge was because of Perik? They didn't want a disgraced cop on the stand."

"I can see that." That was one of the things she loved about John. He didn't lie to her, he didn't tell her platitudes. He could see the reality of police work behind the pomp and was honest. "Okay. So I have an idea. The priest."

"Father Jean-Pierre?" Gail blinked at him. "He couldn't have seen her since then. His son was out of the gang."

"Half a lead is better than none," John pointed out. "After we check this guy, why don't we pay that guy a visit?" It was true, it was better than nothing.

When they got to the church, they were all busy hanging the Halloween decorations, which reminded Gail to pick up a mess of candy. They'd missed the whole mess the year before, with Holly in the hospital, and Vivian said she didn't want to go Trick-or-Treating. Holly suggested it was because the idea of being around people pretending to be other people was creepy to her. Not even Olivia's invitation won her over, the kid did not want Halloween.
As Gail had expected, Father Jean-Pierre didn't know what had happened to Jordan, but he was impressed Gail was trying to find her. "You remember her from one day all those years ago?"

"The slushy was a lasting impression," Gail said dryly.

The priest eyed her, "You don't think she did it?"

Gail glanced across the room at John, who was checking with some of the other adults. He would be surprised. "I don't. I hope. I just ... Part of me wants her to know that some of us do care, and we do remember, and she's not alone. I've done that."

And the man smiled at her. "You're a good person at heart. Like that big guy, Diaz. He used to come around here a lot." Gail felt her heart bottom out as Jean-Pierre talked about how he'd gotten Chris to volunteer in order to help a kid out.

"Chris died," she said softly, and Father JP's head snapped up. "Last month. We took him off life support." Gail fought the urge to shove her hands in her pockets. "I didn't know he was still coming down here."

"You mean you," he said just as softly. "Which one were you? The mother or ..."

The mother probably meant Denise. "The ex who's a lesbian," she suggested, a little with the tone Holly called Peck-Derisive. But the pain of Chris still hovered there and she added, more kindly than her friends would probably expect, "If I'd known, I'd have had someone tell you."

The priest didn't seem flustered or offended, "It wasn't in the paper?" When Gail shook her head, he seemed to understand. "I have seen her. Jordan. A few times since that time. She'd sleep here instead of at her home."

Gail frowned. This was why she hated priests. They lied and hid things and said it was for your own good, when it wasn't. "Look, I'm serious that I don't want to arrest her. Yes, she's a person of interest, but I think she knows who did it. If she's still running with her gang, I'll arrest her because that's safer than people thinking she's all buddy up with us. But I've got no plans to toss her in prison. That won't help her at all."

After a moment the priest nodded. "I'll do what I can." And he took Gail's card.

He was a fucking godsend. Not even a week later he had convinced Jordan to talk to her, though she had to send Gerald and Andy to pick her up. Oh god. That made her nervous as hell. The fuck-up twins could make this go all wrong.

When Jordan was cuffed in interrogation, she finally made her appearance. "Hello Jordan," Gail sat down.

The girl eyed her. Gail remembered the sullen, angry, jaded twelve year old. Was that what Vivian might have become with her? The urge to hug her odd daughter came to mind. "Do I know you?"

"I arrested you for assault once."

"Yeah, that doesn't narrow it down."

"Seven, almost eight years ago." Gail looked around. "We brought you to this precinct. Asked you about a missing boy and a gang." When Jordan said nothing, Gail added, "Curtis Pane."

That got Jordan's attention. "You weren't the detective."
"No," smiled Gail. "I was uniform then. But you, I got video of you." She slid over photos of the crime scene. Jordan saw them, saw her face, and frowned.

When Gail out down the photos of the dead man, Jordan looked away. "What do you know?"

Gail placed her hands on the table. "I know you didn't do it. You wouldn't kill one of your old crew. You would never betray them." She took a deep breath. "You. You're like me, Jordan Lewis. You're loyal."

Their eyes met across the table. Jordan still distrusted her. That was only natural and logical. But deep in there, deep behind it all was a glimmer of wonder. "What do you want?"

"I want to know who he is, why he died, and who killed him. And I think I'm going to need a very loyal inside man." Gail smiled, but it wasn't a nice smile. It was dark and probably a little dangerous. "So I'd like to make you an offer."

Seeing their daughter excited about going to the firing range was, in a word, weird. "Are you gonna shoot too, John?"

She was hanging off Holly's arm, running ahead to ask John the question without letting go. While Vivian was mature and safe enough to run around the station, Gail flat out refused to let her do so. She barely liked her being at the station at all, and dreaded taking her upstairs. After the run in with her father, Gail simply made others do her bidding.

But her birthday was a different matter, so Vivian was allowed to come to the police range. John, fresh shaven again thank god, nodded. "I am shooting. It's my first time, though. Any tips?" John was filling the void left by Chris, as much as anyone could.

"Mom will win," said Vivian firmly. "Just take your time and don't miss." Holly covered her mouth. The advice was remarkably practical. "When can I learn to shoot?"

"Not until you're at least ten, Monkey," announced Gail, catching up and grabbing Holly's waist for a hug and kiss. "Hi," she smiled. "We got our bad guy. Did John tell you?"

John shook his head. "I did not spoil your thunder, Champion of the Universe."

As Gail caught Vivian's free hand, the girl asked, "Was it really the girl who threw a slushy at you?"

"She was our witness. Now she's going to be my skel. She's a spy on the gangs for me."

Oh for... Holly grimaced, "Gail!" They'd agreed not to use some of the more colorful police euphemisms around their daughter.

"What's a skel?" Vivian was clearly curious.

"Skeleton. It means she's my CI. Criminal informant."

At the door to the range was Elaine, who shook her head. "Must you call them that, Gail? It's not polite."

Gail rolled her eyes. "I didn't think you were coming, Mom."

Elaine opened the door for them all. "I thought you were joking about Vivian and might need a, er, sitter." She looked down at the girl.
"Nope, I'm keeping score, because Chris can't." Vivian looked a mixture of proud and sad. That was pretty much how everyone felt about it. Chris had been last year's winner, and Vivian decided on her own that she'd fill in. "Are you shooting?"

"I'm sure we can rustle you up a gun, Mom. Standard issue."

Mother and daughter Pecks looked at each other curiously. "22s?" Elaine looked thoughtful. "I'm a bit out of practice with that."

Evilly grinning, Gail suggested, "That can be your excuse when I shoot rings around you."

Even Holly knew that meant the game was on. "Looks like just you and me in the peanut gallery," she told Vivian.

As they filed in, Vivian paid close attention to how Gail and Elaine handled their guns. A moment of that old shyness, the girl who was afraid of guns two years ago, was gone. Here was a girl, almost nine, who understood them and their purpose and had no fear but a healthy respect. Here was a girl who teased the adult men in her life (though only Oliver was loved) though only briefly. And there was a woman Holly never thought she could love so much, hoisting Vivian onto a counter as she explained what the various parts of the gun were, and why Elaine was inspecting them so much.

God. She loved Gail. That smile and that heart, underneath all the pain and anguish, won her over. She joked about seeing the Peck behind the walls, but the truth was that Gail saw Holly behind her own walls of doubt and fear. Gail dragged Holly out again, dragged her back again and again, and loved her so blindingly it burned her soul.

With guns sorted, Elaine offered to show Vivian how to put the gun back together at the maintenance table. Holly caught Gail's hand before she followed. The blond looked quizzical and Holly drew her in for a kiss. "I love you, Gail," she whispered. "Happy birthday."

The smile on Gail's face was the big, broad, easy one. The smile that bared her teeth and made Holly melt. "I like hearing that," admitted Gail. "I didn't like my birthday much, but hearing you say it to me in the morning is pretty awesome."

She adjusted Gail's jacket needlessly. "I'll say it again later tonight if you win."

"When have I lost?" Gail scoffed at the idea.

"Well your mom is shooting against you."

It was Steve's laugh that broke the moment. "You think Garbage Pail can't beat Mom? Puh-leaze!"

He clapped Gail's shoulder. "Come on, Pale Fail. Let's hustle those losers."


"Me and you against all of them."

As the siblings headed to the range, Holly grabbed Gail's jacket again and pulled her over to the side. "Go away, Steve," she told her brother-in-law. Steve smirked and did not say a thing. Holly took hold of the jacket lapels and backed Gail against the wall.

"Holly, we happen to be in public," smiled Gail, not fighting it at all.

"I'll keep in PG," she murmured and kissed Gail again. "I love you." Gail opened her mouth and Holly hushed her. "I love you. I would marry you in a heartbeat if we weren't already married. We
Gail tilted her head, a little confused. "I love you too, Holly," she said softly.

Resting her forehead against Gail's, Holly repeated it. "I love you. Do you get that?" She couldn't think of how to tell Gail that she wasn't broken, that all those scars and wounds made her perfect for Holly, that Holly wanted no more than her forever. "You."


"Good. Go beat their asses for me." She kissed Gail again, very chastely, and sent her to the range.

It was after the warmup round, where everyone except Holly and Vivian had a go, the masses lined up and Holly realized how this was her life now. This strange, hectic, crazy, serious world where her wife was a cop, their daughter was still fairly self-contained, their friends were from myriad professions, and she was happy at a firing range. This year, Oliver had begged off saying he needed some rest with baby Jerry, but Chloe had left Little Chris with her parents for a date night. Nick and Andy and Traci lined up, leaving the three Pecks in the center spots, John taking the far end.

Vivian stood on the chair, making her just tall enough to see everyone. "Okay! When the buzzer goes off, you have eight seconds for five shots. Assume your positions!" The girl grinned, adjusted her ear protection, and held the buzzer, looking at Holly.

"Okay," nodded Holly, amused. That their child loved Gail's birthday hustle this much was bewildering and wonderful. Holly didn't know if she loved it or hated it, but their strange life was not what she'd expected or predicted a decade ago. It didn't need to be. None of this was what she'd planned or wanted, but it was everything she ever desired and needed.

"Three. Two. One. Go!"

The buzzer rang. The shots began.

Life had been very strange. The orbit of the Pecks had detoured her and yet found her where she'd wanted to be in a totally different way. She wasn't sure she'd have that happily ever after, but like she'd told Gail that one, terrible night in her bathtub, their life was not exactly a fairytale.

But half of the people in a fairytale got a pretty shitty ending, when she thought about it. Holly smiled and would take this life. It was perfect in its own way.

Chapter End Notes

The End.

Thanks for coming with me on this.

Yes, Chris was doomed from the moment I planned out the back half of the story. If you look at everyone in their life, the one that would hurt the most to lose is Chris. Everyone loves him. Gail loves him. He's the heart of their little group. So you have to shatter that to keep them together. This is their moment, though, that elevates them from being rookies to being the new old guard. They are no longer children.
Out with the old, you see.

Holly didn't get a chapter named after her because this is a Rookie Blue fic first, and I picked all the main cast members. But there was a lot for Holly in all the chapters so maybe this arc could be called "Holly" and not "Death Becomes Here" ... Death did come. Death lingered. Death remains.

I'm listening to everyone's comments about a sequel. I'm taking a break from this little universe for a bit, but I am listening. There are some one-shorts and short-series for you in the future.

Thank you all very much for the comments, PMs, reviews, tweets, and emails. They really made my day.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!