Growing the Game
by thefutureisequalaf

Summary

Life is tough. It's tougher if you're Muggle-born. And if the Hat puts you in Slytherin...

A plan to jump-start the U.S. National Quidditch Team sends promising young athletes to Hogwarts. Sports, spells, school, international cameos, and, of course, romance. Also some science, because I'm a dork like that.

Notes

Disclaimer:

This work uses the likenesses of real people as characters in a fictional story. Nothing more than "what if?" entertainment is intended.

Preface:

This story follows several USWNT players as international students at Hogwarts, but I’m treating Hogwarts as a 4-year college. I also compressed the age spread so that they’d have several years of school together.
The relationships take a little while to start and the "M" rating doesn't apply until Chapter 30.
2007

“You do realize that, if this gets out, Sunil will have our heads.”

“That’s literally the least of the potential problems. What do you really think?”

 “…You’re absolutely right that the team needs this, but I won’t like knowing that I’ve siphoned off some of the best players in the U.S. for a sport nobody’s heard of. It seems selfish of us.”

“It is, but it isn’t. What do we always say about why we’re still in the soccer business? That we do it for the next generation of players, so that girls growing up will have an inspiration to pursue their dreams and be great – “

“And there’s still a group of girls in America who still don’t have anyone quite like them to look up to.” He paused, a smile growing. “Why didn’t you start with that?”

“I should have. I was too focused on you as the administrator we need. Are you in?”

“I’m in. I’m in all the way,” but his smile faded. “I still don’t like the idea of spiriting away some of our most promising players.”

“Neither do I. Still, we’ve both read the Mag. Affairs demographics reports on wizard births; the percentage of Muggle-borns out of all Muggle births is vanishingly small, so the odds of a witch entering the player development pipeline are as well. The clump of young witches we’re talking about is a statistical fluke; the senior team will hardly notice in the long run. Besides, once the new team starts winning, fewer witches will stick with soccer long enough to be noticed and missed.”

“You’re right, again. I’ll get the ball rolling on the exchange.” He hesitated, unsure if his next thought would be well-received. Caution won out: “I don’t think I have to tell you this, but absolute secrecy is a must. The way we handle this has to make soccer tactics security look like an open clinic. If this gets out – “

The witch stopped him with her eyes as much as with her words: “If this gets out, everything I’ve worked for will be undone. FIFA and the IOC will revoke both of our World Cup wins and every medal, trophy and player award from my time on the team, which is nearly all of it. The entire sporting community will feel betrayed, like Lance Armstrong’s steroids…on steroids,” she paused, “and a million girls and women will think they’ve been believing a lie their whole lives.”

There was no response to that, so he waited for her break the silence.

“Well,” she cleared her throat, then grinned. “Let’s do this, shall we? I’ve got two World Cups but, so far, only one sports legacy.”
Alex’s heart, finally at rest after practice, jumped up to her throat when she saw the envelope. It said “U.S. Soccer Federation” in confident blue letters at the top and her name was showing through the clear window. “Alexandra Morgan,” she breathed out, “Alexandra Morgan. University of California, Berkley.” She had to hear herself say it for it to be real. The freshman forward tried to calm herself – *it’s not time for call-ups yet, you already have the U-20 camp schedule* – even as she dashed the rest of the way to her room. It was pointless – the only thing that would cut through Alex’s excitement was the letter, and it might just give her something new to be excited about. Alex ripped her dorm room door open and slammed it back, leaned against it and tore the letter open. Yes, it was that familiar letterhead, and…the text was green. Handwritten, in green ink. “What on earth…”

Handwritten. Green ink. Yes, and there were the telltale scratches where a quill had dragged the ink along the paper. She’d seen it before, when she was 11. The day that man had come to her house, when mom and dad and Jeri and Jeni had learned that their youngest was different from all of them. When she’d learned that she was special, that she had potential that no one else she knew had, that she possessed abilities which could not be gained nor lost nor earned nor sacrificed, that she had opportunities before her and expectations upon her which no one else she loved shared.

It had felt like the worst day of her life.

This man had asked her – and it’d been just barely a question at all – to leave everything and everyone she knew and go off to some boarding school for “wizards and witches”. She threw him out. With yells and anger and tears and flailing limbs, she’d chased him out of the Morgan household.

That had shocked her parents far more than the news about their daughter being magic and a future part of an underground wizards’ society. Grown-ups that they were, they didn’t want their daughter to miss out on any opportunity, no matter how unexpected or strange. “Think about it,” they said, “this is a unique opportunity for you, Alex. It’s a chance to learn and grow in new ways. Maybe you’ll learn new, fun things that you can do! You’ve never turned down a challenge; why not go learn more about who you are?”

“I know who I am,” she’d said. It was confident and final and it was the end of the discussion.

Alex blinked and shook her head clear. She still hadn’t read the letter. 11 year-old Alex, child though she was, had one thing right: she knew what she wanted, and what she wanted was to be a champion athlete and to be with her family and friends. That had never changed, despite more visitors, more letters with green ink, and even despite puberty and high school. Now she had her college teammates and a fast-track to the senior National Team and an amazing family supporting her the whole way. The last thing she wanted was more green ink.

Yet this green ink came from the U.S. Soccer Federation. Whoever wrote it had at least an idea of what it was like to run for 90 minutes and then have to two-touch a flying, spinning ball into the far corner of the net – with three defenders and a keeper guarding the net and no teammates to cross to – or else go home and spend the rest of the tournament thinking “if only…” Maybe this letter came from a wizard who understood what she lived for.

Alex sat down on the bed and read:

Ms. Alexandra Morgan, I would like to inform you of an opportunity…play a foundational role in developing a new team – *A new team? What?* – which will represent the United States…highest level of international play…exchange program with a school…United Kingdom…study abroad to finish your degree…play at an intramural and intercollegiate level...
“Quidditch?! What the hell is Quidditch? What is…”

I know you’re likely very confused at this point – No shit. I would like to meet with you to explain and discuss this opportunity. Please join me this evening…cafe whose card I have included…Bring both the card and this letter…interest of confidentiality, do not share any of this information with anyone.

Respectfully,

Someone who understands

Alex stared at it. Reread it. Reread it again, then stared some more. The signature was haunting. “Someone who understands,” she said aloud to the room. Green ink. U.S. Soccer. Witchcraft. Someone who understands. She fished the business card out of the envelope and read the address, then the time given in the letter. She had just enough time to be there early, if she stayed in her post-practice sweats. If they really understand, Alex resolved, they can handle sweatpants.

Chapter End Notes

This work is the first I’ve shared outside of a classroom and it will also be my first attempt at writing anything romantic. Specific constructive feedback is welcome.
Alex Morgan arrived at the café full of anticipation and nerves. She’d had much too long in the car to think about what awaited her, and it must’ve shown on her face because the man behind the coffee bar caught her eye and waved her over. “Did Mrs. Green send you my card?” Alex could only manage a blank look and a nod. “She’s waiting for you in that booth in the back,” he waved his hand at the worst-lit corner of the otherwise airy café. Alex nodded again and applied her frazzling attention to walking through the busy tables.

The woman at the booth had dark hair to her shoulders and her nose buried in a book. A black snapback cap shaded her face. Closer, she looked to be older and shorter than Alex, wore reading glasses that no right-minded human would pair with that hat, and showed no reaction to the young woman now standing at her table. A discrete U.S. Soccer crest showed through the unzipped portion of her fleece jacket. Alex cleared her throat just as the woman spoke.

“Have a seat, Ms. Morgan. You’re in for one more shock today. Don’t freak out and spoil our privacy.” She folded her book, sat her glasses on top, and pulled off her cap. Alex just managed to keep her jaw from dropping to the floor.

Mia Hamm had invited her to dinner.

The legend smiled as the gears spun in Alex’s head. “How about I just explain?”

Alex forced herself to nod.

“When I was little, I made everything into a sport or an adventure. I wanted to run and play and jump and climb and kick all day with my friends. The more I saw that I could do, the more I wanted to do, and the more I challenged myself and the others to do. That quickly turned competitive, but it was almost never adversarial – we each wanted to do our best, to be our best, and the only way we knew to discover our ‘best’ was to keep one-upping each other. Then we grew into team sports and working together, and I fell in love with athletics, then sports, then soccer in particular.” Alex nodded at familiar beats in the story and her blank look became a small, distant smile. “I loved learning to move the ball and my body. Those endless hours on the practice fields doing footwork drills stopped being a chore as soon as I noticed my skills improving. I dreamt of playing in front of thousands and wearing the letters “U.S.A.” on my jersey and when I realized how bad I wanted it, I let nothing get in my way.” The determination that had crept into Mia’s eyes flashed into a smirk. “Not even some naïve bureaucrat from the Air Force Office of Magical Affairs.”

Alex’s eyes went wide. “You rejected them too? And you’re a witch? I mean, of course you are, you’re here – we’re here – I mean…” She blushed.

Mia smiled and went continued, “I had my life mapped out when I was 11 – or I thought I did, most of it was way off – and I was not going to let some strange grown-up waltz in and tell me where I would go and what I would do with my life. I didn’t block it out completely, not like you did, but I didn’t agree to boarding school. My parents and I – Muggles, if that wasn’t clear – went to groups and wizarding social events, but we were all hopelessly out of place at most of them. There was one group at an Air Force base that was good; everyone there, wizard families and Muggle parents, had military mindsets and social structure ingrained so deeply that we were all able to connect. We weren’t there for long but it was the first time when I was ok with magic being part of my life. But in general, I didn’t get along well with magic and wizards and witches. Nearly every kid I met who grew up with magic didn’t get why I liked using my legs and feet for things that they could do with a flick of a wand. Muggle-borns were a little better, at first, but after one year of magic school they
were as in love with magic as the wizard-born were.

“The only witches I could tell I had something in common with were the Quidditch players. I could see that they felt the same way about their sport as I did about mine, and I wanted so badly to connect with them over that. But saying that I liked playing soccer, with its running around and kicking, got the same looks of 'you’re weird' from them as it did from everyone else.”

Mia paused to take in Alex. She’d been listening intently, the depth of Mia’s revelations having washed away her star-struck flusters. “Wow,” she said quietly. “You were right.”

“Right?” Mia wasn’t sure what Alex meant.

“You do understand.”

Mia smiled, wider and warmer this time. “By the time I was in high school, I was dead-set on playing professionally and for my country. Magic looked like it could only get in my way and I cut myself off from it. I swore it off completely: no adjusting my coffee’s temperature, no healing little cuts and scrapes, and no holding stray hairs in place. I didn’t want there to be the slightest chance that I’d cast a spell out of habit and end up permanently disqualified out of fear that I might enchant the ball during a match. I’d also found that the repeated experiences of being compared to assumptions of what witches and wizards were “supposed” to be was draining and discouraging. Even though I knew that I was who I supposed to be, the constant looks of confusion and disappointment weren’t healthy for me. So, I removed myself from that world and lived like any Muggle athlete. The positive experiences I’d had with magic made it harder to give it up, but it was a sacrifice I was willing to make to pursue my dream.”

“Exactly.” Alex didn’t realize she’d spoken aloud until Mia repeated it.

“Exactly. And I made it, and we were twice World Champions, and after 17 wonderful, amazing years, I retired. My body couldn’t keep up with the demands of the highest level any longer and I felt it was time to move on from living out of a duffle bag. But I was still myself and I needed something athletic and competitive in my life. About a year or so later, I rediscovered Quidditch. It was competitive and athletic while demanding a lot less from my joints.”

“Quidditch,” Alex said, reengaging. “That’s what we’re here about, right? I don’t even know what it is. And why do you…”

Mia held up her hand. “Actually, Alex, it’s not what we’re here about,” she spoke with warmth. “I invited you early so we could talk, one witch-out-of-water to another. We’ll save Quidditch for a few more minutes, when the other two girls get here.”

Mia thought back and grinned. “Well, I can laugh about it now…”

“No way! That was seriously your first impression of Abby Wambach?” Alex was fighting to contain her laughter – they were supposed to be keeping a low profile in a Muggle café – and the
hilarity forced its way out through tears instead.

“Really! There’s no way I could make that up.” Mia Hamm wasn’t doing much better at keeping a lid on it; Alex was a great listener with a contagious laugh. She gathered herself as much as she could and took a deep breath. “Ah, but the rest is history. At the rate she’s going, she’ll have my record in 2013. But I think our other guests are here.” She tilted her head towards the door, and Alex saw two young women thank the man at the counter and turn their way. When she glanced back at Mia, the soccer celebrity was hidden under hat, glasses, and absorbed in her book. “Moby Dick,” Alex mumbled the words on the spine. “Guaranteed to deflect attention even without an ugly hat”

“I’d appreciate it if you’d give them the ‘Don’t lose your heads’ disclaimer when they get here,” Mia muttered back.

“Will do.” Alex turned to face the two girls as they arrived. “I’m Alex,” she began, when her eyes dropped from theirs to their shirts: “and you’re Stanford,” she spoke automatically.

The girl on the left rolled her eyes – green, Alex noticed – and the girl on the right smirked at them both. She folded her freckled arms and said, “I’m pulling seniority. Freshman has to sit with the Bear.” Green-Eyes pouted but moved to sit. Alex began to make room when Mia lifted a finger from her book. “Oh, there’s one thing before you sit. You have to promise not to make a scene. This woman is kind of a celebrity. Like, really, really, lose-your-shit famous.”

“Promise,” both Stanford girls answered in succession. Alex and Mia slid to make space and Mia began removing her disguise.

Alex watched, amused, as realization dawned on Freckles and then hit Green-Eyes all at once. Her dark skin went pale – well, tan, really – with shock. The other girl breathed out a “No way,” and glowed with admiration.

Mia smiled across at the younger Stanford girl. “I’m pleased to meet you, too, Christen. It won’t help us, though, if someone notices you staring at me.” Christen blinked and resumed staring. The elder Stanford caught Alex’s eye and gave what looked like a suggestion of mischief and a head-tilt towards Christen. I hope I’m reading this right, Alex thought, and poked Christen in the ribs.

“Oh! Oh, mya – Mi – my – Mia, I’m so sorry.” The color and more returned to Christen’s cheeks. She ducked her head, but not far enough to miss the approving glance her teammate shared with Alex. She raised her chin and glared at them both, drawing a guilty grin from Berkley and a triumphant smirk from Stanford.

“How about I finish introductions and give you all a moment to breathe?” Mia offered. “This is Alex Morgan, star freshman forward at UC Berkley. She’s a Muggle-born from Diamond Bar – near LA,” she said to the freckled Stanford, “– native who, much like myself at your age, has devoted herself to soccer and rebuffed magic and wizard society.” Mia gave the two Stanford players a half-second to digest her last sentence and continued. “Alex, this is Christen Press, also a star freshman forward, one wizard parent, from Palos Verdes. “Next to me is Kelley O’Hara, Muggle-born of Georgia with several years of wizardry school. She led Stanford in scoring last year and is surely itching to do so again.” Kelley grinned a far more intense grin than Alex imagined she was capable of producing.

“Oh, she’ll have to work for it.” Green eyes flashed across the table; hazel ones flashed back, brighter:

“Try all you want. I’m going to lead the division.”

Alex felt at home, her nerves gone. “Not if I have anything to say about it.” Playful one-upping with
two other forwards who just happened to be witches; already she was drawn to them.

Mia Hamm broke things up as the two Stanford players turned to face Alex as a team. “Yes, we know, we’re all goal-scorers here,” she laughed. “Let’s get to the reason we’re here.”

“This ‘Quidditch’ thing,” Alex supplied.

“Yeah. I know as much about it as I do about cricket,” Kelley said, "which is that it exists and the Brits are into it."

“Oh!” Christen exclaimed. “Quidditch is…it’s like…if soccer – football – is “the beautiful game,” then Quidditch is the beautiful game for people who can fly and enchant balls to have minds of their own.”

“Real helpful explanation, Christen. Try it again like you’re explaining a team set-piece to a new player. And calm down!” Alex could see that Kelley, like herself, was trying to keep a straight face and level head in the face of Christen’s infectious reaction. Seeing a fierce forward getting excited about this other sport was encouraging, though. If Christen could love it, then maybe Alex could, too? But no, that was getting ahead of herself. She needed a lot more than someone’s enthusiasm before she could take this – what even was it? – this “Quidditch exchange program” seriously.

“Hokay.” Christen took a breath and glanced at Mia. “Wait, do you want to? This is kind of your show."

“You take a shot at it and I’ll fill in after you,” Mia replied.

“Right. So. Quidditch is an old English game, easily as old as football – any of them – and it spread around the wizard world a lot like soccer did. There’s a Quidditch World Cup and everything. The game is…the first thing to know about Quidditch is that it’s played in the air. There’s seven players on a side, all riding broomsticks. One is the keeper, which is just like in soccer, two are the beaters, who keep the bludgers from hampering their team, and then three, the chasers, try to score with the quaffle…”

Alex was already lost. She didn’t know where to start on visualizing any of it, and Christen seemed to be throwing gibberish words in at random. Alex tuned out the rest of Christen’s description and thought about what she really needed to learn. When Christen wrapped up, Alex jumped in. “At this point I really have only one question,” she interjected before Mia could speak. “Why aren’t you playing Quidditch?”

Christen sighed and looked at Mia. “I hope I’m not about to spoil your plan. The reason I went with soccer is that U.S. Quidditch is just not a contender. The serious, competitive spirit that we have in soccer here and that they have in Quidditch in Europe just isn’t there. Nobody was trying to grow the level of play. Everyone on the national team and in the few clubs are only in it for recreation. Picture a soccer team made of people Mia’s age who have never cared about winning.” Alex frowned, then looked sheepishly at Mia. Christen went on: “I lived on drive and passion and I wanted to be the best. Quidditch here couldn’t offer me that. As much as I loved playing it, there was no contest when I had to choose a sport.” She looked ruefully at Mia. “Did I ruin everything?”

“No, you actually set me up perfectly. The reason I went with soccer is that U.S. Quidditch is just not a contender. The serious, competitive spirit that we have in soccer here and that they have in Quidditch in Europe just isn’t there. Nobody was trying to grow the level of play. Everyone on the national team and in the few clubs are only in it for recreation. Picture a soccer team made of people Mia’s age who have never cared about winning.” Alex frowned, then looked sheepishly at Mia. Christen went on: “I lived on drive and passion and I wanted to be the best. Quidditch here couldn’t offer me that. As much as I loved playing it, there was no contest when I had to choose a sport.” She looked ruefully at Mia. “Did I ruin everything?”

“No, you actually set me up perfectly. What we – those few of us who want the U.S. wizardry community to have a Quidditch team worth of admiring – want to do is start a new national team from the ground up. We’re inviting the best, most competitive young athletes in the country to immerse themselves in a winning Quidditch culture and then build a program around them. I’ve already conducted a trial of sorts with a few soccer players and both their skills and their love of the game have skyrocketed in one year. Now I’m looking for volunteers for a full team. Are you
interested so far?

“Mm-hmm”

“Hell yes!” Kelley had taken a clear interest.

“I need to see it.” All eyes went to Alex. “It sounds fun but I need to see it in person. Like, at the competitive level you’re talking about. And this school, what it’s like, what classes are like. You’re suggesting that I walk out on my team, my degree and my future on the soccer senior National Team. I need to see what you’re offering for myself.”

Mia couldn’t help but smile. “Right to the point. Saves us another hour of discussion. You two want to see Hogwarts as well?” Kelley and Christen nodded eagerly. “Pack an overnight bag and meet me…Christen, have you used the Pipeline before?” Green eyes glittered back. “Every chance I get,” she replied.

“Go pack and bring Kelley to LAX-M. Alex and I will meet you at the gates to the Funnel. And don’t forget your ID!” Mia said.

Christen bounced out of her seat, grabbing a bemused but excited Kelley’s hand. “Oh, it was so great to meet you, Mia! We’ll be there in a bit more than an hour.” Kelley waved goodbye before twisting to keep up with Christen.

“Where are we going?” Alex heard Kelley hiss.

“England!”
Tourists

*Ding, ding, Ding! "Welcome to Los Angeles International Mageport. For the safety of yourself and all travelers at LAX-M, please report any unattended items or creatures to Mageport Authority staff. Thank you and enjoy your trip."

Alex stared about, bewildered. Throngs of people filled the vast space in front of her, milling between the array of portals behind her, a crowd of desks ahead, and endless doors and ramps on either side. “We were in San Fran ten seconds ago…” she whispered.

“It’s magic, remember?” Mia chucked her on the shoulder, then gave her a tug. “Come on, time is still real.”

“Oh my god, this is so surreal,” Alex said. “Wait, what do they mean, ‘unattended creatures’?”

“Let’s focus on getting our tickets and making it to our gate, then we’ll talk. For now, just don’t pet anything that you don’t recognize.”

Mia’s warning hung in Alex’s mind as they found Christen and Kelley. Christen grinned at Alex’s bewildered expression while Kelley barely acknowledged them before turning to stare at some new fascinating sight. Mia herded them to a que for “United Etherlines” while Christen rattled off answers to Kelley’s flood of questions.

“Identification?” The clerk said, and Alex was suddenly full of misgivings. She produced her passport and hoped that it was accepted in the wizard world. He took it and began inspect the others’. Moving quickly – but not quickly enough for Alex – through theirs, he finally opened hers and frowned. The frown deepened and he looked like he was going to ask a question, then turned to the terminal next to him and typed furiously. He glanced down at her passport, up, down, and then at Alex, his lips pursed. “You are a witch?” Alex couldn’t tell if it was a question, and nothing came out but stutters.

Mia laid a hand on her shoulder. “Alex is something of a late-bloomer. This is her first foray into magic society and it was quite a surprise for her. She didn’t have time to prepare.”

The clerk looked back and forth between them, then the screen and her passport, and nodded. “Very well. I’ll need you to sign an affidavit to that effect at the U.S. Supernatural Customs desk over there,” he pointed, “before I release your tickets. Skip the line and show it to me when you’ve got it.” He turned and began printing their tickets.

“You’ll have to keep this with your passport for the duration of your trip,” the Customs officer admonished Alex. She had intense, no-trouble-on-my-watch eyes and they made Alex gulp as she nodded. “If you lose it, it’ll be bureaucratic hell getting you back into the country.” She stamped the affidavit with her badge number and then made an actual wax seal with the emblem of the United States of America. The officer smiled, and Alex could tell she enjoyed making that seal. “Enjoy your trip and come home safe,” she said with friendlier eyes.

In the boarding lounge – which, despite being at subway depth, somehow had windows with the usual views of LAX’s runways – Alex was finally able to relax. Mia and Christen fielded questions from her and Kelley about wizard travel, Quidditch, and the school they were visiting. “What kind of a name is ‘Hogwarts’?” Kelley blurted.

“You’ll have to forgive them for being Scottish,” Mia answered. “It’s the land of Macbeth, ‘Double,
double, toil and trouble,’ and so on. It’s been called “Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry” for a millennium and they aren’t about to change it now, however silly it seems to us.”

“Oh, come on, Kelley! Don’t tell me that this is too goofy for you,” Christen needled.

“Nothing is too goofy for me,” Kelley said in the same tone she’d used for “I’m going to lead the division.” Alex had to laugh, but reined it in to voice her concern.

“But really, is the whole place like that? Old and quirky?” She asked.

“I’ll admit it’s not for everybody, but so far I haven’t heard of an exchange student getting fed up with the atmosphere. Honestly, a little archaic quirkiness is the price you should expect to pay for living in an enchanted castle.”

Kelley’s eyes went wide and dreamy at Mia’s concluding words. Alex wanted to smirk at her but could only smile; the Irish girl was just too likeable. That gave her another idea.

“Mia, does Hogwarts have just English students, or do they have people from the whole UK?”

“The whole UK plus Ireland. England contributes the most but Wales, Scotland and Ireland are well represented.”

Christen gasped with mock drama. “Kelley! You’ll finally be reunited with your own kind!”

Kelley O’Hara tackled her teammate and was tickling her on the floor when the announcement came that it was time to depart. Alex was laughing nearly as hard as Christen just from watching them.

“No, Christen,” Alex interrupted as they emerged onto the arrivals concourse in UnderHeathrow, “I feel like I’ve just been through the world’s trippy-est IMAX film and had my stomach turned inside out and am now wearing it as a hat. I really don’t want to hear the how and why of it.” She was been pale and unsteady and Kelley caught her arm around her shoulder. By the time Alex’s head had cleared, Kelley’s arm was gone from her back. A flicker in some part of her seemed the slightest bit disappointed.

When they’d arrived at Hogwarts, it looked as ugly as the name suggested. A decrepit old castle, poorly-lit corridors with damp walls, and crotchety staff – it was beyond belief that anyone could live here. The Great Hall was an improvement – it had content-looking students in it, for one thing, and actual color in the decorations – and things began to look up. The three prospective students received a tour of the halls, the classrooms – ‘Potions’ smelled as bad as Alex had feared – and the Hufflepuff living spaces. “What on earth is a Hufflepuff?” Alex had asked, a little too loud. Lowering her voice, “And why can’t we see any of the other dorms?”

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“Because the other Houses didn’t want to let in random American tourists,” Mia muttered back, “and they knew Hufflepuff would volunteer.”

That put a damper on their growing interest, until Christen spoke up. “I guess frats and sororities can be like that, too, not wanting to let just anyone into their spaces and traditions.” Alex still wasn’t happy, but Christen was right not to be mad.

Their guide, a stout little man whose dignified face was undermined by his mangy balding pattern, sensed the improved mood and resumed his commentary. “House Hufflepuff is named after one of the founders of Hogwarts, Helga Hufflepuff. Its students are selected for possessing Helga Hufflepuff’s favored virtues: patience, loyalty, hard work, and modesty. Their crest is a badger against black and gold, which symbolize the dedicated toil needed to reap a harvest from the earth.
The other Houses are also named after Hogwarts founders: Godric Gryffindor, Rowena Ravenclaw and Salazar Slytherin. As with Hufflepuff, each House embodies its founder’s virtues. House Gryffindor celebrates…"

Alex knew she should be paying attention, but she was losing herself in the magnificent sights around (almost) every corner. There were tapestries as tall as her house, impossible candle-laden chandeliers, stairways that moved after they’d climbed them, and – “What…is that an elf?”

Mia nudged her side. “It’s not polite to stare.”

“Oh, sorry. I just didn’t realize that elves were real. Or that they’d be so short…”

“Were you expecting them to be tall, gorgeous and pining for the West?” Christen chuckled. “Be glad Tolkien was a Muggle.”

The biggest curveball had come not from Hogwarts but from Kelley O’Hara. Walking away from one of the main halls of classrooms, she asked their guide, “What education do you offer in applied sciences?”

He stopped in his tracks and turned to her with a look of confusion and dismay. “I’m sorry, I… would you like to return to the Arithmancy room? And we just left Alchemy…or we can continue on to Herbology?”

Kelley was just as confused that he did not understand her, but she clarified: “No, I mean the physical sciences, like, well, physics, and chemistry, and not just what plants and ingredients are for magically but what they can do…” she searched for the right word, “materially.”

Alex watched the guide try to process what was happening. “You mean…uh, you mean the Mundane sciences?” he finally managed to say.

“Yes!” Kelley was thankful to get her point across. “Yes, that’s exactly what I mean.”

The guide looked very uncomfortable. “Well,” he began again, “there’s Astronomy, which overlaps the Muggle discipline in most ways…hmm, but you did say you were interested in ‘applied’ sciences…” He looked up at her, confidence returning. “In truth, that is a rare request at this school, and any instruction offered would be based on the expertise available among the faculty and the time they’re willing to devote to one student, and it would all be subject to the approval of the Headmistress and the pupil’s Head of House. I think there’s a Ravenclaw third-year doing an independent study in… ‘Mundane Mechanics’ or such.” He sighed. “It is not out of the question but I don’t want to get your hopes up, either.” Kelley did her best to not look crestfallen. “Something we do have,” the guide perked up a bit, “is a ‘Muggle Studies’ program. You may find the upper level of courses worth your while.”

“Perhaps we can speak with an academic advisor after dinner? We have a meeting at the Quidditch pitch in a few minutes.”

The guide seemed to have forgotten that Mia was there. He looked annoyed with himself for getting caught off guard yet again. “What? Oh, yes, of course. I’ll show you there and then see about setting up a consultation.”

He left them at a field adjacent to an oddly tall stadium—looking, Alex thought, inappropriately relieved – and Mia waved to a group of young women leaning against three odd-looking poles. Each pole was different-sized and had a large vertical ring at the top. “Those are the goal hoops?” She asked Christen. The girl nodded and was about to say more when shouts interrupted her.
“Mia!” “The big Hamm!” “Ahh, it’s always good to see you!” The three women were running towards them.

Alex was surprised by their American accents, but it made sense if they knew Mia Hamm. The elder witch began introductions. “These are three of the Americans here at Hogwarts. They’ve all returned early to focus on Quidditch before the start of their second year.”

“Wait,” said the tallest of the three, “does this mean we’re not the New Kids anymore?”
The Game

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I’m Lauren,” said the girl with a clear face and curly brown hair.

“Tobin,” the tallest, tanned nearly as dark as Christen. She reminded Alex of surfer friends from back home: supremely laid-back.

“You surf?” Apparently Kelley had the same impression. Tobin’s face split into an impossibly wide grin.

“Yeah! You?”

“Oh yeah! Kelley, by the way. I got into it after I started at Stanford.”

“Pfft, Stanford,” the third girl snarked.

“Amy made the soccer team at USC,” Tobin explained in a calming tone, wary of the glint in two pairs of eyes. “Now she plays for House Slytherin.”

Christen gaped at them, prompting Kelley and Alex to exchange glances over her head. Their looks confirmed that they were both clueless.

“It’s changed since the bad old days,” Amy said to Christen. Her expression of genuine apology surprised Alex. “It’s not a cesspool of evil anymore.” The blonde noticed Alex and Kelley’s confusion. “Slytherin’s standout trait is exceptional, self-focused ambition. It’s a contrast with the other Houses, where ambition is alloyed with an external definition of greatness. Some decades ago, the Slytherin ethos was twisted into a Pure-Blood superiority complex and it, well…there was a coup and a war.” For a moment the weight of the world seemed to be on her shoulders. “Even as someone who wasn’t there, it’s taking a while to be welcome again.”

Kelley broke the moment’s silence. “‘Alloyed’,,” she said and raised an eyebrow. “Good word.”

“Gotta keep the Pure-Bloods on their toes,” Amy grinned. “So, you’re Kelley, and are you from Stanford as well?” Amy extended her hand to Christen.


“We’re all forwards,” Alex explained, hoping to keep the conversation on topic. “I’m Alex, just starting at Berkley.” Handshakes were completed all around.

“Soos,” Kelley began, “why do you like it here?”

“That’s my cue,” Amy said, and started back for an ornate chest sitting next to the goal poles. Lauren jogged towards a festive tent on the edge of the pitch while Tobin fielded the question.

“There’s the atmosphere. The castle felt stuffy at first, but then I realized that dust is what happens when something chills in one place for ages. Since then, I’ve never been more relaxed in my life – on land, that is.”

“Speaking of, how do you cope with being landlocked?”
Tobin grinned. “We have magic and a huge lake. It’ll never beat the real thing, but I’ve gotten the hang of charming up respectable waves.”

“Sweet,” Kelley grinned admiringly. “What else?”

“The house system is great. It’s like anything and everything can become a friendly competition, but doesn’t have to. The sorting guarantees that the people you share space with have similar values and mindsets.” The rumble of the chest dragging against the ground signaled Amy’s return. “The education is great, too, really. I mean, it’s like a lot of school in that you don’t think you’ll use a lot of it, but if you take it as an introduction to all the different aspects of wizardry, then you can really appreciate it.” Amy was unbuckling the chest as Lauren returned from the tent. Not even showing that she just ran 50 yards and back, Alex noted.

Christen gasped next to her. “Is that- that’s a Valkyrie CX!” She looked up at the three. “Damn, someone is serious.”

Alex shook her head. “What on earth are you talking about?”

“Perks of living simply,” Tobin said – presumably in explanation – as Lauren handed odd-shaped… somethings to each of them. Only when Alex looked down at the one she was holding did it register.

“Broomsticks…”

“Yup,” said Christen, “and Tobin plunked down for the most agile pro stick on the market.” Tobin blushed and Alex looked again at what Tobin held. It was vaguely broom-shaped but she’d never have recognized it on her own. The stick’s ‘handle’ was taller than it was thick, glossy black and appeared to be made of a carbon fiber weave. Where it widened into the ‘brush’ end, the upper surface dipped and widened in shape reminiscent of a racing bicycle’s saddle.

“She swears there’s wood in it somewhere,” Amy smirked, then knelt behind the chest, which contained several spheres. “This big one is the Quaffle. It’s basically a football but it’s been enchanted to fall slowly.” She held it overhead and let go. The ball began to descend in slow-motion. “When you throw it, up or down, it’s a normal ball, but when it’s just free-falling it acts like it’s on the moon. You know in soccer, when you’re chasing a ball that’s rolling for the goal line, and you sprint and you slide to try and get your foot behind it before it goes out? This anti-gravity saves you from doing that straight down at the ground if a player loses it,” she said as the ball finally settled into the chest.

“Much appreciated,” Alex said. The others laughed, but she was beginning to consider how physical Quidditch might get.

“The three Chasers on each team try to put the quaffle through their opponents’ goal hoops. The keeper tries to stop them. Sound familiar?” Kelley and Alex nodded. “Here’s where it gets original. These two smaller balls are the Bludgers. They’re heavy and they have minds of their own.” Amy poked one, which twitched and made a grumbling noise. “They’re enchanted to chase after players and try to run into them.” Alex’s eyebrows shot up. “Each bludger alternates between pursuing a player on each team. They’re dense and they hurt but they’re hampered by their momentum, so if you see one coming and dodge it can’t turn and come back very fast.”

“So they’re random flying hazards?” Kelley asked. She didn’t look impressed.

“It gets better,” Amy said with a devious grin. “Two players on each team are the Beaters. They carry heavy bats and knock the bludgers away from their teammates. It’s acceptable to hit a bludger towards an opposing player, but they can only aim for the other keeper if one of their chasers is in position to score.”
“But then you can send one of these things at the keeper,” Alex clarified, less than comfortable with the idea.

“Correct.”

“It’s not vicious like you’re thinking,” Lauren said. “It’s really just about spreading the other team’s defense. You don’t actually want to hit them.”

“Sweet, unassuming Lauren,” Amy smirked, “is the queen of creating lanes for chasers.”

Alex was surprised when Lauren didn’t blush but grinned instead; She’d underestimated how competitive these players were.

“Finally,” Amy slid aside a panel inside the lid of the chest, “there’s the Golden Snitch. God knows why they call it a ‘snitch,’ but it’s pretty cool.” She held out a small golden sphere. “It also has a mind of its own, but this one’s fast and agile as a hummingbird. Just before the start of a match, the referee releases it and it zips off…well, somewhere. The game ends when either team’s Seeker spots it, chases it down and catches it. There’s no time limit, but it’s rare for a match to last 90 minutes.”

“The tactical twist,” Lauren took over, “Is that while each goal with the quaffle is worth ten points, catching the snitch is worth one hundred and fifty points.” Kelley’s and Alex’s eyes widened at the significance. “Exactly,” Lauren continued, “it’s huge. The team that catches it usually wins.”

“The strategy twist,” Amy tagged in for Lauren, “is that while matches are won by total points, tournament standings depend only on quaffle goals. So if you’re after a trophy, your chasers need to be as good as your seeker and vice versa, and your beaters and keeper need to hold the other team’s goal tally down.”

“Huh,” Kelley stated.

Christen smirked at the others. “That’s O’Hara for, ‘You gave me a lot to think about. I’m going to be uncharacteristically quiet.’”

“So,” Tobin took over, “now for the thing you seriously need to get into, even if you stay with soccer.” She held the Valkyrie CX out in front of her. This, ladies, is a broom.”

“We’re going to give you an introductory lesson in broom-borne flight and then you’re welcome to stay and watch our team practice,” Tobin said. “Everyone but you, A-Rod. You know how it is.”

“No hard feelings,” Amy smirked, “we’d bounce you out, too. And have.”

“Right.” Alex and Kelley shared a look. “Christen, how experienced are you on a broomstick?”

“Good for an American teenager.”

“Ok. Kelley, Lauren’s going to teach you. Christen, you’re their wing-woman. Do whatever Lauren says. Alex, let’s give them some space.” Tobin turned and jogged towards the other set of goal posts.

Alex, following, heard a mutter behind her and then Amy swooshed overhead. She circled the field twice and touched down in the far third. “Whoa…” Alex breathed out.

“Never gets old,” Tobin grinned.

“Did she…were those ‘magic words’?” Alex asked with air quotes.
“Yeah, basically. Flying brooms have a command which activates them. It keeps them from floating away when you aren’t using them.”

“Useful. Do all brooms have the same command?”

“Not really. Most basic brooms use the word “up” as the command, but for better brooms it’s usually the brand name. If you order direct from the maker, you can specify your own command.”

“So is yours ‘Valkyrie’?”

“No,” Tobin said, and blushed. “You’re gonna think I’m a huge dork.”

“She was going to learn that sooner or later,” Amy spoke up as they drew near. “By the way, Alex, I was checking to make sure the airspace was clear, not showing off. Not just showing off, anyway.” Tobin glared and Amy smirked. The smirk won.

“Fine,” Holding her broom level at her side, Tobin let go of it and said, “U-S-A.” The broom, fallen to calf height, zipped back into her hand like a yo-yo.

“Now that was cool,” Alex admitted.

“I think so,” Tobin grinned, for the first time a bit shy. “If you stick with it, you’ll figure out your own thing. It’s kind of like a pre-game ritual.”

“And I don’t think you’re a huge dork,” Alex matched her grin. “At least, not in a bad way.”

“When I got good enough to need a top-tier broom, I knew it’d be easy for me to get tangled up in my own pride. I chose the command so I’d never forget why I was doing this.”

“So your job is to smack magic cannonballs at other players?

“Towards other players,” Lauren corrected Kelley. “I’d say more to reassure you, but I’m not going to share details before you’ve been sorted.”

“Whatever you say.”

Lauren looked back over her shoulder. “They’re far enough away for us to get started.” She turned back to Kelley. “Did you dance as a kid?”

“Briefly.”

“I’ll keep the analogies to a minimum. Controlling a broom in the air is all about poise and coordination. There are a few different methods but, for Quidditch, you want to learn to control your movement entirely with your core, hips, and thighs so that your arms are free. Seekers hunch down on the stick for speed but beaters, keepers and the best chasers rarely put their hands on the handle.” Lauren laid the brooms on the field in front of them.

“Would this be a bad time to mention that I’m afraid of heights?”

Lauren looked at Kelley for a long moment. “Christen, mount up so and make sure Kelley doesn’t drift away.”

“Up,” Christen said, and a broom leapt into her hand. She straddled it and floated to within arm’s
length of Kelley.

“Eerie.”

“You’ll get used to it, and I’ll bet you a chocolate frog that you get over your fear of heights today,” Lauren replied.

“A what?”

“Just say yes,” Christen laughed.

“Yes. What now?”

“Now you reach your hand out for the broom and say, ‘up,’ like Christen just did.”

“Up.”

Nothing happened.

“Up.”

The broom seemed unimpressed.

“Order it, like it’s a lazy puppy.”

“Up,” Kelley said as sternly as she could manage when thinking about puppies.

The broom rose into Kelley’s hand.

“Good boy,” she said, voice heavy with sarcasm.

“The better the broom and the more confident the user, the better the response,” Lauren explained, then snapped her fingers. Her broom was in her grip in the time it took to snap her fingers.


Lauren shrugged, trying to hide a smile. “You’ll get there.”

“Up.”

Tobin clamped down on her reaction. It wouldn’t help Alex to know that it wasn’t supposed to be easy. “Next, step over the broom – see how it’s not quite level? – and center your weight over that lowest point.”

Alex straddled the broom handle, which rose up an extra inch so that her feet were not quite flat on the ground. She tested the feel of taking her weight off her feet. The broom settled slightly before pushing back.

“Good, now, the broom wants to move to stay under you. Shift your weight in any direction, and the broom will slide that way. The further you shift, the faster it’ll move to keep up with you, but its fastest forwards and slowest backwards. You want to try sliding left towards me and then back to Amy?”

Alex nodded and rolled her hips to the left. The broom began to move towards Tobin, but also
started to roll. Alex shifted back to the right, intending to stay vertical, but ended up rolling even faster that way. Spooked, she leaned left across the rotating broom. It flicked her back to the left and she knew she was going to fall off.

She felt strong hands around her waist and saw Amy grab the broom. “You’re good, we’ve got you,” Tobin said behind her. “Take a moment to breathe while we right you.”

Alex nodded and kept her chin down, hoping against hope that they wouldn’t notice the blush heating her face. *First minute on a broom and I have to be caught,* she thought bitterly. Tobin pushed and Amy twisted and Alex was back to balancing on the broom.

“There’s something of an unwritten rule among Quidditch players,” Tobin said: “*Nobody* tells the truth about their first attempt at flying.”

“What are you talking about? I saved a burning airliner during my first lesson.”

“Exactly,” Tobin smirked at Amy, who was the picture of innocence. “What happened there was you anticipated the next thing I was going to teach you. When you tilt the broom sideways, it wants to rotate. So when you rolled your hips to shift your weight, your legs tilted the broom to the left and it thought you wanted to roll left.” Alex nodded, her composure returning. “What you want to do is isolate your lower body from your upper body and use your core for balance and weight changes.”

“Got it,” Alex said, “let’s try this again.”

“Pay attention or it’ll be you falling off,” Lauren prompted Kelley. They’d noticed Alex tumble into Tobin and Kelley was amused. “Now that we’ve covered basic translation and rotation, the next thing is to get up in the air. To do that you need to both shift forward and tilt the broom up. Since your weight is forward, you use your legs and heels for the tilt. Then you’ll be pointed up and going forward, so you’ll climb. To come down you do the same thing but tilt forward. Ready to try it?”

“Ready,” Kelley grinned. This was the coolest thing ever.

“Sweet. Once you’re away from the ground, keep climbing to three times treetop height. Whatever you do, do not fly into the clouds. You’ll think you’re flying level and come out pointed straight down. Christen, you ready?”

“Yes.”

“Stay close behind and on Kelley’s right and ten feet below.”

“Got it.”

“Why the minimum height?” Kelley asked.

“So that we have plenty of time to catch you.”

“Oh.” That brought her back to earth. Still, she could do this. She put her weight back on the broom and picked her heels up. The broom started to drift backwards.

“Your center of mass moves slightly when you lift your feet,” Lauren noted. “With practice, balancing will become a habit.”

Kelley nodded. It all made sense, she just had to work with it. She gripped the brush between her
heels, pulled down and leaned forward.

The broom shot out from under her, dumping her flat on her back. It corkscrewed like a deflating balloon and buried its handle halfway into the ground. For a moment Kelley was stunned, then she burst into laughter.

“Oh my gosh, I totally set you up for that. I should’ve had your hands on the broomstick for your first flight. I’m so sorry, I got ahead of myself.” Lauren, heartbreakingly apologetic, helped Kelley up. “Don’t worry, first flights are sworn to secrecy. I suggest comparing notes with Alex afterwards but you don’t have to tell anyone anything. None of us will.”

“Thanks,” Kelley said between fits of laughter. “Oh, boy,” she sighed as she got a grip on herself. “Alright, Kelley flies, take two.”

Christen came back with the broom and wiped the handle on grass. “I’m not even going to tell you about my first flying lesson,” she grinned. “You got this, Kelley.”

She did.

Several takeoffs and landings later, Alex was comfortable on the broom and was having the time of her life.

“How fast can these things go?!” She shouted to Tobin.

“Hang on, you’re gonna need something!” Tobin yelled back.

Alex turned and slowed. Tobin hovered next to her and produced a wand.

“Caput circulatum,” Tobin said as she waved the wand in front of Alex’s eyes.

“…Did you just cast a spell on me?” Alex asked, not sure what to think.

“Yeah, to keep the wind out of your eyes. Trust me on this one.”

“Alright, then.” Time to find out what these things can do, she thought, and – careful to release heel pressure on the brush – threw herself forward along the broomstick. The rush of air ripped at her hair, her hands and the sweatpants that she was still wearing but, mercifully, left her face alone. She tugged her shirt sleeves over her hands to keep the wind off, then took stock of her progress. The Quidditch field was shrinking behind her and Hogwarts castle was looming ahead. She pressed the brush with her left heel and felt the broom begin to turn, but the wind rotated her back like a weathercock.

‘Can you not turn when you’re fast?’ Alex pressed again, harder, the broom swung farther and this time she could feel the force of the air shove back against her right side. She forced her left foot against the brush and this time she wasn’t careful to keep her legs straight and she rolled onto her side. Startled and still stretched flat, she tried to pull herself back along the broomstick with her legs, forgetting that this would tug the brush end of the stick downward and tilt her upward. But, on her side, ‘up’ was ‘left’ and now the broom was trying to climb sideways, shoving her left towards the lake – and leaving her stomach behind. So that’s how it works, she gulped.

Lauren, Kelley and Christen pulled up alongside Tobin as she watched Alex. Amy, still trailing for safety, was keeping pace. “Alex is on a basic sport broom,” Lauren observed. Tobin nodded. “A-Rod is on her pro Quidditch broom.” Tobin nodded again. “I don’t think I’ve seen A-Rod fly much faster than she is now.” Tobin nodded.

Seen from a mile and a half away, Alex’s hard turn away from the castle might’ve been intentional.
They watched Amy, more experienced, take a smoother arc to follow. She narrowed the gap, but it stayed constant once Alex straightened and sped away over the lake.

“One of the Houses is getting a new seeker.”

Alex had been ready to commit to Hogwarts the moment Hufflepuff’s Quidditch practice ended, but Mia Hamm stopped her before she could finish her sentence. “It’s easy to be enthusiastic when you’re in the middle of it. The three of you are going home and taking time to think. Sleep on it. Talk to your families. Drill down and figure out what you really want from your lives. Make sure that you will never regret your decision.” It was a sobering admonishment and it made for a quiet trip home.

Alex pushed the day’s memories aside and thought of her family. Sure, she wouldn’t see them at Berkley as much as she had in high school, but to spend the whole academic year in the Scottish countryside was another thing entirely. Between fireplaces on the trip back to UnderHeathrow – of course it’d be Mary Poppins, Alex thought – she imagined life apart from Mom and Dad, Jeri and Jeni, disconnected from the Internet and Skype.

Then there was Berkley. She was committed and they were in preseason training. The athletics department had been very, very good to her – with an agenda, to be sure – and she was bonding with most of her teammates already. To just quit, to vanish into the wizarding world, was unfair to them. That much was black and white: if she decided to leave, she’d have to tell each of her teammates personally. I really am seriously considering this, Alex realized, the significance of her thoughts hitting her.

And what about the senior National Team? Alex had day-dreamed of playing soccer on the world stage since 1996, long before she’d decided that it was her dream. What would it mean to her to play at the highest level in an underground sport? What could it mean to her? She pondered it all, turning it over in her mind, until she recognized the familiar sights of UC Berkley outside Mia Hamm’s car. She wondered, briefly, when they had gotten into the car, before her attention wandered back to the campus outside. It all looked different to her, now. She didn’t know why, not yet, but she sensed that something inside her had changed. That realization grew in power until she felt overwhelmed by… everything.

Alex’s gaze was vacant again and Mia had to grip her shoulder to bring her back to the present. “We’re here. Go get some sleep,” the veteran advised. “You’ve travelled half-way around the world and back since you left practice last night. Being sharp and alert is as important when making decisions off the field as it is on the field.” Alex nodded silently. Distant thoughts and tired body left her with nothing to say. “We’re here,” Mia repeated. Alex nodded again and regained her self-awareness. She felt an overpowering need to stretch and yawn and so she let loose: ears rushing, back sliding across the seat, arms sprawling behind her, legs pushing against the front bulkhead. That taken care of, she forced herself to think about what to do next.

“Thank you,” seemed like the right place to start. “Thank you for taking the time to talk to me. And thank you for showing me more of the world. I don’t know…” Alex trailed off in uncertainty.

Mia reached for her far hand and turned Alex to face her. “Make the right decision for you. I’m not giving you a deadline because I know this is too important to you to procrastinate. You have tomorrow off, right?” Alex nodded. “I recommend you spend it with your family. Sleep in your old room, visit your favorite park or the field of your most memorable goal. Stir up the things at the core of who you are and figure out what it is you want. Be sure that your decision is rooted in desire and not fear,” Alex was sick of responding only with nods but too weary for anything more ambitious, “and the witches and wizards in U.S. Soccer will have your back no matter what you choose.”
“Thanks, Mia,” Alex managed.

“Any time, striker. Now, get out of my car and crash into bed!” She grinned and pushed the sleepy Alex Morgan towards the door. Alex gave a weak grin in return and made for the dorm entrance, the stiffness in her limbs lessening as she went. She made it into her room on autopilot. As she stripped off her clothes and fell into bed, images from the day played in her mind: Mia, the crowded terminal, candlelit halls, a strange ball suspended against blue sky, tanned hands supporting her on a broom, and, just for a flash, a pair of hazel eyes.

Chapter End Notes

As mentioned in a previous note, this is the first work I've shared publicly and it's also the longest piece of fiction I've ever written. I would appreciate some (considerate) feedback.

Oh, and we'll get to the Sorting soon :)
“You fucking mind-reader.”

“What can I say? I know you too well.” The driver, also blonde but leaner, unbuckled and turned in her seat. “You have something heavy on your mind and you need to talk about it, but you won’t unless I make you. So here we are, in my car, at your favorite park. Talk.”

A groan was all she got in reply, at first. Her friend, eyes pressed shut, leaned her seat back and unbuckled. The driver waited for the sigh which meant she was resigned to being vulnerable.

It came, and words followed. “Whit…you remember the thing I told you? The thing I made you swear never to speak about unless I brought it up in complete privacy?”

“I remember.”

“I’m bringing it up.” She paused and her friend gave her the time she needed. “I got a letter, from…you aren’t going to believe-” her face fell in an instant. “Dammit, I wish I could tell you who it was, Whit, but I can only share my secrets with you, not someone else’s. I’m so sorry I have to keep something from you.”

“It’s ok, Ash. Secrets are secrets. I understand that much.”

“Thank you.” She sniffed. “Fuck, I’m tearing up already.” Silence. “I got an offer letter from U.S. Soccer.” She mentally thanked her friend for not reacting. “It was from a witch associated with the Federation, on official letterhead and everything, but handwritten. It said – it said a lot of things, but it invited me to meet her and so I’ll just tell it all together. She…this person said that they and a few others were trying to get a development team going for a wizard sport, a sort of football spin-off with magic and flying broomsticks. It’s big in Europe and other places, but not here. They’re inviting driven, proven athletes to transfer to a wizardry school in the U.K. and learn to play there, then bring that level of play back to the U.S.”

She took a deep breath and went on. “Soccer was my outlet, Whit. It was my dream and my escape and my therapy as I grew up in a world that made less sense every year. And a huge, huge reason I want to play for the National Team is so that other girls growing up can see that I went and made my dream come true and think that maybe they can, too. Well, when I was talking to M-…to this person, she asked me what my life would be like if I’d watched U.S. women win a Quidditch – that’s what the sport’s called, don’t ask me why – a Quidditch World Cup in 1999 instead of soccer. The answer is that I would have been so much more at peace with myself growing up, because I would’ve had role models for my witch side. I never had that, Whit.” Ashlyn made eye contact with her friend again, and her eyes were filling with tears. “I never had a witch to look up to. I had no posters of inspiring magic-users to pin over my bed. And as much as soccer was the thing I clung to, it was only possible by burying that other side of myself. There was…there’s…”

Whitney saw the cracks growing and pulled Ashlyn in for a hug. She held on tight and felt her friend let go; quiet sobs, sniffles, and a growing wet spot on her shoulder. “I can only imagine how hard that was. That’s horrible. I’m so sorry, Ash,” Whitney said. Her own voice was thick and cracking.

“I had to smother that entire part of myself, Whit. If anyone had the slightest reason to wonder if I
could save shots without touching the ball, my career would’ve been over. Dream, dead. I would’ve had,” her voice cracked again, “I would’ve had none of myself left.”

It broke Whitney’s heart to hear that from her friend. A sob escaped her own throat and she held Ashlyn tighter. They stayed locked together until Ashlyn’s breathing settled into a slow, congested rhythm. Whitney thought back to the offer that had brought all of this to the surface. “So, now you’ve made an identity you can live with and you’re working out the dream that helped you through all of that pain. Then you get this offer, to be something that might’ve saved you from all of it, and it throws that identity out of balance.”

“Yeah,” Ashlyn answered, and drew back from their embrace. “But…but it’s not just that. I love soccer. Giving it up seems…I can’t even picture it.”

“You’re torn between your first love and something you might wish had been your first love.”

Whitney knew she’d hit close to the truth when Ashlyn stayed silent.

“That’s it,” Ashlyn finally said. “It’s a choice between the dream I had and the dream I might’ve had, and which I want to take responsibility for representing.” She smiled for the first time since they’d parked. “Thanks, Whit.” Her lips twisted. “I still have no idea what I’m going to do.”

“Absolutely any time, sister. Listen, there may not be a ‘right’ decision here. Neither of those options are bad, but one might be a better choice for you. Your job is to figure out which it is and why.”

Ashlyn nodded and sat up straighter. “There’s another thing: that point about if you’d seen witches like you win a World Cup is actually a two-part problem. Suppose the U.S. had won at Quidditch during your childhood. Would you have seen it?”

Ashlyn felt beaten down all over again. “No,” she swallowed. “I wouldn’t have. I think there’s supposed to be a system to track magic kids but, somehow, I got lost. They tried for a while. There were visitors and letters and even a social worker. But they never offered anything. I mean, they offered a wizarding education, but that was always in exchange for taking me away from home. There was no ‘Look at this. This is what we have to offer you,’ just all-or-nothing, sight-unseen. I guess my point is that it always came across as them demanding that we trust them, but I think no one in my family could handle what was going on. Certainly not me.” She took a moment to breathe while Whitney rubbed her shoulder. “After a while of that, the skater girl from a working-class Florida neighborhood…” She couldn’t say any of the words that came to mind.

“Fell through the cracks,” Whitney finished for Ashlyn, who nodded. “You have to talk to your contact about that. Knowing you, if you don’t think you’re making an impact on the girls who need it most, you’ll get really discouraged.”

“You’re right. It would kill me if it turned out I’d given up soccer only to not actually inspire anyone.”

“Then go back and grill this woman on what’s going to change. Hopefully she’s thought of this already, so find out what she’s working on.” She smiled, lifting the mood. “Now, is there anything else Dr. Engen can help you with, or shall I drop you off you at our dorm?”

Just before Ashlyn opened the car door, Whitney called her attention back. “If I can guess, with one guess, who it was you met with, will you tell me if I’m right?”

Ashlyn smiled, but wistfully. “Whit, you know I would tell you if I could. It’s just too big a thing for me to take in my own hands.”
Whitney looked down, disappointed but understanding. “You’re right. Take care, Ash,” she said, but then a sly grin took over her face: “and say hi to Mia Hamm for me.”

Ashlyn sat dumbstruck. Whitney laughed wildly, but forced herself serious and put a hand on Ashlyn’s shoulder. “It’s ok, Ash. I get how serious this is. I’m going to grin at the knowledge that she’s literally magical for twenty minutes and then forget about it.” Her smile returned as she saw Ashlyn recover. “You should know by now that you can’t consciously keep a secret from me. Remember, call me if you ever need to talk more.”

“Thank you so, so much.”

Chapter End Notes

Comments welcome. I like hearing what you think.
We're finally going! Sorting will be Chapter 13. Edit: Chapter 7 after merging a bunch of shorter chapters.

Alex needed two days to make her choice and her peace, five minutes to relearn her signature with a quill pen, and six days to have a new passport expedited and rushed to Diamond Bar. The Hogwarts fall term began in seven days. Alex moved out of Berkley and said goodbye to everyone she knew – no matter how awkward or painful the parting – with the specter of bureaucratic failure looming over her head.

Some things never change.

In the end, an owl dropped the passport through the sunroof of Jeni’s car, the school uniform fit, and Alex awoke to the realization that she had five hours to catch a train – on the other side of the world. It called for strong coffee. Her family drove her to LAX and she’d hugged them all twice.

Mia, now sporting aviators under the black snap-back, met her inside and led her [accessing LAX Mageport from the main LAX terminal cannot, for security reasons, be described here], where they met Christen and Kelley just as before. “I like the sunglasses. Big improvement,” Kelley teased, then exchanged a stunned glance with Alex as they realized she’d just teased their childhood idol.

Mia had told them to pack the minimum essentials and purchase the rest in England. For her, that included her preferred workout clothes – she’d tried not to count her sports bras as she packed – sweats, a soccer ball and hand pump, family photos, and four rolls of pink pre-wrap.

For Kelley, “essentials” apparently included a surfboard. Alex rolled her eyes in mock judgement and turned to Christen.

For Christen, “essentials” meant disconcertingly little.

Christen saw Alex’s face change and anticipated her question. “I’m not going. I came to see you two off.”

Alex didn’t know what to think.

“Remember when you asked why I was playing soccer instead of Quidditch?” Alex nodded and Christen took a breath. “Everything I said, about the level of competition and wanting a challenging environment, was true, but it wasn’t why I chose soccer. In high school, when I saw that I no longer had time to be great at two sports, I realized I’d fallen in love with soccer. I’d played both sports for most of my life and my unconscious mind had already figured out what I wanted. When you asked, I told you what I thought someone who’d never played Quidditch needed to hear.” She paused to inspect Alex’s expression. “I wanted to help you make a good decision, and I didn’t think that saying ‘because I love soccer more’ would help you keep an open mind.”

Alex nodded slowly. “I think I understand.”

“If I’ve upset you, I apologize. I was…trying to manipulate you into thinking for yourself,” Christen
finished wryly.

It made Alex smile. “I don’t want to encourage you, but it did work. Thanks, I guess?”

“Don’t worry, she doesn’t need any encouragement.” That earned Kelley a punch in the shoulder. “For real, Christen, I’ll miss you.”

“Aww, I’ll miss you too, Kell.”

“You sure you won’t change your mind? Slytherin green would go perfectly with your eyes.”

Christen lunged and Kelley dodged and Alex laughed, but it was a strained laugh. She felt suddenly uncomfortable, and that bothered her. Why does a joke about Christen’s eye color–

Mia interrupted her thought. “I hate to break up the fun, but we need to get going.”

“Then this is where I say goodbye. Alex, it was great to meet you. You’re going to do great at Hogwarts. I can’t wait until you’re making headlines for U.S. Quidditch!” Christen embraced Alex and then turned to Kelley.

“You get that scoring record for me,” Kelley said with more emotion than Alex had heard from her before.

“K-O, you’re the best. I’ll run ‘em ragged for you,” Christen said as she pulled Kelley in tight. “You keep Alex out of trouble, ok?” The Stanford pair dissolved into laughter. Alex felt uncomfortable again and looked up at the atrium until she sensed them pulling apart.

“Good to go?” Mia prompted, and took a step away from the group. Alex and Kelley turned to follow her.

“Goodbye!” Christen yelled after them.

“Goodbye!” Kelley and Alex waved back.

“Be seeing you!” Mia yelled over her shoulder.

They were going to Hogwarts.

Alex, now traveling by ether-line for the third time, arrived at Capital Region International Etherdrome on steady feet and with her stomach where she expected it to be. For a split second, she was tempted to fake nausea so that Kelley would catch her again. She made herself forget that she’d ever had the thought.

“Where are we, exactly? Geographically?” Kelley asked Mia.

“We’re directly under Washington Dulles International Airport, so about a 30-minute drive west from Washington, D.C. In ideal traffic.”

“Are all of these terminals under airports?” Alex asked.

“Funny enough, this one was actually here first. I hear there was a massive panic in the Department of Magic Affairs when they saw the plans for Dulles Airport. In general, though, a lot of ether terminals are built under existing Muggle infrastructure. It’s just more convenient.”

“What is this ‘ether,’ anyway? How does this all work?”
“You’ll have to save that question for your professors, Kelley.”

They crossed the terminal to wait by the security screening exit. “We’re meeting two more student-athletes, then you’re off to England,” Mia explained.

“Wait, you aren’t coming?” Alex asked.

Mia shook her head. “I have to get back to my work here. One of the two players has experience travelling overseas and the rest of you can figure it out. Don’t forget that you’re legally adults,” she checked her watch, “and right now, I need to go bring the other player down from upstairs. Stay found,” she said, and left.

“Well, then…” Kelley said to the space their mentor had just left. The two girls looked around at the walls, the floor, the crowd, and, possibly, each other.

“Don’t you get cold feet now, Ash. You swore to me that you – what were your words? – ‘cut your heart open and made peace with what was inside’.”

“It’s just the symbolism of getting out of your car. It was daunting, for a moment.” Ashlyn tugged the handle and popped the door open. “Alright, time to do this.” They worked her surfboard out of Whitney’s car and Ashlyn shouldered her backpack and duffle. There was nothing left to do but say goodbye.

“Just giving you a nudge. I’m so proud of you, Ash. I wish I could go with you, but that’s sorta the point of all this, isn’t it? Go be with your kind.”

“My friends are my kind, Whit.”

“I know, you big softie. Send me tickets to a match sometime.”

“As soon as there’s something to see, I will.”

“I’ll be patient.” She gave Ashlyn one last hug. “Text me when you get to England. Oh, and don’t forget that you’re not making a normal connection at Dulles, so claim your bag.” Whitney wished she didn’t have so much to say, but she couldn’t help it. “Show those Brits what a big, bad American keeper can do!”

“Excuse me,” a voice sounded from behind, “is this Mrs. Green’s Eggs and Ham tour group?”

Kelley rolled her eyes at Alex as they turned. “You just wish you’d thought of it,” Alex whispered. The look Kelley shot back was priceless. They faced a giggling brunette with unmistakable soccer legs.

“Ali Krieger, former Penn State right back, future Gryffindor chaser,” the brunette introduced herself.

“Kelley O’Hara, Stanford forward.”

“Alex Morgan, Berkley forward. Kelley’s jealous of your Mia Hamm pun.”

Kelley glared again but brushed it off. “I’d thought that beaters were more parallel to soccer defenders.”

Ali’s bright-eyed smile turned to a wicked smirk. “I love the looks on you forwards’ faces when I
take a shot-cross from your own goal line. I am going after that quaffle.”

Alex and Kelley exchanged a look. Ali’s smirk turned to a grin.

“So, Mia said you’ve traveled as a witch before?” Alex prompted.

“Yes,” Ali confirmed, “I’ve spent some time in England and Germany.”

“I’m glad,” Alex said. “I’ve been in the wizard world for less than a week.”

Ali was cluing them in on quirks and tricks of navigating magical society when Kelley saw Mia returning. “Oh my god, they match,” she grinned.

Alex turned and saw Mia leading the final player towards them. She wore, as Kelley noted, aviator sunglasses and a black snapback hat, and was carrying a surfboard.

“It’s the new Blues Brothers,” Ali said, prompting Kelley and the new girl to laughter. Alex smiled and pretended to understand the reference. Mia just looked chagrined.

“I should’ve known better. This is Ashlyn Harris, goalkeeper from UNC.”

Ashlyn slipped off her sunglasses so she could make eye contact as she shook hands. She had loose waves of bright blonde hair, a partial sleeve of tattoos on one arm, and strong shoulders under her t-shirt. It seemed to Alex that she held Ali’s hand and eyes for a half-second longer than the others but, then again, her senses seemed off today.

Kelley shifted in the boarding lounge seat. “Why is it that we can just step into magic portals to go from one city to another, but we have to wait at a gate to go to England?”

Alex smiled at Kelley’s question; the girl was never quiet or still for long. Ali looked up from a Hogwarts orientation packet – quill and lithographs on parchment, of course – and answered. “Basically it takes more magic to travel farther, so they make it more efficient by sending as many people at once as possible. There’s a more technical explanation if you’re into that sort of thing.” Kelley nodded eagerly. “I didn’t say I knew it,” Ali admitted. “Something about…oh god, what were those words…inverse-squares and parageodesics.”

Alex smiled as she watched Kelley’s eyes light up with interest. “Feeling better about your future education?”

“I am,” Kelley beamed, then pulled out her phone. “Pardon me while I learn what a ‘geodesic’ is.”

“Do I sense a future Ravenclaw?” Ali prompted.

Kelley didn’t seem to hear, so Alex turned to Ali and asked something that’d been bothering her. “This House sorting, how does it really work? It seemed like they gave us the tourist’s explanation when we visited.”

“What I’ve read is that there’s this magic, telepathic talking hat.” She gave Alex a moment to process that image. “Each new student puts it on, it reads your mind, then announces which House you belong in. I’ve heard stories that it talks to you, telepathically, while it’s considering what to do with you. They say that students who don’t get the House they want end up agreeing with it by the end of the year.”

“So this hat figures out who you are, possibly better than you know yourself, and sorts you based
“As far as I can tell, it’s based on your value system. Like, why the things that are important to you are important to you. Or maybe it’s how you value whatever it is you value.” She pursed her lips. “Those might be the same thing. Anyway, it’s a more nuanced distinction than just personality traits or mindsets. Honestly, there’s nothing to worry about. The hat picks a House where you’ll feel at home.”

“I like that,” Alex smiled.

“I know, right?” Ali’s smile was dazzling. “Sometimes the words just fit together perfectly.”

“Back to the sorting thing: what you’re saying is that we could all end up in different Houses.” Kelley rejoined the conversation.

“We’re very unlikely to all end up in the same House,” Ali replied. She noted the looks of concern on her new friends’ faces and tried to assuage their worries. “We’ll still have classes together, and we’re free to hang out with whoever we want. We just won’t all be sharing a room.”

“And we’ll be on competing teams in Quidditch,” Ashlyn noted, looking thoughtfully at the others.

Mia Hamm had arranged for the generic school supplies to be purchased and shipped to Hogwarts for them, so the only things they’d needed from Diagon Alley were wands and familiars. Shopping had gone smoothly, save for an argument at Magical Menagerie:

“But it’s a rodent!”

“It’s not on the approved list, Kelley. No rodents are.”

“Other students have had rats as pets! You said so yourself. If someone can bring a disgusting rat, why can’t I-”

“I don’t know how they were able to bring a rats as familiars, Kelley, and I don’t want to find out what they’ll say if you show up with an animal that’s not remotely what they ask for!”

“Come on, Ali! Cats I understand, and owls I guess, but how can they put a toad on the list and think that a student would choose that? If toads are on the list – toads, which are completely useless! – then how can they justify turning away a squirrel?”

Exasperated, Ali turned to the others “Can you talk some sense into her?”

“No.” Ali stared at Alex.

“I don’t think she's refusing,” Ashlyn spoke up. “Alex is being a realist. Either we drag Kelley out of here and get her an owl or we let her buy the squirrel.”

Kelley bared her teeth at Ali.

“Fine, it’s not worth the scratch marks. Don’t come crying to me when your Head of House objects.” Kelley didn’t hear. She was already skipping towards the man behind the cash register.

“The wand chooses the witch,” Ali explained.
“Does that mean this will be a quick stop?” Alex was nervous about time. Her mind still worked in terms of miles, not fireplaces.

“It would, but wand shops tend to be run by slow old men with too many stories.”

“Let’s get him started now, then.” Alex opened the door to Ollivanders’. Ali and Ashlyn filed in, but Kelley wasn’t paying attention. “Kelley.” She still didn’t notice. “Kelley!”

“What? Oh, sorry. There’s just so much to see here! Look, lookit, look at that!”

Alex grabbed Kelley’s hand before she could point at two gnomes carrying dragon eggs on a litter. “Kelley! Get a grip. My god, are you turning into a squirrel now that you have a role model?”

Kelley grinned at her. “I’ve always been a squirrel. I was just preoccupied with Mia Hamm until now.”

Alex sighed and pulled Kelley into the store.

“Platform what?”

“19th Century British wizard humor.”

“So where is it? In the wall between 9 and 10?”

When Ali didn’t reply, Ashlyn groaned into her palm. “Whatever. Let’s go.” They paid for their brunch and took the stairs down to the track level of King’s Cross.

“So we literally just walk through the wall.”

“Yes,” Ali confirmed.

“Like it’s not there,” Kelley continued.

“Is it there.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it.”

Alex laughed. “Kelley, that’s the whole point!”

“Will you be alright if I go first?” Ali asked. “I don’t want you to see me disappear and freak out.”

“That would actually be helpful,” Kelley replied.

“Ok. Watch and learn.”

Ali turned and pushed her luggage cart across the concourse, aiming for a spot on the wall three-quarters of the way between the exits for Platforms 9 and 10. She took a breath and forced down the instinct to stop.

Ashlyn, Alex and Kelley watched her disappear into the wall. “That was so cool!” Kelley shouted.

“Kelley!” Alex hissed. “Don’t draw attention to the secret thing!”

“Oh, right. Sorry.” She immediately perked up again. “I’m next!” She shoved her cart toward the wall, getting faster as she went.
“Don’t stop right on the other side!” Alex reminded, hoping Kelley was still listening.

Next to her, Ashlyn chuckled. “That girl,” she said, shaking her head. Alex nodded, no words needed. They watched Kelley vanish into the wall. “Give her thirty seconds to stare in awe at whatever’s on the other side?” Ashlyn asked.

“At least.”

Kelley stopped and stared.

It was as if she'd stepped into a movie. The far end of the platform was wreathed in steam. To her right, a long line of passenger cars were filling with students and luggage. “No way…”

An elderly man in railway uniform saw her staring, caught her eye and waved her forward. “Can I help ye, lass?”

“I...this is an old train,” she said with wonder.

“That she is,” the man replied, “though new to us. We took advantage of the post-war anti-Pureblood sentiment to swap our old engine for a newer one.”

“Swap?”

“We used a little memory magic to exchange our old engine for a larger one. It was in a railway museum waitin’ on a fundraiser to pay for rebuildin’ ‘er. We thought we’d save them the trouble and let them have ours. We save three-quarters of an hour on our run and the Muggles are happy to have an engine that works.”

Kelley nodded, mostly comprehending. “Can I see it?”

“Of course ye can, it’s right there! Though you don’t have a lot of time left to get settled in one of the carriages.”

Kelley looked back behind her. “Um, my friends will be through any moment now. If anyone asks for Kelley, tell them I went to see the engine and to please take my stuff.”

The man chuckled as Kelley dashed off towards the cloud of steam.

“I don’t see Kelley. Did we give her too much time?”

He turned around to face two young women. “You just missed her. Would you like me to help you with her baggage?”

“Please.” Ashlyn noticed Ali sitting on a bench only a few feet away. “Ali? How did you lose Kelley?”

“I tried to get her attention,” Ali shook her head and gave a wry smile. “She didn’t even notice me.”

A knock on the compartment door interrupted the girls’ conversation. Alex slid it open. “Would you ladies like any refreshments?” asked a woman pushing a cart.

“Kelley, don’t you owe Lauren Cheney some sort of dessert?” Alex asked.

“Oh, yeah. Do you have any, um, ‘chocolate frogs’?”
The woman chuckled. “I do. Will you be seeing this Lauren soon?”

Kelley shook her head. “Probably not for a few hours.”

“Then I suggest you buy a spare.”

The girls shared stories of soccer teams and childhood adventures, the conversation gradually subsiding as the Hogwarts Express rolled and swayed through the Scottish countryside. Ali fell asleep on Ashlyn’s shoulder and Kelley, uncharacteristically, gazed out the window, absorbed in her thoughts.

Alex yawned. “I didn’t realize how tiring this last week was,” she said to Ashlyn, quietly for Ali’s sake.

“I know. I was busy, but it’s not like any of it was hard work,” Ashlyn replied, voice low. “It makes sense, though, that completely changing the course of my life would wear me out.”

“Yeah. My heart and my mind feel like I’ve just played a tournament. I want to be excited for Hogwarts but right now all I can think about is what the bedrooms will be like.”

“You’ll feel better when we get there. Right now were kind of in limbo on this train, but I bet the Sorting will inject some tension and liven things up.”

At the word ‘bet,’ Kelley shifted in her seat and looked at the two pentagonal chocolate frog boxes. “Why do I need backup chocolate? We’ve got to be almost there, anyway.” She picked up one and opened the lid.

Ribbit, ribbit.

Kelley started and dropped the box. The frog leapt from the package and landed on her leg. She kicked and the frog flew off and landed on Ali’s cheek.

“Wha…”

Ribbit.


“Sorry! I’m sorry!” Kelley was on her feet and coming for the frog. “Let me get it.”

She cupped her hands and leaned in to catch the frog. She nearly had it when the carriage rolled over a set of points; the jolt was just enough to unbalance her and she slipped forward and smushed the chocolate frog against Ali’s face.

“Ahh!” Kelley didn’t know what to think. “Did I…was it alive? Did I kill it?!?”

“No,” Ali grumbled back, “it was just enchanted to seem alive. Magic candy.” She touched the chocolate on her face and turned. “Ashlyn, help me get this off.”

Ali saw Ashlyn’s eyes flick from hers to the chocolate smear, to her lips and back to her eyes. They stared at each other for a moment, equally shocked, then turned away abruptly. Both were blushing scarlet. Ali grabbed the wax paper out of the frog’s box and scraped the chocolate from her face. Kelley, the picture of embarrassment, sat and faced the window.

Only Ashlyn noticed that Alex’s look of discomfort, as she stared through the back of Kelley’s
shoulder, was not embarrassed but forlorn.
Sorting

Chapter Summary

The players find out which Houses they will call home. Who will end up together?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You go first.” It was not what Ashlyn wanted to hear right now.

“Why? You’re the one who’s used to this stuff,” she whispered back at Ali.

“Because if any of us go before you, you’ll spend the entire time hoping the Hat will put you into the same House. If you go first, you won’t know what to worry about, so there’s no chance you can influence the Hat.”

“Sounds like more reason not to go first.”

Ali fought her impulse to over-analyze Ashlyn’s words. “Ashlyn, this is a big deal. You need to let the hat put you in the best place for you.”

Ashlyn turned to look at Ali. There was concern on her face that hadn’t come through in her whisper. Ashlyn decided to trust it. “Ok,” she whispered back, and slid in front of Alex.

“You’ll be great,” Ali whispered louder, and squeezed Ashlyn’s shoulder. Ashlyn closed her eyes and let the tension out of her body. The line moved, slow but sure, and then Ashlyn was next. The previous student jogged over to Ravenclaw and the professors gestured for Ashlyn to take his place. Ali quietly slipped alongside Alex.

The Sorting Hat was lowered onto Ashlyn’s head.

My word, you have a story to tell. Good on you for wearing your heart on your sleeve!

“ Heard it before,” Ashlyn said quietly, remembering her tattoos.

Ahh, of course you have. Well, let’s see…yes, you have nerve, and you want to be a hero—“

A hero? Ashlyn’s thought interrupted him.

Would you prefer “role model”? You want little witches to see your greatness and look up to you, don’t you?

But not for my sake! Ashlyn protested. Ali didn’t want her to influence the hat, but what if the Hat got her all wrong?

Glory is given, not taken, Ashlyn. Heroism is in the eye of the beholder. Yet it is good that you see the mantle of a hero as a responsibility and not a trophy. Indeed, you have as much to teach your Housemates as you have to learn from them.

My Housemates?
“GRYFFINDOR!” the Hat shouted to the assembled school.

You needn't be anxious about her.

How did you…?

Have you forgotten? I am literally a ‘fucking mind-reader.’ Go and join your House with pride.

Ashlyn grinned and hopped off the stool. A professor pointed her to an aisle and she strode to the cheering Gryffindors.

Ali touched Alex’s shoulder. “Let me go next. Ashlyn’s been anxious and I don’t want her worrying any longer than she has to.”

Alex wasn’t sure what Ali meant but nodded and let her go. She walked over and sat down as though it were any stool, anywhere, and this was just another day.

Another athlete! Most people have at least a little of each House in them, but you sporting types are always strong in three or four. Smart people who are driven to work hard to win glory… I digress. Let’s see, a modest defender with a love for the attack. Ah, it is not the work but the heart which defines the Houses. Go forth, young lioness!

“GRYFFINDOR!”

Ali pushed off the stool and just about pranced over to the Gryffindor tables. She forced her way between an older student and Ashlyn who, caught up in the cheering crowd, threw an arm around her shoulders. Equally enthused, Ali let it stay.

Alex, having gone from first of her friends to third, was becoming anxious herself. She willed her heart to slow, but it was taking more effort than usual. She started for the stool before she was called, and her head buzzed and her vision blurred. Just the next four-plus years of my life in the hands of some old hat, Alex thought as she sat down. God, I hope it puts me with Kelley. Or Kelley with me.

The hat settled on her head. It was warm and fuzzy, yet she found no comfort at all.

My goodness, woman, you are a fascinating case. So much going on in your Muggle-born head— but I’m indulging myself. You’re a simple Sort and I can’t dawdle.

“GRYFFINDOR!”

The bloc of students with maroon and gold trim on their uniforms cheered and waved for her to join them.

“Yeah, Alex!” “Whooo!”

She looked over her shoulder and saw Lauren and Tobin waving and cheering from the yellow-black group of students. She waved back, “Thanks, guys!”

Lauren grinned and yelled back across the hall. “It’s on now, girl!” Alex laughed and crammed herself into a space close to Ali and Ashlyn, who’d stood to call her over. When they sat, Ashlyn kept her hands to herself.

A professor waved Kelley forward to take Alex’s place on the stool.

Well, well, here’s another fierce one, came a voice in her head. It’s been a while since I sat on heads so devoted to becoming elite. Mmmm, ‘No excuses,’ you tell yourself. It costs a lot to bind yourself to
such an absolute. Does it inspire you to heroics, Kelley O’Hara? Or does it keep you up at night?

What are you after? Kelley aimed a thought at the Hat.

After? I’m not ‘after’ anything. I’m simply an old hat doing his job.

Then do it, Kelley retorted.

So defensive. Can we meet in the middle? Tell me, Kelley, what it is you want.

Kelley swallowed her impulse reply and took a breath. I want you to tell me why you put me in the House you choose.

The Hat was silent. The silence went on until Kelley could hear her own pulse, the breathing of the faculty behind her, and the occasional crinkle of fabric above her.

Ali made you think this was an easy job for me.

Kelley laughed aloud. It was true, Ali had made it sound automatic and her friends had been sorted quickly. I’m sorry, do whatever you need to do. The hat crinkled in what must’ve been a nod and was silent again. Kelley listened to fire crackling in the great hearth and relaxed into the sound.

What would it take for you to deliberately handball?

The question made Kelley’s eyes snap open. All eyes were on her and no one seemed to be breathing. Like the crucial moment in a close game. The Hat’s question suddenly seemed a lot less abstract. She closed her eyes again. She’d been around gamesmanship and dirty play. She’d seen it on the field and in World Cup broadcasts. She’d risked committing fouls to press an attack or break one up and been booked for it. She knew her answer; it was her answer to everything.

“No excuses. Play like champion.”

Meaning?

"Meani-" Kelley realized she was speaking out loud. Meaning that I work to be the best and if the difference between me being champion and runner-up is a handball, then I'm not the best.

And so you see the problem I have. Are you the most ambitious of the hard-working or are you the hardest-working of the ambitious? Or should I just say ‘Oh, toss it’ and make you a celebrity in illustrious Gryffindor?

I wouldn’t object, since you put my friends there. Oh! Speaking of, Ali suggested Ravenclaw.

On the basis of one fact about you! Amateur, absolutely amateur. You’re allowed to have secondary traits, you know. Oh, bother, here it is: would you be better off with people whose strongest support is for your goals or for your work ethic?

Kelley almost responded several times. What did it matter when she was her own source of both? But wait, her environment would have an unavoidable influence on her. Which would be more helpful? Then again, she planned to spend all her time studying and training for Quidditch with her fellow footballers, so it didn’t matter much. Which houses were they in? Gryffindor and Hufflepuff, so–

Oh, for goodness sakes, girl! Would you rather live underground or underwater?

Underwater! Ooh, but doesn’t Ravenclaw have a tower?
No! We’re going with your impulse. That’s final.

“SLYTHERIN!”

Cheers erupted from the green-trimmed students. The usual polite applause from the other Houses, however, was absent.

Did you get what you wanted?

Kelley remembered the beginning of their conversation. Did you share all your reasoning?

I did.

Then I’m satisfied. Thank you.

It’s been a pleasure, honestly, the Hat said as someone lifted it from her head. So few of you are real challenges to sort.

Kelley hopped off the stool and followed pointed fingers to the Slytherin tables. A few of the older students waved and slid to make space.

“Whooo Kelley!” “Yeah girl, stall that hat!” Tobin and Lauren drew questioning looks from the assembled Houses. Kelley waved over her shoulder, and then a new voice called to her.

“O’Hara! Sit here.”

She looked for the unfamiliar American voice and saw the one person with a hand in the air who wasn’t waving it. The students on the opposite bench had shifted to make a space and the hand pointed to it. Kelley walked to the open spot and recognized Amy as one of students who’d made room. She smiled to the blonde and squeezed in across from the woman who’d called to her.

“A-Rod told me about you. I’m Hope Solo, fourth-year. Welcome to Slytherin.”

Chapter End Notes

Writing is fun. It's even more fun when you know people are enjoying your work. I'd love to hear your thoughts on what you like and/or what would help you like.
The assembled school was dismissed. Returning students laughed and high-fived and new students grinned and listened to tales of what Hogwarts had in store for them. Tobin and Lauren shrugged off their disappointment – more competition was good for everybody, right? – and began making friends among the students the Hat had given them. Alex, Ashlyn, Ali and Kelley were swept off in their respective crowds, the red heading for Gryffindor Tower and the green for Slytherin Dungeon.

“People might ask you about your sorting,” Amy advised Kelley. “You were a Hatstall, which means it took longer than five minutes for the Hat to choose your House.”

“He didn’t choose.” Hope and Amy stopped, surprised. “He let me choose.”

Amy started to speak but Hope cut her off. “Keep that under your hat, so to speak.” Her face hadn’t changed but Kelley thought she saw a twinkle in Hope’s eye. “Some of your more arrogant Housemates will think you don’t really belong here.”

“How did you choose?” Amy was curious.

“He asked me if…you know, maybe I shouldn’t tell.” Kelley looked sheepish as she remembered that she’d picked her bedroom, not her House.

Amy and Hope shared a look.

“Are Hatstalls rare?” Kelley asked, staving off an awkward silence.

“The Hat only takes more than five minutes a couple times a century. It’s actually a big deal,” Amy replied. They walked on. “A lot of famous people were Hatstalls.”

“Wow. Ooh, I can make it sound all mysterious and dramatic when people ask!” Kelley grinned her signature up-to-something grin.

Amy chuckled and Hope smiled. “By all means. Just don’t make it sound sinister.”

“Yeah, our reputation doesn’t need any help.”

“Fuck our reputation.” Hope’s amusement vanished. “We can’t help what people think,” she focused on Kelley again, “just don’t act like you’re plotting to take over the world.”
“Is it that bad?” Kelley was starting to question whether the underwater dorm was worth it.

“It can be, until you get an individual reputation. Don’t take it personally before then.”

“It’ll help that you have friends in other Houses already,” Amy added. “And if your parents aren’t magic, you’re golden.”

“Muggle-born, country-raised,” Kelley said, putting on her former Georgia accent.

“Oh, this is good,” Hope laughed, and it was a full, warm laugh. “A Deep South Muggle-born Slytherin Hatstall. The poor Brits won’t know what hit ‘em.”

“When O’Hara’s on the attack, no one does.” Kelley realized too late that she was prodding Hope to make her laugh again. Feeling embarrassed, she looked away and braced for a shut-down.

“You’d better put your money where your mouth is if you plan on making Slytherin’s Quidditch team.”

Kelley heard what she expected to hear and no shot at her dedication went unanswered. She halted and gave Hope her hardest eyes. “The first thing I did after I decided to transfer here was borrow Christen’s broom. The only private space I had was our dorm room, so I worked on hovering and balance. I spent every possible second of last week on a broom: signing forms, making calls, packing up, brushing my teeth, braiding my hair, everything. When I started, I couldn’t even balance a soccer ball on my head without running into something. Now I can juggle a ball with every part of my body without moving an inch any direction.” Hope and Amy were staring, stunned again. “I will make the team.” Kelley forced herself to start walking and prayed that the startled pair would catch up. She still didn’t know where the Slytherin rooms were.

The crimson-trimmed crowd carried Alex up to Gryffindor tower but she was only half-engaged in the excitement. Her mind just wasn’t there when the older students showed them how to get into the House common room and led them in search of their luggage. “The house-elves brought it all up to the rooms during the Sorting ceremony,” they explained. Alex, Ashlyn and Ali’s bags turned out to be in the very spire of the tower, accessed through a trap door in the floor.

“Wow…” Ali breathed when she saw the room. It was circular and featured three four-poster beds, each with wardrobe and nightstand, as well as a full bath behind a screen. A wrought-iron chandelier hung from the center of the conical rafters, supporting candles which danced with light of every color. Tendrils of ivy peeked around the frames of the windows, which looked out over the whole of the castle and surrounding countryside. “I feel like Rapunzel.”

“You should feel lucky,” the third-year who’d come with them said. “Only three women every four years get to live here, assuming none stay for a Magister’s.”

“Dang.” Ashlyn walked to a window with a view of the Quidditch fields. “Wow, we can fly to Quidditch practice and back.”

“If you like. On behalf of the rest of Gryffindor, I do insist that you somehow seal the windows whenever you aren’t here. If we get pranked because someone came in through your room, you will be very unpopular.” The three Americans exchanged concerned glances.

“Are pranks a big thing at Hogwarts?” Alex asked.

“Not usually, since the Houses are hidden and password-protected. Still, if some Slytherin punk notices you flying in and out of here, they might get ideas.”
“We’ll keep it secure,” Ashlyn assured her, “and we’ll look into ways to seal the trap door as well.”

“Thank you, from the bottom of our collected hearts. We’ll all be gathering in the common room soon, so unpack and then join us!” She climbed down through floor.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Ali asked the other two.

“And who in their right mind gives college students four-poster beds?” Ashlyn volunteered.

“I don’t know, but if I find out I’m sending them a thank-you letter,” Ali replied.

Alex saw their eyes widen and then they were both blushing.

“What I meant was—“

“I know what you meant,” Ashlyn tried to reassure Ali.

“No, before that.” Ali was still blushing. “We have a private living space and we don’t need to go through the rest of Gryffindor to get to it. We can have the other Americans over whenever we want.”

“Are students from other Houses even allowed in each other’s spaces?” Alex asked.

“Why ask?” Ashlyn countered. “That’s Ali’s point; we could have our favorite Hufflepuffs and Slytherins up here every day and no one would know. Especially the Slytherins. I get the feeling they wouldn’t even be welcome within earshot of the Fat Lady.”

“Ohhh.” Realization seemed to dawn on Alex, and she showed signs of her upbeat self again. “That’s brilliant! It’ll be like a Team USA clubhouse.”

Ashlyn’s smile turned into a cringe. “I don’t know about ‘clubhouse.’ It sounds too public-television to me.”

“I’m sure we can think of something else. We’ll have plenty of time to ourselves up here,” Ali said.

Ashlyn looked up from her duffle bag and immediately blushed again. Ali turned to Alex. “I’m going to go and...” she gestured at nothing over her shoulder.

Ashlyn busied herself with her bag. “I’ll catch up later.” Ali took that as her cue and disappeared down the ladder.

“Should I apologize? I can never tell with these things.”

“It wouldn’t hurt,” Amy suggested. “I think the issue was that you questioned her before you’d seen her practicing. Apologizing will help, but I think the critical thing is that you don’t challenge her about Quidditch until she’s seen you see her practice.”

Hope considered it. “Yeah, I see it now. With college scouting and tryouts, the first thing anybody learns about you is how you are on the field. Here it’s backwards. I spoke like we already knew each other and she took it like we didn’t. Which we don’t.”

“See? You’re better with people than you think you are,” Amy smiled encouragement. “For what it’s worth, Lauren said that Kelley took instruction really well during her flying lesson, and my first impression was that she has a really fun and...open personality, if that makes sense. Easy to be friends with If you meet her halfway.”
“I think I’ll do that.”

“Great. And wow, if she really can juggle a ball while on a broom after a week’s worth of spare moments, she could be our best answer to Tobin.”

Hope grinned at the thought. “Then I’m definitely apologizing to her.”

Alex sat on the edge of her bed, staring absently at the next one. Her heart was more tangled than it had ever been before. Ashlyn heard the silence and looked up. “Wishing this was someone else’s bed?” Alex looked back at her with wary eyes. Ashlyn nodded, Alex’s look answer enough. “I guess you and I both have a problem, huh?”

Alex blinked. “Problem?”

Ashlyn sighed. “Alex, this is not my business but I’m already thinking of you all as teammates and teammates look out for each other. I don’t know if anyone else has noticed yet, but you’re heading for a bad crush on Kelley.”

“B-bad?”

“I apologize, I didn’t mean bad as in ‘wrong’. I meant it as in ‘severe and potentially painful’.”

Alex nodded. She didn’t want to talk about it – felt entirely uncomfortable talking about it – but Ashlyn already seemed to know…

“I’ve never…” She rested her hands in her lap and stared at them.

Ashlyn came and sat down next to her. “You look defeated, Alex.”

Alex felt hot tension building in her face and forced her eyelids closed and her lips tight. “I feel defeated.”

Ashlyn reached a hand around Alex’s shoulders and held her close for a minute. “Were you thinking about saying that you’ve never been interested in a girl before?” Ashlyn was patient while Alex weighed her answer. She nodded against Ashlyn’s shoulder.

“Do you feel like you don’t know what to do?”

Alex nodded again.

“Don’t know what to do about Kelley, about yourself, or both?”

“Both.”

“I’m going to give you one piece of advice before you talk more,” Ashlyn said, “and that’s that you can and should make decisions about what you want but you can’t ignore parts of who you are. So, you might conclude that you don’t want to pursue Kelley or that, all in all, you’d rather be with a man, but, whatever you discover, you need to face this attraction head-on.” Ashlyn gave Alex a moment, then continued. “If you keep on as you are now, dwelling on her but not making a decision, it’s going to eat you up inside.”

Alex knew Ashlyn was right. “It’s already starting to.”

Ashlyn squeezed her tight. “Part of being mature – I can’t believe I said that, I’m barely older than you – is managing what you feel versus what you want. You’ve done that with soccer, right?
Chosen not to eat or drink something or go to a party, even though you’d enjoy it, because it would get between you and what you truly wanted?

“Mm-hmm.”

“The emotions are stronger here, but it’s the same choice. You need to explore yourself and figure out whether your interest in Kelley stems from a core need or if it’s something you can live without.”

“I don’t know.” Alex’s voice cracked.

“And that’s ok. It’s ok to be confused or to simply not know, Alex.” Ashlyn gave Alex a moment to process. “It’s ok to be there but it’s causing you pain, so you shouldn’t stay there much longer. You need to make a decision about Kelley and won’t know what to do about Kelley until you know what to do about you.”

“How do I find out?” Alex was lost.

“I suggest that you take some time and imagine the big picture of your life: what you want your future to be like, what you want to get out of it and who you want to be when you get there. Then look and see if there’s a woman lover and partner in that picture, or could be.”

“That’s…”

“Big?” Ashlyn offered when Alex stayed quiet.

“Big,” Alex agreed. “You put it simply, but it’s big.”

“Some things are big because they’re complicated and others are big because they’re fundamental. Look at it this way: how many different things did you consider when you were deciding to come to Hogwarts?”

“Um…a lot.”

“Don’t worry about actually counting. That decision about what you wanted was big and complicated. Now, if I asked you why you want to play a sport for the United States of America, how many of those things would you even think of?”

“One, two. Two.”

“That’s big, because it’s fundamental to who you are, but it’s not complicated. Does that make sense?”

“I think so, Yeah.”

“Does this seem more manageable now?”

"Some, yeah. There's another thing," Alex looked at Ashlyn. "You've been talking in general terms this whole time. Like, you haven't once used the L-word."

"Labels don't matter right now," Ashlyn shrugged. "Figure out who you are and what you want first, then think about what words to use. If you bring in the words now, you'll let their baggage tell you what to think about yourself."

Alex stared at her in awe. "I wish I'd talked to you years ago. Not even about this stuff but just in general."
Ashlyn smiled. "I might not have been much help then. So, where are we with your life?"

“What we’re saying is that yes, I have feelings for Kelley, but I’ve never thought about whether feelings for a woman are part of the life I want. So I make peace with what I want, then worry about a particular woman,” Alex said, calm again.

“Exactly,” Ashlyn confirmed, thankful that she’d gotten through to Alex.

“Cool. I think I can handle that.”

“Happy to be of service,” Ashlyn said with a last squeeze of Alex’s shoulder. “You talk to me any time you need, ok?”

She was 1-vs-1 with Hope. Her run up-field had been good but then Amy had intercepted her pass to Alex and cleared it to Hope. Now it was taking everything Kelley had to stay between Hope and the goal. Hope was effortless on the ball, dodging every trick, anticipating every feint and nutmeg, until Kelley was utterly disassembled as a soccer player. Hope danced the ball away for space and took her shot. In despair, Kelley threw herself sideways, arms outstretched. The ball deflected off her hand and sailed into the near high corner of the net.

“What the fuck, Kelley?! I had that!” Ashlyn screamed as she clambered up from the ground by the far post.

“Merlin’s beard, what kind of Slytherin can’t even cheat right? You’re cut, O’Hara.” Hope marked on a clipboard and turned to yell at the sideline. “Next! This one had better be worth my time!”

Ali looked at Kelley with sickening pity, then walked to join Ashlyn and Alex. Their crimson jerseys turned to white with red and blue accents as they mounted brooms and flew away, leaving Kelley alone in the center of the abandoned practice field.

"Does it inspire you to heroics? Or does it keep you up at night?"

Kelley sat up in her bed with the Hat’s words echoing in her mind. Didn’t until now, apparently. She looked up through the glass ceiling of the dorm at the dark water above. Live with my friends? No thanks, Hat, I think I’ll stare at the bottom of a lake instead. She shoved the covers aside and went to the common room for a drink.

Leaning back against the water cooler, Kelley let her eyes explore the darkened room. In the daylight hours, the architecture, setting and décor struck Kelley as ‘Gothic witch-pirate’ and she’d been intrigued. Now, with only weak moonlight at the lake’s surface, everything was smothered in a dark, forbidding blue-green. “I can’t tell if I like it or hate it,” she said quietly.

“I know the feeling,” a soft voice replied. “My first few weeks here were the loneliest of my life.”

“Yeah?” Kelley didn’t care who she was speaking to. This seemed like a conversation best kept anonymous.

“Yeah. When the new moon came, I actually hid and slept in the library. I just couldn’t handle how dark it felt down here. But then there was one night when I woke up and my whole room was glowing with silvered blues and greens from the full moon at its zenith. I came out here and saw how beautiful it was.”

Kelley glanced around the room again. It was still just as forbidding.
“They say ‘beauty is in the eye of the beholder’, but I realized then that it isn’t true. The light in the room just was beautiful. The choice I had was whether to let it be beautiful to me.”

Kelley gave the room another chance. She looked and watched until she noticed that the colors flowed in faint waves, darker and lighter, bluer and greener. They changed hue with the currents and eddies the way a sheet billows in a breeze, but far slower, smaller and gentler. There was something there that might fascinate but, to Kelley, it remained distant and cold.

“How did you let it be beautiful?”

“This is going to sound corny,” the speaker said, and Kelley heard a familiar amusement in the voice. “I had to learn to be content. When I’m dissatisfied with something in my life, it can become all I can think about. It’s like my heart puts its foot down and won’t enjoy anything else until it get what it wants. Since that first month, I get up early at each new phase of the moon and sit out here to see if I can embrace the beauty. If I can’t, I think and journal until I figure out why, and then I make a plan to get past whatever’s holding me back from being content.”

It did sound corny, Kelley thought, but intelligent. She looked at the water overhead and pondered her nightmare.

“Right now I’m dissatisfied that I pushed away a promising young Quidditch player.”

Finally it registered that the speaker ought to have a U.K. accent, but didn’t. “Hope?”

“Over here, Kelley.” Kelley saw an arm wave amid the blue-green shade. She picked her way towards it, feeling wary, until she could see Hope smiling and gesturing for Kelley to join her on a couch. She sat upright, not yet ready to be comfortable.

“I want to apologize,” Hope began. Kelley could scarcely believe how gentle her voice was. “When I said, ‘put your money where your mouth is’, I meant it playfully. I was happy to have one of Hamm’s picks in Slytherin and I was already thinking of you as a U.S. teammate. I realize now that I shouldn’t have assumed you’d hear it that way.” Kelley nodded and Hope shifted forward, intent on making eye contact despite the poor lighting. “I’m sorry, Kelley. I know that Mia sent because you have world-class potential. I won’t try to predict whether you’ll start this fall before I’ve seen you in the air, but I have no doubt that it’ll be worth it to watch you.”

Kelley’s heart skipped a beat as Hope touched her nightmare. She relaxed at last.

Hope noticed and her look of sincerity grew into a smile, then took on a wry twist. “If you come at Quidditch with the same intensity you used on me, you could be team captain in your third year. Don’t tell A-Rod I said that.”

Kelley laughed. “Seriously, thank you, Hope. I’m not blameless, though. I felt embarrassed after I made my ‘no one sees O’Hara coming’ comment and I expected the big stern fourth-year to put me in my place, so I kind of heard what I was expecting to hear. If I’d been looking at you, I might not have missed your intent.”

“‘Big, stern fourth-year?’” Hope smirked. “I’m glad we’re not having this conversation in front of Amy; she’d be in hysterics. Stern is just part of my ‘badass goalkeeper’ game face. I wear it until tryouts, so that the new kids work hard to impress Hope Solo, fearsome captain. After that, I put it on around the other Houses so that they’re already intimidated on match day.” Far from intimidated, Kelley was feeling at home with a fellow competitor. “As for your comment, I liked your spirit,” Hope mirrored her thoughts, “and your place is whatever you earn on the field and deserve as a friend. Don’t ever think otherwise.”
Kelley smiled and let her head fall back against the couch. Above, the water was a little lighter than when she’d woken up. She gazed until she could see the subtleties of the colors again and she let herself soak in them. “It is beautiful. Magical but in a calm, cool way, not in a Disney and fireworks sort of way. Soothing.” She rolled her head to look at Hope “You remember when Amy asked how I chose Slytherin?”

Hope’s silhouette nodded. “I admit I’m curious.”

“I was a handful,” Kelley smirked. She gazed up at the lake as she retold the story. “The Hat went through so many things to figure out where I belonged. He had me down to either ‘the most ambitious of the hard-working or the hardest-working of the ambitious’. ”

“Hufflepuff or Slytherin. Not a common sorting dilemma but a promising split for an athlete,” Hope observed.

“Finally he got fed up with me and asked if I’d rather live underground or underwater.” Kelley turned to watch Hope’s reaction. It was a smirk with aspirations to become a smile. “We went with my impulse,” Kelley grinned. The smile broke through.

She looked back up at the water overhead. It was getting brighter; dawn couldn’t be far away.

“I think I’m going to like it here. It’s like living in a giant lava lamp.”

Hope burst into laughter. *I think I might like that, too,* Kelley thought.

Chapter End Notes

Edit: I’ve been thinking about revising the scene with Alex and Ashlyn ever since I posted this. If you have constructive feedback, your comments are doubly appreciated.

First Lessons

Chapter Summary

First day of classes!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

At breakfast in the Great Hall, Kelley could feel distrustful eyes on her as she walked, green-trimmed, between tables of Gryffindor and Hufflepuff students. She felt the looks evaporate, too, when Lauren stood to hug her and pulled her into a space between Tobin and herself. Lauren’s approval clearly made Kelley one of the ‘good ones.’

“I think you just saved me months of reputation-building,” Kelley thanked her afterwards.

“That she did,” Amy said, joining them outside the Great Hall. She reached to hug Lauren, who stepped back and put her hands on her hips. Amy pouted and made puppy-dog eyes; Lauren stared her down for as long as she could, which was not long at all, before breaking down and pulling Amy in.

“That was my monthly dose of trustworthiness,” Amy smirked at Kelley once they’d separated. “A Lauren hug is like a badge that says, ‘It’s ok! You can be friends with me!’”

“You kids don’t know how good you have it,” Hope said, walking up behind them. A woman in Ravenclaw attire stood close at her side.

“Ja, Hope came to Slytherin with no friends and with no interest in people’s opinions. If it were not for me, she would never have made any.” She was even taller than Hope, with a lean face and straight black hair.

“Not for the first two years, anyway. Kelley, this is Jessica Landström. She’s an international student from Sweden who’s stuck around for a Magister’s degree in…I know what you do but what’s the name again?”

“Mecha-magical research and development,” Jessica smiled, pride evident.

“Whoa. They have a program for that?” Kelley wondered how she hadn’t heard about this.

"Aldrig, no. I share my time between one-with-one arithmancy study with Professor Vector and interning with the Hogwarts Railway engineering shop.”

Kelley’s curiosity wanted to dive deeper but the sight of Jessica’s elbow brushing against Hope’s damped her enthusiasm. “That’s really cool. I’d like to hear more about it sometime.” She hoped she sounded as interested as she genuinely was.

“Absolutely. Any friend of Hope is a friend of mine,” Jessica said with a smile to Hope.

Kelley turned her whole body away to face Amy. “Did you see where the other first-years went? I was going to try and catch them before the first class.”
"Heath! Tobin Heath!" Ashlyn's voice carried from further down the hall.

Amy pointed over her shoulder.

"Thanks," Kelley smirked at Amy and jogged away.

"Cool kid," Jessica said. "Hope, how are things with you?"

"Ashlyn! Harris, right? Dude, how did I not see you at Sorting?"

"Blame my schoolgirl uniform and your mysterious, early departure from UNC," Ashlyn suggested. "It’s awesome to see someone familiar here."

"I know! So, you’re out to be Gryffindor’s keeper?"

"That’s what I’m here for. It’s gonna be tough, though; I’m brand new to Quidditch and I’m going to be especially busy with classes. Alex and I--" Ashlyn dropped her voice. "Alex and I have zero education in magic. We just got a letter – one of these owl-letters – from Mia Hamm telling us she’s arranged for extra tutoring. Staying afloat in school takes priority over Quidditch for now."

"Wow, yeah, you’re going to be busy. Who’s Mia got to tutor you?"

"An American who’s been playing pro Quidditch over here for a few years. Her name’s Tarpley."

"Oh, so she’s not with Hogwarts?"

"No. We’re going to meet her in Hogsmeade pretty much every day. The trip there and back will be the only flying experience we get for a while. Good news is, after she’s caught us up on school, she’s coaching us all in Quidditch flying techniques."

"Sweet, I’d love to get some time with a real pro." Tobin paused as a memory stirred. "You said her name was Tarpley, right? Wasn’t there a Tarpley at UNC a while back?"

Ashlyn thought back. "Now that you mention it, yeah, that does sound familiar. I--" Kelley's arrival distracted her. "Hey, this is perfect, I’ve got something to tell both of you. The three of us in Gryffindor have this awesome room at the top of the tower. It’s nothing at all to fly in and out without the rest of the House knowing. We want to have a U.S.A. gathering after dinner today."

"Awesome," Tobin said. "We’ll need to be subtle about it, though."

"Secret plan? I got this," Kelley grinned. "Hang a gold curtain out your window when the coast is clear. We’ll meet somewhere and then fly up to you one by one."

"Do you have a gold curtain?" Tobin thought she’d better check.

"We’ve got miles of them. Where will you meet?"

"I’m new here," Kelley replied. "Tobin?"

"Most of us have our brooms at the Quidditch grounds, so let’s meet there. I suppose we’ll need to start keeping them in our rooms if we’re gonna make this a regular thing."

"We hope to," Ashlyn said. "I’d better go get my stuff together for class. Pass the word about the secret plan. Later!"
Despite the best efforts of the Hogwarts stairs, Kelley made it to her first class on time. She found a seat next to another Slytherin girl and pulled out the text and her notebook. “Magical Theory,” she said, hoping to spark a conversation. “Seems like a good place to start, right?”

“You’re Kelley O’Hara, right?” The other girl looked at her intently.

“Yeah. What’s your name?” The girl’s words were normal but her tone was off.

“Kate. We’re in the same room down in Slytherin.” It sounded like an explanation rather than an introduction.

“Nice to meet you, Kate. Sorry I didn’t recognize you.”

“Yeah, you too. Do you know those other two Americans in our House?”

Kelley nodded. “Hope and Amy. Why?”

“Well, my friend’s the only first-year in their room and she’d really like to be with girls her age. I was wondering if you’d want to swap beds with her.”

“Umm…maybe. How many others are in the room?”

“Just two third-years, I think.”

Kelley didn’t see any downsides. “Yeah, I’m down for that. Hope and Amy will be, too.”

“Awesome, thank you.” The girl turned forward again.

“So, Kate,” Kelley said, again attempting a conversation, “where are you from?”

“What? Oh, Kent.” She glanced at Kelley just long enough to answer.

“Someone’s got a one-track mind.”

“Hmm? Yeah, I—” Kate stopped and hung her head. “Sorry. Kelley. Sorry, Kelley, I do tend to focus hard on one thing at a time. How about you? Where are you fro—”

“Welcome to Magical Theory 1, everyone! It’s your first day, your first class, and we’ll be starting from first principles.”

So much for that conversation, Kelley sighed.

The professor swept to the front of the room and pulled a handful of chalk sticks from his robe, smearing dust on the neat black in the process. “Ravenclaw and Slytherin is my favorite pairing for these abstract subjects. Our discussions are so much more penetrating. So, chalk! I carried it here, from my office, in my pocket. But! I didn’t have to. I could just as easily,” he pulled a wand from his robe, “have sent the chalk ahead of me,” he flicked the wand and the sticks of chalk zipped to the blackboard’s tray, “or come here without it and summoned it to me,” he flicked the wand again and one came back to his other hand, “or I could even, with Headmistress McGonagall’s approval, apparate myself and the chalk directly from my office to this room. In this class we will attempt to answer what magic is and how,” he waved his wand and the chalk rose and wrote ‘WHAT’ and ‘HOW’ in enormous letters on the blackboard, “we are able to use magic in its various forms to interact with the physical and metaphysical elements of our world.”

The professor turned to the board and saw that the chalk had continued writing his words as he was speaking. Kelley heard him grumble under his breath and the chalk began transcribing an obscenity.
He flicked his wand angrily and the chalk stick zinged over the students heads to shatter against the back wall.

He looked sheepish. “We’ll go through a lot of chalk.”

By lunchtime, Kelley felt concerned about her courses. She asked the assortment of first-years seated around her, “Do any of you know how much homework we’ll have?”

“My cousin graduated last year and she said that, of grades, sleep, and fun, you can pick two out of three,” answered a Hufflepuff boy.

“Bah, who needs sleep?” The girl across from Kelley was the cockiest Gryffindor Kelley had met.

“Me, for one. Thinking with a tired brain is like living life with an empty stomach.” The Ravenclaw girl across from Kelley was all business.

“Oh, come on! This is university!” The Gryffindor girl objected.

“Precisely,” Ravenclaw replied.

Hufflepuff concurred. “She’s right. My gran always said that sleep exists to remind us we have limits.”

“Challenge accepted,” Kelley grinned.

She expected laughs but received stares instead. “What?” She looked around at them while they looked around at each other. “What?!”

The Hufflepuff boy broke the awkward silence. “I guess you probably meant nothing by it. It’s just that, well, you’re Slytherin and…” he let it hang.

“For real? I’d never even heard of Slytherin until a week ago and now you can’t take me non-seriously?”

“Yeah but the Hat had some reason to put you in Slytherin. Just because you’re from America doesn’t mean…”

Kelley waited with exaggerated expectation. “Mean what?”

“Look, it’s like this.” The Gryffindor girl rescued him. “House Slytherin produced all of the worst people in wizarding history. The founder, Salazar Slytherin—“

“Is dead.”

They spun. Hope Solo and Jessica Landström towered behind them. “He’s dead,” Hope maintained her cold, flat tone. “Voldemort is dead.” Two of the first-years flinched at the name. “Dead and you’re still terrified of him. Those of his supporters who didn’t turn on him, and many who did, are rotting in Azkaban. Most of them came from Slytherin, so your Ministry and the Hogwarts Trustees decided that the House system needed some tweaks. Now you’re able to sit with each other at meals and lose your heads when a Muggle-born who knows literally nothing about all of this makes an innocent joke. Any Gryffindor could’ve said that and you’d all laugh your heads off. Kelley says it and you freeze. Why? Because she’s wearing a green tie? Grow up.” She spun on her heel and left.

“She’s actually pleasant when she’s not angry,” Jessica said in half-apology, and hurried after Hope.
Kelley looked back at the others. “Jessica’s right, honestly. From Hope’s perspective, I think she was defending me, not attacking you.”

The Hufflepuff boy offered an apology. “Sorry, Kelley. We didn’t know you were a Muggle-born.”

To Kelley, that seemed to miss the point. “Should you need to?”

Alex ate with pace and returned to her room early. Collecting her journal and Muggle-style pen, she returned to the Gryffindor common room and slipped out through a window. She settled into an adequately comfortable spot on the roof of Hogwarts castle and took in the view: quad with tiny students, Quidditch stadium, dark, green forest, overcast sky. “So,” she said to the view, “what do I want in my life?” She opened her journal and began writing dreams.

“Seen Alex?”

“Funny you should ask that. Look here.”

Ashlyn followed Ali to a window and leaned out. “Aha.” She leaned back and closed the shutters. “She’s certainly got style.”

“Do you know what she’s up to? Journaling on a castle roof seems either really awesome or really lovesick.”

“It’s some of both,” Ashlyn replied. “I talked to her yesterday about a thing that’s bothering her and she’s got a lot to think about now.”

“Kelley?”

“It seems I’m not the only perceptive one around here,” Ashlyn said.

“Mm-hmm, which is why I’m expecting your next talk to be with me.”

“As soon as I get back from tutoring,” Ashlyn assured her.

“Glad to hear it. Now, how about we split Alex’s Potions equipment and carry it down for her?”

Alex walked in to the Potions classroom with several minutes to spare but the professor, studying something at a desk in the corner, spotted a problem.

“Early is no good without your supplies, young lady. You do own a cauldron, don’t you?”

“We brought her things, Professor,” Ashlyn spoke up from a table near the front. Ali waved Alex to the empty seat next to her. On her other side, Ashlyn sat paired with Kelley.

“You have quite the collection of friends,” the professor observed. “What is your name?”

“Alex Morgan.”

“Well, Ms. Morgan, your Housemates sit at ease with a Slytherin! How the times have changed.”

“Less than you’d think,” Kelley spoke, voice colorless. “It’s really just us Americans who don’t know who to be angry at.”
“You ok, Kelley?” Her tone surprised Alex.

“Yeah, I just got my first dose of Slytherin hate at lunch. Hope crashed the conversation to stand up for me but I’m not sure if she made it better or worse.”

“Hope?”

“Oh, you haven’t met her yet!” Kelley’s eyes lit up at last. “You will later. She’s awesome. Scary awesome, but awesome.”

“Hope Solo?” Ashlyn asked. Kelley nodded. “You should’ve heard the stories the Gryffindor chasers were telling about her last night. They made her sound superhuman!”

“Better get in her good books so she’ll practice with you,” Ali grinned. “She’s your competition, too, Ash.”

“It’s at the top of my priority list, believe me. The sooner I meet her, the sooner I’ll stop having nightmares about a seven-foot-tall demon-keeper with four arms and a permanent starting spot.”

Kelley laughed until her body begged for mercy.

“As fascinating a social study as this is, it is time we got started,” the professor said and stood up from behind the corner desk. Alex noticed something that she’d missed before.

Their professor was hot.

“I am Dr. Valence Couture.” She unfastened her formal faculty cloak and draped it over her chair, revealing a modern, fitted dress shirt tucked into pants tucked into boots, all black. A black cape, lined inside with purple, hung from her right shoulder. “I am Potions Master for Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and the youngest person ever to hold this post.” She smirked. “You may have noticed that my hair is not grey.” Hidden highlights of emerald and violet flashed from her black ponytail as she moved to the front of the room. “The Sorting Hat took four minutes and forty-seven seconds to place me in Ravenclaw over Slytherin, where I played beater for three years,” and had the broad shoulders to show for it, “until I graduated early in 1991.” She had to be a full six feet tall. “I earned a Magister’s in alchemy from Paris Polymagical Institute and a Doctor of Sorcery for my work in paranormal chemistry at Salem Memorial University. I was on course to be the youngest professor ever tenured there when I accepted the offer from Hogwarts.” She arrived at the head of the class and folded her arms. “To you, I am Doctor or Master Couture, whichever inspires more respect.” Her blue eyes – no, they were violet, too – surveyed the first-year students. A corner of her mouth twitched. “I trust you are all suitably terrified.”

Alex was very terrified but it only made her hotter under her collar.

“We start at the beginning. Is potion-making an art or a science?”

The room was silent. “You did all have at least one potions class before arriving here, didn’t you?” Alex tried not to squirm in her seat.

“It’s a science,” a blonde Slytherin girl spoke up.

“Why?”

“Because it has to be for you to earn two degrees in it.”

“Three points for Slytherin for thinking outside the box,” Dr. Couture smiled. “Ten points from
Slytherin for failing to think about the subject of the question.” Alex hoped to never see that smile again. “Someone else?”

Not after that, Alex thought. So did the rest of the class.

“Ms. Morgan.” Alex was a mouse facing a snake. A sexy, violet-eyed snake. “By next class I’ll know everyone’s names, but today you are on the spot. Is making potions an art or a science?”

Alex shut her eyes and made herself think. Potions. Potions are mixtures of ingredients, I think. They combine or react or something. That’s like chemistry. Labs in chemistry were always about comparing results to the math. Do potions work like that? She needed to know and she wasn’t about to ask Dr. Couture. Heart still pounding, she turned to Ali. If it’s a choice between breaking an unspoken rule and looking like a fool on day one…

“Are there magical ingredients which don’t behave predictably? Like, they care what you think about them or have mood swings or something?” She knew the professor would hear but she hoped most of the class wouldn’t.

Ali blinked in surprise but responded. “I-I don’t think so. At least, there can’t be many.”

Alex turned back to Dr. Couture. “I think making a potion can be an art or a science, depending on the person making the potion, but the potions themselves are science.”

“Why?”

Of course she asks why. “Because mixing the same ingredients in the same way makes the same potion.” Alex hoped it was true. “It’s…” she searched for the word from high school, “reproducible. You can put numbers to it and study it.”

She saw a different smile and felt a glimmer of hope. “Ms. Morgan is correct.” Dr. Couture’s smile was small but pleased, maybe even amused. “Do you have some education in the Muggle sciences?”

“Yes.” Alex thought it best to leave out details like ‘and none in wizardry at all.’

“It’s a shame we don’t teach all young witches and wizards to think with that sort of rigor – or, at least, that they can think with that sort of rigor. Ten points for Gryffindor for a well-reasoned response.” Alex let out a breath she didn’t know she was holding. “Five points from Gryffindor for hedging with ‘I think’ when you knew the right answer.” Alex’s eyes widened. “From now on,” Dr. Couture continued, “I expect you all to answer questions – or fail to answer them – on your own. Each of you is responsible for your own education and I will hold you each accountable.”

Dr. Couture turned and walked to the blackboard, pulling something from her shirt as she went. She intoned words in a low voice and then waved her hand, now holding a wand, at the board. The chalk dust on the board migrated to the edges.

“Now, as you all should remember, the fundamental ingredients of any potion are…”

With each flick of her wrist, the dust reformed into words on the board. Alex was too overwhelmed to be impressed.

“Holy shit.” Ali broke the silence as they walked away from the Potions classroom.

“That’s one of my questions answered,” Alex muttered to Ashlyn, who sent her a quick grin.
“She might actually be more intimidating than Hope,” Kelley said, eyes wide. “Did you see where she keeps her wand?” Alex and Ali shook their heads. “She pulled it out of her shirt! Like it was in her bra!”

Ali let out groan. “My god, and did you see her eyes?!”

“They were the only thing I saw in the entire lecture,” Alex confessed. “Our tutor’s job just got even harder.”

“Forget all that,” Ashlyn broke in. “Where does she shop?”

Kelley’s eyes brightened with laughter but, Alex noticed, Ali’s darkened with something else.

Chapter End Notes

When I saw that there was no canon Potions Master post-Deathly Hallows, I decided to make my own. I got a little carried away :P

Anyway, relationships and Quidditch are next! I'm aiming to post new chapters every two days. Comments welcome, as always.
“Until you’re on the team, one of us will have to sign out a broom for you,” Hope explained to Kelley. “It’s annoying but I'm sure we won't have to deal with it for long.” They smiled, Kelley outwardly and Hope inwardly, and joined the others on the practice field.

“So,” Lauren triple-checked, “We wait for a gold curtain, go at two-minute intervals, keep a low profile, and don't make noise getting through the window. Anything else, mastermind?”

“Cover or tuck in the colored parts of your uniforms,” Kelley added.

“Just how big are their windows?” Amy asked.

Kelley hadn't thought of that. “Um…big enough that Ashlyn didn’t mention how big they are. If it were a tight fit, she’d have said so, right?”

Hope saw a flaw in her logic. “How much experience do the Gryffindor girls have on brooms?”

“Alex has about an hour, Ashlyn has…no more than that and Ali has more but I don't know how much.”

Hope didn't give Kelley time to dwell on it. “Tobin, you go first and see if it's safe.” She paused. “That was a compliment, by the way.”

Tobin grinned, “I got you, Hope.”

It turned out to be a tight fit but Kelley made it look easy. Hope, already inside, was impressed. “What did I tell you?” Kelley smirked at her.

“Trust but verify,” Hope replied. “Seriously, though, you looked like you fly through cramped spaces every day.” The corner of her mouth curled upward. “Which is pretty much what you told me.”

“You’ve come a long way since I last saw you on a broom,” Lauren teased. Kelley shot her a warning glare and got a wink in return.

“So, this is how the other half lives,” Amy said, arms folded in mock appraisal.

“It actually looks like you live in a castle!” Kelley flitted about the Gryffindor girls’ room, looking at everything. “Damn, girl, you even have a tapestry in your bathroom! Bath-space.” She poked her head around the screen. “Thing. What do you call it?”

“We mostly just call it ‘the bath,’” Alex admitted.

“Bath, right.” Kelley flushed the toilet to see if it was magic (it wasn't) and came back to the middle of the room. “It’s so…airy! I love the wood rafters! And the wood framing. And the wood floor.

“It’s very ‘fairy tale’,” Tobin agreed. “I think my favorite part is the view. I don’t know of a better one that’s open to students.”

“Ooh, and the candles!” Kelley craned her neck as far back as she could. “They’re beautiful. How
do they make all those different colors?"

“Um, magic,” Amy reminded her.

“Wow, is someone jealous?” Ali teased.

Kelley shook her head. “Yesterday I would’ve been, but I learned to love Slytherin last night.” She smiled appreciatively at Hope.

Ali noticed Ashlyn's eyes widen and poked her. “Right, and you’re Hope Solo,” Ashlyn recovered. “I’ve heard a lot about you.” She extended a hand.

Hope smiled graciously and shook it. “All intimidating, I hope?” Her voice was higher and softer than Ashlyn would ever have thought.

“Very.” Ashlyn let herself smile back.

“Think ’seven-foot-tall, four-armed demon-keeper’,” Ali chuckled.

“Well, I did grow up near a nuclear research site,” Hope laughed with her. ”Don’t let it slip that I’m secretly a human being. What position do you play, Ashlyn?”

Ashlyn considered her for a moment. “Goalkeeper.”

Hope took another second to read Ashlyn’s eyes. “Do you want a World Cup?”

“More than anything.”

“When we win, it’ll be because we pushed each other every day between now and then. Whichever of us is in goal for the championship, we earn it together or not at all.”

Ashlyn held Hope’s eyes for one more beat before relaxing and smiling again. “I’m looking forward to it.” She clasped Hope’s hand once more, then grinned. “I’m coming for you. You’ve been warned.”

Hope smirked. “I’m counting on it.” She looked around at their future teammates. “We’re all counting on it.”

Dinner came too soon. The girls resolved to sit together and picked up where they’d left off: Alex and Ali hung on Hope’s stories of Quidditch and Hogwarts life, Kelley quizzed Tobin about quaffle-handling and Lauren, Ashlyn and Amy talked home and family. It was too soon again when Alex caught Ashlyn’s eye across the table. “We need to get going.”

With Amy's help, Alex and Ashlyn opened the hidden passage to Hogsmeade and went to meet their tutor. “We’re gonna need those brooms Mia wrote about. I do not want to add a walking commute to my schedule,” Alex grumbled.

“Tell me about it. I need to get back in time to have a talk with Ali.”

“Yeah? How is your ‘problem’ going?

“She hasn't been pushing me away, so I'm hopeful.”

“Hopeful for what?” Alex thought she knew but wanted to hear how Ashlyn thought about it.
Ashlyn wrinkled her nose. “Hopeful that she’s interested in being more than friends. Thing is, I’ve only known her for two days. We’ve been around each other almost constantly but that’s still fast to be getting into something serious. So, it’s important we talk.”

“That makes sense,” Alex noted. “If it means anything,” she added, “you two seem like a good combination to me.”

“You think so?” Ashlyn wanted to hear why.

“Yeah. From the outside, it looks like the two of you clicked really well. Like, even when you’re thinking something…’ Alex searched for a word, “risqué, it seems like she’s been on the same page. Not that she was thinking it, too, but she picks up on it right away and she hasn’t reacted negatively. She either reads you really well or thinks a lot like you do.”

“That’s the way it feels to me, too,” Ashlyn agreed. “Still, I won’t know until I hear it from her. But even then, that’s just the easy part. Getting from a ‘click’ to a relationship that works is the challenge.”

Alex mulled Ashlyn’s words. After another minute of echoing footsteps, Ashlyn asked the question back. “How are you doing, Alex?”

Alex sighed, but Ashlyn was encouraged that it was a small sigh. “Remember Dr. Couture?”

Ashlyn chuckled. “I don’t think anyone forgets Dr. Valence Couture.”

“When we were there, I was attracted to her. Like, no ‘maybes’ and not in the abstract.” She began to blush. “At a completely shallow, basic level, I wanted her and I wanted her to want me. Including sexually.” Alex saw Ashlyn eye her with a mix of concern and respect. “I just did,” Alex shrugged. “I was thinking about it on the way back to our room and I realized that I ‘just did’ and that I didn’t want to stop. It’s a desire I have and I want to take it and run with it – in general, I mean,” she clarified, feeling embarrassed. “Not with a woman twice my age.”

“That’s awesome, Alex.” Ashlyn stopped to hug her friend. “Life is so much better when you’re working with want you want instead of against it.”

Alex smiled at the thought. “I’m looking forward to it.” Her smile crinkled. “Does that mean I’m a lesbian?”

“It means whatever you want it to mean.”

“I’m not sure yet what I want it to mean. At first I didn’t feel a need to put a name to it because it’s just who I am. But all of us being in one room reminded me – and I hope this doesn’t sound presumptuous – that I’m going to have an audience one day. I’m not sure what to think about that right now.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” Ashlyn assured her. “I want to be an inspiration to kids who wouldn’t have one, like I didn’t, and I wonder how it would affect my impact if my sexuality is part of my public image.”

“Yeah. It would be nice of it didn’t matter, but it will, so I don’t want to downplay it when there are lots of other girls struggling with their identity. I think that dropping everything and moving overseas made this a lot easier for me, so if I become a public figure, I think I’ll have a responsibility to encourage people who don’t have that luxury. But I also don’t want to have my achievements put out of reach of straight girls because I’m somehow different from them. Like, ‘Oh, well of course Alex Morgan is good at sports, she’s a lesbian.’ It’s not true but I’ve met a lot of people who think like
“Maybe it’s good that we’ve got a few years before we’re in the spotlight,” Ashlyn thought aloud.

“Agreed. But I won't live in the closet until I graduate, either. I don’t want to make a habit of hiding who I am, plus it’d be harder to actually act on it. Which brings me to the other thing I realized.” Ashlyn gave Alex her full attention again. “Right now,” Alex continued, “Kelley isn't everything. I feel kind of uncomfortable that lust for a professor is what sparked this, but just the experience of being attracted to a second woman widened my perspective.”

“Like your entire life’s happiness doesn't hang on getting things ‘right’ with Kelley?”

“Exactly.”

“I’m so glad to hear that, Alex. That’s a really healthy perspective. What do you think is next for you?”

“Well, getting knocked flat by the sexiness that is Dr. Couture saved me months of fretting over my first girl-crush. Now I feel like I can slow down and enjoy getting to know Kelley. And other girls, too.”

“I'm so happy for you. Yesterday I was worried you were starting a downward spiral and now you're…” Ashlyn shook her head. “I’d thank Dr. Couture but I don’t think it would go over well.”

“There's light at the end of the tunnel.” Ashley nodded sagely. “No, really, there is,” Alex laughed and pointed.

“Mia didn’t mention how we’d recognize her.”

“No, but I think we should be able to spot an American professional athlete in a rural Scottish pub on a Monday evening.”

“True.”

Alex and Ashlyn pushed through the door of the Three Broomsticks Inn and looked around for markers of an athlete. The interior wasn’t well-lit, just lit, and the smells of tobacco and hops hung thick in the air. Human anachronisms sipped butterbeer and firewhiskey between mouthfuls of haggis and shepherd’s pie. “The Middle Ages called. They want their robes back,” Alex muttered.

“There’s not much we can say when our uniform includes a cloak embroidered with Gryffindor’s heraldry,” Ashlyn chided. After another moment, she nodded towards the far corner. “Blonde, tight ponytail, Tar Heels hoodie. Furthest booth on the right.”

“That was easy.”

“What’d I tell you? Come on, Seeker, spotting targets is supposed to be your thing!”

Alex stuck her tongue out and then led them forward. The woman, who looked to be a few years out of college, saw them and stood.

“Alex and Ashlyn?” They nodded. “My name’s Lindsay Tarpley.” Her Upper Midwest accent stuck out even more than her hoodie.

“Tobin Heath and I thought we recognized your name,” Ashlyn said as they clapped hands. “I was a keeper at UNC last year.”
“Mm-hmm, Mia Hamm told me about you two. Small world, right?”

Alex rolled her eyes. “No, just literally everybody in soccer goes to UNC.”

“Alex Morgan,” Lindsay smiled. “Mia was very impressed by your first flying lesson.” She shook Alex’s hand and waved for them to sit. “So, let’s do the fun part first.” She gestured at four long boxes on the bench at her side. “Mia Hamm asked me to pick out brooms for you – and generously paid for them. They’re good quality for your level; you’ll keep up with most anyone at Hogwarts but they won’t give you whiplash while you’re learning. The older U.S. girls will outperform you on theirs, but I’ll help you choose your own pro brooms next year.

“Sweet. Thank you so much!” Alex was eager to unpack hers right there but she knew it could wait.

“Do they need breaking in or something like that?” Ashlyn asked.

“A little. There’s a guide to care and feeding in the box,” Lindsay answered. “Now, I bet you want to hear all about pro Quidditch, but I think we should get right to studying today. Rain check?”

They hit the books.

Back at Hogwarts, they found their windows barred and lights off.

“So much for surprising Ali with a grand entrance and her new broom,” Ashlyn grumbled to Alex. “Let’s go the long way.”

They landed in the quad and trekked back up to the Gryffindor common room. Ali was curled up in a chair by the fireplace, sipping hot cocoa and talking Quidditch with Gryffindor’s goalkeeper. She looked up as the pair walked over. “Is it time?”

“It is,” Ashlyn replied.

“Good.” She uncoiled herself and said goodnight to her new friend. Alex dropped into the chair and began picking the keeper’s brain about a seeker’s responsibilities to the rest of the team. He graciously restarted from the beginning.

Once in their room, Ashlyn felt her nerves kick in. “It’s too bad they didn’t put a couch or chairs in here,” she mumbled. As if I needed any help making this uncomfortable.

Ali didn’t reply but hopped up on her bed. She sat back, legs folded, against one of the posts and patted the bed by the opposite post. Ashlyn climbed on across from her.

“I should start by asking if I’ve upset or offended you.”

Ali let her have a small smile. “Thank you for asking. Remember what happened on the train?”

Ashlyn nodded, wary.

“I didn’t blush because you embarrassed me. It was because I saw what you were thinking and I liked it.”

Ashlyn liked the sound of that but the whole point was to not be vague. ‘I…would you be specific, Ali?’

"I liked that you were thinking about kissing me and I liked that it made you blush. If it was nothing to you, you wouldn't have."
“So, is that a ‘no’ to me upsetting you?” Ashlyn smiled; so far, so good.

“It is.”

Now Ashlyn had firm footing. "Well, I was thinking it because I was – am – attracted to you. This next part isn’t gonna sound romantic, Ali, but I think I could really like you.”

"Oh? You don’t already?” Ali covered disappointment with amusement.

"I do, but it doesn’t count when I barely know you."

Ali watched and waited for Ashlyn to put a conclusion to her statement.

Ashlyn got the hint. "But I want to."

_There it is, _Ali thought. "Want to really like me?"

"Want to really know you. Then really like you, if it works for us."

_Right answer. _"You know what? The fact that that matters to you is way more romantic than anything you might’ve said,” Ali smiled at her.

"Does that mean that you li-"

"Stop."

Ashlyn’s eyes widened.

"It's important that I say it. I like you, too, Ashlyn."

Ashlyn enjoyed the moment. “You've been really direct about all this, Ali.”

Ali cocked an eyebrow at her.

“I like it.” Ashlyn was catching on.

“Well, when the stud I knew nothing about took an interest in me,” Ali smirked, “I decided to make her take me seriously or not at all. You're being really pragmatic here, too, by the way."

"Yeah,” Ashlyn sighed. “I was thinking and I realized, whatever we do, we need to be able to play on a team together for the next decade or so. So we need to get this right.”

Ali nodded. "Also not romantic, but wise."

“Right. But, if ‘us’ works, we can ignite the romance any time we want.”

Ali’s cheeks flushed at the thought. It felt warm and she wanted more of it. "Well. Why do you like me, Ashlyn?"

The sudden sensation of vulnerability made Ashlyn look away for a moment. "You...well, it started with thinking you were gorgeous when I met you, but since then you've been so...attentive when we're together." She wrinkled her nose. "I want a better word for it. Thoughtful? Like with the Sorting, you could tell what I was thinking and you cared about it.”

Ali just smiled.

"And that was after I'd given you plenty of reason to keep your distance."
"I wasn't going to not support you."

"That's so much less common than you'd hope. You had to pick up on it first, too. Kelley was right with you and she didn't catch that I was nervous."

"Yeah, but Kelley was-" 

"Don't argue with me about how great you are," Ashlyn grinned. "You're caring and sweet and fun and smart and it's so easy to picture each part of my life with you."


Ashlyn looked at down at her hands. “That’s the thing, I want to dive in with you but I know we need to go slow.”

Ali nodded. “I know. It's easy to forget that I just met you yesterday morning. So, what are we going to do slowly?” She saw Ashlyn's pupils dilate and just smirked at her. “I’m so much better at flirting when it's you listening. Imagine if I were actually trying!”

Ashlyn tried not to imagine. “That might be…counterproductive, at the moment. I think we should focus on getting to know each other. How about this: we spend time together but we don't get romantic about it and we don't make assumptions about how our relationship might be changing.”

“What do you mean by that last part?”

“Like, if you or I feel like we're growing closer, we check in and make sure instead of assuming the other person is on the same page. That way we don't set ourselves up for hurt feelings.”

"Ok. I'm down for that.” Ali considered how it all might play out. “This is so deliberate. It's like professional dating.”

It made Ashlyn smile. “I just can't see mixing pro sports and pick-up dating.”

Ali laughed. “I love that.”

“I know, right?” Ashlyn’s smile was dazzling. “Sometimes the words just fit together perfectly.”

Ali basked in Ashlyn's smile until she realized that she was quoting her. “Oh, you did not…” She felt like melting all over the bedpost and gripped the duvet to stop herself. “Didn’t we just agree not to get romantic?”

“I wasn’t…I’m sorry, I guess I didn’t realize the effect that would have on you.” Ashlyn looked crestfallen. “I just wanted to make you smile.”

Ali shook her head, smile still there. “Well, you did, and that’s most of what romance is, dummy.”

Ashlyn could feel her heart tugging towards Ali and decided that she needed to get off her bed. She tried to find something to do with her things, but there wasn't really anything. She felt bad about the way she'd left the conversation hanging; besides, there was something she still wondered about…

“So, I'm a stud, am I?”

“Tall, strong, tattooed surfer who stole a pair of uniform pants from a boys' room during her first night?”

Ashlyn stared. “No one was supposed to see that. I'm sorry if I woke you, I thought I was being

Ashlyn feared it wouldn’t be so easy.

Entering the Slytherin common room, Amy shook her head. “I still can’t wrap my head around most of what Jessica does,” she admitted.

“If you could, you’d probably be looking for a way to get paid for it,” Hope pointed out, “or, at least, you’d be in Ravenclaw.”

“Yeah, no thanks,” Amy replied. “Still, she’s a way better Quidditch player than I am an engineer.” She chuckled at a new thought. “Oh, wow, she must have a horrible time explaining her internship to people!”

“So, what do you do, Ms. Landström?” Hope pantomimed as they entered their darkened room. “I’m an engineer at Hogwarts Railway.” ‘You drive the train?!’ ‘That’s so cool!’ ‘No, not that kind of—’

Gah!

What the—

Hope scrambled at something on her back. Amy moved to help but the lights were off and she couldn’t see much. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know but – aargh! – it has claws!”

Hope tripped over the foot of a bed and Amy caught her. She felt rapid scratches on her arm, traveling up her shoulder and then something hot and frantic on her head. “Ahhh! What the hell is this?!”

“Oh my god, A-Rod—“

“No! The lights!” Amy waved Hope back. “Get the lights!”

Hope, near panic, yanked her wand from her pocket. It slipped through her fingers and sailed into the dark room. “Shit!”

“What?!”

“I lost my wand!”

“Argh! I’ll try and get at mine!” Amy said as the something continued flailing on her head.

“What the hell is it?!”

“We’re about to find out,” Amy replied as she drew her wand. The thing on her head chose that moment to climb down to her shoulder via her hair. She gasped in surprise and pain and stumbled. Her hands opening by reflex and she heard her wand hit the floor and bounce to her right. She landed on her knees and felt around for it. "Dammit!"

The thing took that as its cue to leap back onto Hope, who swore again. “Get off my sweater vest!”

“Something wrong?” Kelley’s voice came from the doorway.

“Yes!” Amy and Hope yelled together. “Get the lights, Kelley!” “It’s on my face!”
“Lumos fixtura!” The room’s lamps came to life. Everything froze.

Hope was nose-to-nose with a squirrel.

Kelley collapsed on a bed, laughing hysterically. The squirrel dropped from Hope and scampered to join her. Hope wanted desperately to be furious but she couldn't hold onto her anger; a smile cracked her lips instead.

Amy caught her breath and shook her head. “Holy crap, Kelley! I can't believe you brought a squirrel as your familiar!”

Kelley grinned at her. “Variety is the spice of life.”

“You did not just get philosophical about this.”

“Wait a minute,” Hope put the pieces together. “Did you trade rooms with the other first-year?”

“Yep!”

Amy buried her face in her hands and turned away. Hope laughed at both of them. “Were you planning on telling us?”

“I forgot to when we were all together,” Kelley confessed, “and then I couldn’t find you afterwards. When it got late, we had to start moving our stuff or else wait until tomorrow.”

“Just teach the squirrel some manners,” Amy said as she got ready for bed.

“He was fine until we moved here. I think he's just had too much change in the past day and a half, poor thing.” Kelley replied, looking at her squirrel with adorable concern.

“I wonder what he thinks of living underwater,” Hope mused.

“I’m not sure,” Kelley admitted. “Squirrels definitely seem like the type for fresh air and sunshine.” Her face lit up again. “I could take him with me when we visit the others!”

Hope laughed as she imagined how that might turn out. Amy was pragmatic; “Please. It might get his energy out for when we're back here.” Her tone made Hope laugh even more; she felt that she'd laughed more in the past two days than she had in the past month, and it warranted a contented sigh. Amy quirked an eyebrow at her but she pretended not to notice.

“So,” Hope asked, “does your squirrel have a name?”

Kelley looked up from cuddling with the squirrel. “Of course he does,” she answered. Her tone asked how it was even a question.

“Well? What is it?”

“Squirrel!”

Chapter End Notes

Comments welcome, as always.
I'm now a Scrivener user. Managing ~50k words of multi-threaded plot in Microsoft Word stopped being fun.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ali slept lightly that night and woke early to a rare sunny morning. Seizing the moment, she tugged on a simple shirt and running shorts, filled a water bottle and flew out to the Quidditch practice fields. A familiar clatter reached her ears and she followed it to the stadium; sure enough, Kelley O’Hara was running bleachers. Ali waved as she landed but she left her fellow athlete alone and stretched for her own run.

Many laps later, Kelley ended her routine and took a moment to watch Ali finish a rep of explosiveness drills. Ali saw and nodded to her as she caught her breath. “Are those good for Quidditch?” Kelley asked.

“I don’t know,” Ali admitted. “The D.C. region is just too dense and watched for Quidditch. Nobody wants their picture in the Muggle papers under the headline ‘White House evacuated over broom-rider scare.’”

“Yeah, that’d be bad,” Kelley giggled.

“Speaking of brooms, we’ve got one for you. Mia Hamm sent one for each of us via Ashlyn and Alex’s tutor.”

“No way! That’s awesome!” Kelley was a child at Christmas.


“They should ask this Lindsay about fitness and drills.” Kelley looked around at the empty stadium. “Did you see anyone at the practice fields?”

“I didn’t.”

“I would’ve thought the returning players would be out here,” Kelley wondered. “Is Quidditch just not that athletic or is this House stuff not as competitive as they make it sound?”

“I don’t know. But yeah, I’m wondering, too.”

“Twelve-year-old Kelley can’t believe I’m going to say this, but I’m missing the hardcore fitness training already.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. It’s always made me confident but I’m just realizing now how big a thing it is. Like, the training itself, not even the performance afterwards. Pushing my limits every day made me feel powerful.”
Ali nodded. “We’ll definitely find ways to keep our fitness up. It can only help.”

“Did you bring a soccer ball?”

“Maybe…” Ali wasn’t sure if she wanted to admit it. “Did you?”

“Two, plus cleats and twelve of those low cones,” Kelley declared. “I’m tempted to keep practicing the old footwork and ball-control drills.”

“Me, too, at least until we learn more about Quidditch,” Ali replied. “You want to shower before breakfast, right? Take the broom and I’ll jog back. I can give you the box and manual at lunch and then use the one we saved for you.”

“Are you serious? It’s your broom!”

“All four are the same,” Ali replied, “and I want to run some more anyway. Really, take it.”

“Aww, thank you Ali!”

“Of course! And Kelley,” she said as the girl turned away.

“Hmm?”

“Read the manual.”

“I'm not even a student-athlete now, I'm a just a full-time student. Full-time and pulling double shifts.”

“Alex, its Wednesday. We'll get there,” Ashlyn reminded her. “We just gotta get caught up so we don't fail out of here first.”

“Join us in the mornings!” Ali suggested. ”We've been out at the Quidditch grounds before breakfast for cardio yesterday and today.”

“Hasn’t Ash told you? While you and Kelley are keeping up your fitness, we're in the library reviewing for the day's classes! I live with my face in a textbook.”

“Yeah, but really, Alex,” Kelley said, “This is the part where everything you've been taught about making the best use of all your time-“

“Kelley, I am.”

“I know it can feel that way, but-“

“I can prove it. You know that we're being tutored in our classes by a professional Quidditch player, right?”

“Yeah-“

“Ashlyn,” Alex turned on her study partner, “what position does Lindsay play?”

“Cha-“ Ashlyn stopped and furrowed her brow. “No, I just assumed that. We haven't talked about it.”

“What club does she play for?”
“No idea.”

“See?” Alex faced Kelley again. “We’ve spent six hours a in tavern booth with a pro player and we haven’t talked Quidditch at all.”

“Ok, I believe you. I think Ashlyn has the right idea, though; this is day three out of four years of school.” Alex looked like she was going to be sick. “You’ll get caught up! With plenty of time left!” Kelley rushed through the rest of her speech.

“Alright, then, Ashlyn, hit me with some more Harris-wisdom. How come this isn't bothering you the way it's bothering me?”

“What I'm thinking is that, right now, a goalkeeper’s patience is more helpful than a forward’s drive.”

“Ugh.” It was half growl and half sigh.

“To be fair, I think that’s just you, Ashlyn,” Ali pointed out.

“Look on the bright side,” Kelley said with a mischievous grin. “We have potions today. You get to see Dr. Couture again.”

Alex made what she desperately hoped was a blank stare. “Huh?”

“Oh, come on, I saw the way you were looking at her,” Kelley replied and gave her a suggestive look.

Alex's immediate thought was that she wished the look was really meant for her. All mental activity froze.

Ali, alert, drew attention away: “If you did, Kelley, it's because you were the one person in the room who wasn't looking at her that way.”

Kelley couldn’t deny it but she couldn’t think of anything else to say, either.

“Oh, yeah, I saw how wide your eyes were when we left. She bowled you over same as everyone else,” Ashlyn, smirking, admonished. “How 'bout you take a lesson from your squirrel and look before you leap next time?”

The arrival of Amy and Tobin rescued Kelley from speechlessness. “Good morning, New New Kids. We'd like to have another group gathering to talk about getting you started in Quidditch this weekend.”

"Fucking finally," Alex said under her breath.

It took Tobin by surprise. “Wow, Alex, tell us how you really feel.”

“Sorry,” Alex sighed, “it’s just been all work and no play all day every day since classes started. We haven't even talked about Quidditch with Lindsay Tarpley.”

“Ouch,” Amy sympathized.

“Yeah. Apparently, I'm also not the most patient person in the world.”

“Well you know what they say about seekers: faster than lightning and just about as patient.”
“Really?”

“They do now,” Amy smiled.

“Anyway, does the same time and place work for you?” Tobin asked.

It did and they broke up to go to their first classes. Alex's mood was better already, while Kelley soured at the thought of, as she put it, “Chalk-Wasting 101.” A clapping noise behind Alex caught her attention; behind her, Ashlyn and Ali were grinning about something. “You totally just high-fived over getting Kelley off me, didn’t you?”

Ali bit her lip, unsure whether to be embarrassed or pleased with herself, and ended up just looking adorable. Ashlyn smiled and said, “Teamwork. You’re welcome.”

Amy was late to the spire room. “Sorry, I got held up by my Charms professor.” The others, utterly distracted by Kelley’s squirrel, took a moment to notice her. She leaned her broom against the wall and turned to them again. “Where’s Hope?”

Lauren, holding Squirrel, looked up just long enough to answer. “We thought she was with you.” It was enough of a distraction for the squirrel to squirt out of her hands and climb up a post to the upper frame of Alex’s bed. Tobin kicked her shoes off and climbed after it.

“No.” Amy grinned as she watched her friends cope with Kelley’s frenetic familiar. “I haven’t seen her since…oh, I bet I know where she is. Would one of you Gryffindor girls run to the library and save me the trouble of going the long way?” Alex nodded, desperate for any reason to actually run. “She’s probably at a table way in the back left corner. Ask Librarian Pince if you need help.” Alex yanked the trap door open, pulled her shirt sleeves over her palms and slid down the ladder.

“What was that you said about lightning bolts?” Kelley chuckled.

“SLOW DOWN, young lady! You could hurt yourself or, worse, one of my books. You’ll get hurt either way, really.”

Alex reined it in. “Sorry, Madam Pince. Do you know if Hope Solo is in here somewhere?”

The librarian blinked in surprise. “I’m not sure, but I know where she’ll be if she is.” She led Alex through rows and twists of shelves to a sizeable – and refreshingly non-ancient – desk in a secluded corner. Hope sat with Jessica Landström, one arm across the back of the grad student’s chair. Hope flipped between pages in several books, some archaic and leather-bound and others modern Muggle hardcovers. Jessica was working on a pad of light-green graph paper, occasionally glancing up to ask a question or read a passage Hope found for her. One of those questions must’ve been about more than school, because Alex saw Hope flash her eyes and wiggle her brows suggestively in response. It took Alex a second to realize that, though they were speaking to each other, she couldn’t hear them.

“A-HEM!” Madam Pince cleared her throat in exaggerated fashion.

Hope and Jessica looked up; Alex could see Hope say ‘Alex?’ in surprise. Jessica flicked her wrist and this time she could hear Hope: “Alex?”

“Hey, Jessica. Hope, we have a meeting.”
“Oh, shi- crap,” she corrected with a glance at the librarian. “Crap. I’m so sorry, I lost track of time.” She stood up. “Sorry, Jess.”

“It’s fine.” She smiled at Alex. “Don’t keep my muse away for too long.”

Alex didn’t understand Jessica’s words but her smile felt right, so she mirrored it before they walked back. “What did she mean, her ‘muse’?”

“Oh, that,” Hope shrugged. “We’re always bouncing ideas off each other for better Quidditch brooms and other ‘hey, wouldn’t it be cool if’ sorts of things. Just now we were looking into making a magic broom handle that you can’t let go by accident. My idea, her technical skills – muse.”

“Cool idea.”

“Yeah, but it also needs to not rip your arms off.”

As they left, Alex heard Madam Pince mutter, “A Gryffindor first-year summoning a Slytherin senior. Now I’ve seen everything.”

“Yes! FINAaaaalllyyyyy…”

Ali and Kelley, last to leave the room after the meeting ended, shook their heads as Alex’s shout faded towards Hogsmeade. “Someone had a lot of frustration to release,” Kelley smirked.

Ali laughed. “Someone knows her true calling in life,” she replied. “As soon as Alex gets over this hurdle, she’ll be off to the races. I hope Lindsay Tarpley can join us on Saturday,” she added. “I don’t know how much the others can teach her about playing seeker.”

“We’d better hope so, or else we’ll be dealing with Grumpy Alex for at least another week. Where do you want to study for Charms?” She changed the subject.

“I’m thinking the library? It’s a good atmosphere for focusing.”

“Cool, I’ll meet you there,” Kelley said as she mounted her broom.

“Alright, I’ll get us a table somewhere in the back.”

Kelley, roaming the stacks in search of Ali, was beginning to fear she was lost when she heard a voice.

“Oh, you know it.”

It was Hope’s voice. She froze.

It was dripping sex.

Mouth dry and pulse elevated, Kelley walked toward the end of the shelf.

“I’m sorry, Jess, am I too much for you?” Hope’s tone was unchanged and it froze Kelley again. She heard a noise that might’ve been a ‘Ja’.

“Alright, I’ll stop.” There was a pause and then Hope spoke again, in reply: “That’s what happens when you burn the midnight oil studying Midnight Oil, silly.”
“Some sympathy I get from you.” This time, Jessica Landström’s voice made it to Kelley’s ears.

“Yeah, well, don’t whine to a goalkeeper,” Hope’s voice was good-natured. “We should probably get back to work.”

“Ugh.”

“Hey, you’re the one who asked me to stop just now,” Hope teased.

Kelley had heard enough. She turned and power-walked down another aisle. She was starting to think that she might really be lost this time when she stumbled across Ali at a desk.

“Careful! We don’t want to spill these inkwells they make us use,” Ali warned. “Wait, Kelley, are you okay?”

Kelley shook her head but refused to say anything more.

Chapter End Notes

Comments welcome, as always.
Surprises

Chapter Notes

If you’re curious and/or like visuals, the footwork drills in the second scene come from here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m_umL5_damU
and the figure-eight ball exercise is from Kelley, here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YSjIuN5lhV4

(about 60 seconds of relevant video) x (24 frames per 1 second of video) x ("a picture is worth 1000 words") = 1,440,000 words saved from this chapter! ;)

Kelley hadn’t meant to sit facing the entrance to the Great Hall, but she had. She hadn’t wanted to see Hope and Jessica walk in to breakfast together, but she did. She told herself she wasn’t relieved when they split and headed for different tables, but she was. She definitely hadn’t wanted Hope to sit across from her, but it was the last seat in their cluster of Slytherin students and Hope took it.

Kelley really, really didn’t want to ask Hope her question, but Amy was absorbed in chatter with two second-years on her other side and oblivious to all else. She kicked herself for forgetting to ask yesterday.

“Hope.”

“Mmm?”

"What fitness training do you and th- Amy do for Quidditch?” Kelley remembered she was sitting with all Slytherins and caught herself.

Hope looked at Kelley and their companions for a moment. "Sorry, that’s actually a team secret." Kelley was almost sure that Hope winked at the word 'team'. "House Slytherin has to hold onto every edge it has, so the team can’t risk other Houses overhearing something. We know it’s not fair to you or anyone else who wants to make the team, so at tryouts we look for potential and motivation, not just performance.”

Kelley did not like that but she could hardly argue with the reasoning, and Hope’s look was encouraging…with a dash of mischief? Kelley’s words were the same either way: “Fine, have it your way. I’ll show you potential and motivation.” Amy’s conversation opened up and she dove in.

Hope hung back as the group got up from breakfast. “Oh, by the way, Amy had something she wanted to show you. Come with me.”

Amy had just left. She did wink, Kelley realized, and followed along.

Hope led her upstairs, up more stairs, up seven flights of massive castle stairs, around corners and into an empty corridor. She stopped in front of an ancient floor-length tapestry. “When I said training was a team secret,” Hope smirked, “I wasn’t talking about Slytherin.” She turned to face the bare wall and spoke to it. “I need our training room.” A door faded into existence. Hope swaggered over
and pulled it open. Kelley’s eyes bulged.

The room inside was palatial. White columns supported the ceiling on a grid of arches and vaults. Opposite the door, a modest hearth lent a homey contrast. At least, it would have, if the room weren’t half-full of modern fitness equipment and sports paraphernalia. Treadmills, punching bags, resistance machines, weight benches and racks upon racks of free weights of every kind occupied the middle of the room. To the right, a tangle of copper pipes sprouted from behind a partition. To the left, a ghostly model of a Quidditch stadium hovered above the floor.

“No. Fucking. Way.”

“I thought you’d like it. We were saving it for a surprise on Saturday,” Hope smiled. “I don’t think I’ve heard you swear before.”

“Awesome-shock, cleats-up fouls and stubbing a toe will do it. Is that a locker room?”

“No locks but yes, showers and all the rest.”

“Wow,” Kelley was in awe. “Just wow. Yeah, no wonder it’s a secret. Who built all this? You and the other three?”

“Actually, the room did.”

“The room?”

“Yeah. Magic. If you need something, you can come to that spot in the hallway and think about your need and the room will provide it. As long as no one’s already inside, you can use it or ask for any room it’s created before.” Hope gestured to the equipment. “Even with magic, there’s no way we’d choose to build a weight room on the seventh floor.”

“That is so amazing.”

“I know. The lockers even have our names on them.”

“Wow- wait, does it have mine?”

“No, sorry.” Hope stopped. “At least, it didn’t last week.”

Kelley was off like a shot. “It does! ‘O’Hara’, right here! And ‘Morgan’, and ‘Harris,’ and ‘Krieger’.” Hope heard a shower start and stop again. Kelley, awe giving way to fascination, wandered back through the room, inspecting everything. “And this…hologram thing?”

“We call it ‘the map’. Jessica insisted it wasn’t really a hologram and wouldn’t let it go.”

Kelley looked up sharply. “Jessica’s in on this?”

Hope nodded, a bit surprised at Kelley’s reaction. “Yeah, didn’t you see ‘Landström’ in there?” Kelley shook her head. “She’s spent a lot of time here studying stuff the room’s created. Why?”

“You said it was a ‘team secret’.”

“It is, but it was partly her idea. She’s the one who knew about the room. The proper name for it is ‘Room of Requirement’, but that’s too long.”

“Oh. I guess that’s fair.”
“And Jessica’s good at keeping her mouth shut. As proud as she is, she’s got her sights set on patents.”

Kelley decided she’d have to live with it. “Well, this answers my question about if athleticism matters in Quidditch.”

“It matters if you plan on winning, but a lot of players who grow up using magic for everything don’t learn that. When Lauren and I caught on,” Hope grinned sideways at Kelley, “we decided to keep it to ourselves for a year. Now that I’m a captain and the New Kids are starters, we’re going to push fitness in our teams so that we all keep growing.”

“Good. I was worried.”

Hope was curious about that but they had places to be. “It’s time we got to class, unfortunately. We’ll talk exercises and quaffle-handling after dinner.”

Kelley missed Hope at dinner and in the Slytherin dorm afterwards. Deciding to make the most of her time, she grabbed her bag of soccer equipment and went to the Quidditch grounds. She stretched, ran warm-up laps, then laid out her cones and was into her fourth variation of sprint-agility transitions when she heard her name. She finished the last group of front-to-backs and bolted the remaining fifteen yards to the scoring area before looking up to see who it was.

It wasn’t Hope, nor any of the other American students. Kate from Magical Theory and the assorted students from lunch on the first day were watching her. “Hey!” She waved and caught her breath. “What’s up?”

She got an odd silence in reply, then four questions at once:

“What are you doing?” “Where’s your school uniform?” “How do you move so fast?!” “What’s with your stomach?”

They answered three of their questions themselves: “She changed to not get it sweaty.” “She’s clearly been practicing this stuff for a long time.” “Do you seriously not know what abs are?” “But for real, Kelley, what are you doing?”

“Footwork drills for soccer. You might call it football.”

“You mean the Muggle sport?” “Why aren’t you preparing for Quidditch tryouts?” “Footwork?” “Drills?”

“Yeah, I played football before I came here. Someone was supposed to work with me on Quidditch skills, but they’re haven’t shown. I’m keeping up my fitness with what I know instead.” Once again, they didn’t seem to know what she was talking about.

“I’m not sure that the House teams spend much time spend much time on…mundane exercises,” Kate said.

“I don’t know much about Quidditch yet,” Kelley replied, “but I bet they will once I’m done with them.”

“What were those steps you were doing?” Kelley saw that the Gryffindor girl was sincerely curious and forgave her bluntness.

“Front-to-back’s. Here,” Kelley led them back to the cones. “Imagine lines between the pairs of
cones. You run, stop before the line, then you step over the line with both feet and then back again. Do that five times and then run to the next line and repeat. The point is to change between sprinting hard and keeping light on your feet."

Gryffindor put on a game face. “I wanna try it.”

“I know,” Kelley grinned. “Go for it.”

She got set and went for it. Kelley heard a muffled “Damn” after her first few light steps; in the second group, she broke off and went through the steps slowly. “This is even harder than it looks,” she said admiringly.

“You’re doing well for a first try,” Kelley encouraged her. The girl gradually increased the pace and then went back to the start. She charged at the cones again.

“Keep it light! Pick your feet all the way up!” Kelley called to her. She nodded without looking up and continued, confidence growing. Coming from the third set, she put on all the speed she could muster — and fell flat on her back when she tried to stop for the fourth.

“Ok, Kelley, tell me how that part isn’t magic,” she demanded with a grin.

Kelley met it with her own. “Cleats.” She lifted a foot to show the spikes.

Ravenclaw laughed. “Of course! Classic Muggle solution.”

Gryffindor groaned but recovered and raised a challenging eyebrow. “So, prickle-boots, what do you have to show for all of your practicing?”

Kelley smirked and thought about how to show off. “This is the sort of series drill we might do in a team practice, with lots of balls and people to return them, except I’m going to make it way flashier and use a lot more of the field.” She rearranged the cones and placed the first ball, then carried the second halfway back to midfield.

Alright. Kelley dribbled the first ball toward the goals and accelerated to her maximum speed, her feet a blur between touches. At the edge of the scoring area in front of the left goal, she squared and shot, curling the ball to the right. It just missed the rightmost goal post. Kelley shuffled fast along the edge of the scoring area to two cones in line with the center post for a set of rapid crossovers. Those done, she faced right and burst a few more yards to her second ball and a grid of cones. Using each surface of her feet in succession, she tapped the ball in a figure-eight through the grid, twice, flicked it behind her with her toe, pivoted and struck, this time curving it to the left. The ball clipped the far inside edge of the left, lowest hoop on its way through.

“Yeah!” It deserved a fist pump, so Kelley gave it two.

“Dude!” Hufflepuff was impressed.

“Wow, do you dance, too?” Slytherin was as well, though more by the footwork than the shots.

“I love how you put spin on it. That was so cool,” Ravenclaw grinned.

Gryffindor nodded approvingly. “If you learn to play Quidditch as well as you do that, you’re gonna be really dangerous.”

“Then watch out. I’m going to be better.” If my coach would show up. Did something happen to Hope?
“Um, wow,” Kelley glanced up from her new broom's manual. “Thank you for forcing to read this.”

“I had a feeling you wouldn’t.” Amy smirked but it was a pleasant smirk.

“I'm sorry I didn’t make it, Kelley.” Hope walked into their room. The two looked up, concerned. “I brought you the next best thing.” Hope held out a handful of books; she looked just fine. Kelley took the books and scanned the covers.

“Physics of Flight...Aviation Weather...Fighter Combat: Tactics and Maneuvering?! Hope, I’m a nineteen year-old girl with a broomstick, not the guy from *Top Gun.*”

“I know, Kelley; it’s just the first few chapters of each that are valuable. With the first book, you just need a conceptual understanding of the forces on you. Quidditch matches aren’t postponed for weather, so that’s what the second one's for. As for that one,” Kelley pretended her frown was for the military book, “yes, it’s ninety-nine percent irrelevant but the rest is solid gold. It’s the definitive word on how to chase to someone else in the air. Mia Hamm’s father was in the Air Force,” Hope added, misreading Kelley’s look.

Kelley didn’t hear; she was busy trying to keep her temper down. “Hope,” she took a breath and looked her in the eye, “I really don’t give a damn right now. I've got all year to study. What I need is someone to train with.”

“I know, and studying these will put you years ahead of the other House tea-.”

“No, you clearly don’t know. What difference does the weather make when I don’t even know how to play the ball?”

“Kelley-“

“Hope,” she cut her off again, “I could’ve spent this afternoon learning to handle a quaffle from anyone in our little group, including actual chasers who are probably better at it than you, but you volunteered. I waited for you at dinner, then down here, and then I did soccer drills at the practice field so I’d at least get something from my time while I waited. I’ve been worrying that you had an emergency or something. Now I’m another day closer to House tryouts with nothing to show for it. Do you get that I’m mad?”

Hope caught a warning glance from Amy and counted to five.

“Yes. You’re right and I’m sorry, Kelley. I should’ve tried to get word to you somehow so you could get with one of the others.”

“What kept you?”

“I got caught up in something with Jess that couldn’t wait.”

“Are you two joined at the hip or something?”

Her bitterness surprised Hope. *This is the part where I go ask Amy for help, but we’re all right here. Fuck.* She tried to think what the issue could be but remained just as confused. “No, we’re not joined at the hip,” she ventured. “We’ve just been together here for three years and grown close.” Hope was even more surprised when Amy, not just Kelley, gave her a doubtful look; that was too much to handle. She bailed: “I- Kelley- I promise I’ll make things right with you, but I really, really need to talk to just Amy right now.”
“Fine. Start by keeping that one.” Kelley snatched her broom and stalked out.

Chapter End Notes

Comments welcome, as always!
Tap-tap! Tap-tap-tap!

Alex looked up from her journal to see Kelley hovering outside a window. She unlatched it and the Slytherin girl alighted on her floor. “Hey, Kelley. What brings you back here so late?”

Kelley looked around the room and asked her own question. “Where are Ali and Ashlyn?”

“How’s hanging out somewhere. Is something wrong?”

Kelley turned back to Alex. “Yeah. Nothing to do with them. Or you. It’s Hope.”

Alex nodded and tried to think helpful thoughts, instead of ‘Kelley just showed up at my bedroom, Kelley just showed up at my bedroom’. “Do you want to sit down?” seemed like a good start.

“Right.” Kelley looked around again and decided on the floor; she sat back against Alex’s bed and Alex settled against the wall next to her.

“No squirrel?”

Kelley started and looked guilty. “No, I was too angry to think of him. I wish I had. He’d help my mood a lot.”

Alex’s impulse was to slide over to Kelley and put an arm around her but she second-guessed herself. Am I thinking that because I care for her or because I want her?

“What happened? Or what can I do for you?”

Kelley sucked in air through her nose, clenched and unclenched her jaw, and let the breath out through her mouth. “Hope ditched me. She said she’d start teaching me Quidditch fundamentals after dinner today and then she just didn’t show up. Hours later, after I’ve looked for her and worried about her and resigned myself to doing soccer drills instead, she waltzes into our bedroom, gives me the world’s least-sincere apology and hands me some books on flying. Like, as if books are a substitute for learning by doing.” She got mad again. “And not even on broom-flying! They were Muggle books about flying airplanes! Who cares about that?!”

“My god, Kelley, she just totally blew you off?”

“Yes!” She said it as if the word stung her.

Alex finally decided that Kelley needed a comforter more than she needed to have the right motivation to be one. She slid over and pulled Kelley in with an arm around her shoulders. Kelley immediately snuggled into her side. Alex focused on focusing.

“The worst part is,” Kelley went on, “I don’t want to hate her. I—”

“Whoa, stop. How is that a bad thing?”

“I…that’s not what I wanted to say. What I meant is that I am really, really mad at her and she deserves it, so I want to stay mad, but I also know she’s…she’s just better than this, so I want to not be mad at her.”

Alex didn’t know what to do other than keep holding Kelley. I feel like I should respond to that, though. What would Ashlyn say?
“Are you worried that, if you forgive her and stop being mad, she won’t think it’s a big deal to you? Like, she’ll think its okay to blow you off?”

“Kinda, yeah.”

“Something my mom said a lot when we were little,” Alex told her, “was that the point of forgiving someone is that they thing they did wasn’t right. Apologizing and forgiving is like an agreement that what they did was wrong but that you both want to be at peace again.” She thought more. “Sorry if that sounds really basic.”

“Five points from Gryffindor for hedging your answer,” Kelley smiled.

Alex smiled back, warm and fuzzy for a moment. “What I mean is-“

“Wait, sorry, tangent: did I upset you the other day at breakfast?”

“Oh, that. Yeah, a bit. I didn’t like being singled out, especially…” Well? Am I gonna own this or not? “Especially since that was only the second time I've ever been attracted to a woman and I was only just coming to grips with that. Ash and Ali knew, which is why they pushed back.”

Kelley’s eyes grew wide and she sat up. “Omigosh, Alex, I had no idea. I am so sorry. That must've been the last thing you needed then.”

“I forgive you, Kelley.”

Kelley smiled like a child and relaxed into Alex again. “So, before I interrupted you?”

“Yeah. If you and Hope agree that she treated you wrong, then forgiving her and letting go of being angry can help bring out what’s better in her. If she’s not on the same page, you might forgive her anyway so that you can stop feeling angry. Grudges suck. They’re like poison.”

Kelley nodded along. “Yeah, you’re right. What is it they say? Everything I need to know I learned in kindergarten – or would’ve if I’d paid attention.” She grinned, but it faded fast and her speech darkened. “I take it back, the worst part is actually that she ditched me for Jessica.”

“Did she say that?”

“She said she got caught up doing something with ‘Jess’ that ‘couldn’t wait’,” Kelley frowned.

“Yeah, ok. When Hope was late to our meeting and I went to find her, she was in the library with Jessica, helping her with a pet project for better Quidditch broom handles. She just lost track of time. I bet the same thing probably happened with you. It’s still wrong of her but I definitely wouldn’t take it personally.”

“Yeah? Was that all they were doing?”

Alex caught Kelley’s meaning. “Um, it did look like Jessica said something…flirty to Hope right as I found them. How does that change my point?”

“I heard them say a lot more than that after Hope went back to the library.” Kelley’s voice rose in frustration. “Are they a couple or not?!”

Alex could almost hear Ashlyn asking her next question. “Kelley, the question that matters for you is ‘why do you want to know?’ Why is not knowing bothering you?”

Kelley drew away from Alex. To the surprise of both, Alex pulled her back. “You didn’t fly all the
way up here so you could run away when it got hard. I’m not letting go of you until you’ve answered that question, at least to yourself.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You don’t have to tell me, but it seems like you don’t want to think about it, either.”

Kelley looked up at her with weak eyes.

Alex had a question and, again, she wondered if it came from care or desire. “Kelley…” It hurt to ask. Ok, that’s definitely my self-interest talking. If I ask, she might never…but I’ll hate myself if I don’t. “Kelley, do you like Hope?”

Kelley burrowed her face into the crook of Alex's neck and croaked, “No.”

Alex wasn’t convinced. “I’m not sure I believe you.”

“I don’t like her.”

A wet spot on Alex's collar said otherwise.

Alex held tighter. “Why deny it, Kelley?”

She felt Kelley’s jaw working. “Because…because there's no point.”

“No point?”

Kelley nodded against her. “How…why…there’s no way she'll like me if she's already with J-Jessica.”

“And you think she is, but you don't know for certain,” Alex continued, Kelley nodding confirmation, “so you don’t want to let go and it hurts.”

“What am I going to do?” Kelley moaned into Alex’s neck. “I just switched into her room so I can’t even avoid her now.”

Alex was growing more confident in her role. “I guess you gotta decide if you want to find out if Hope and Jessica are a thing.”

“How am I going to find out?”

“Ask. Hope or Amy?”

Kelley groaned at the thought. “Amy, I guess. I don’t think I can handle Hope feeling sorry for me.”

Alex nodded, understanding. “That sounds best.” She thought back to the event that set Kelley off. “I see. You couldn’t not take it personally, whether it was actually intentional or not, when Hope chose Jessica over you. Is part of the reason you want to be mad at her to try and show how her much she matters to you?”

Kelley nodded again. “It doesn’t sound as good when you put it that way.”

Alex smiled. “I don’t think that’s ever worked for anyone, Kelley.” Something else was bothering her, though: “A moment ago, you said there was no point in liking Hope, but if it's just about Jessica then you see a slim chance. Is there something else?”
Kelley swallowed hard and Alex knew she'd hit the mark again. “Wh-Why would she ever have feelings for me? I mean she's older and about to graduate and she’s so…just…” she trailed off into a sob. It broke Alex's heart – for mostly the right reasons – to see Kelley come undone. She wrapped Kelley in a full hug and the girl just about climbed into her lap. Alex was at the edge of her comfort zone but this seemed to be what Kelley needed, so she pushed through it. “You really like her, don’t you?”

“I was starting to.” Kelley raised her head to look at Alex. “A lot. Great, isn't it?”

“Aww, Kelley, the last thing you want is a bad attitude on top of this.”

“Like it matters.”

“Kelley!” Alex was shocked. “Are you back in denial again?”

“No.”

Alex grinned at her and she managed a weak smile back. "Kelley…you know what ‘tough love' is?”

“It’s that thing parents and coaches always talk about right before they tell you to suck it up.”

“Kelley,” I can't believe I'm about to say this, “if you want to stop hurting, you need to need to either let Hope show you if she can have feelings for you or else get over yours for her. Both of those might hurt more than you do now but those pains will end. The way you are now, you could stay miserable forever.”

Kelley sat up and looked at her. “You don’t mess around.”

“Honestly, that surprised me, too,” Alex admitted. “I’ve just been asking myself, ‘What would Ashlyn say?’ this whole time.”

“I’ll make sure I thank her in the morning,” Kelley managed to smile.

“Is there anything else she can do for you tonight?” Alex wanted to keep Kelley's flicker of good humor alive.

“I don’t know. I’ve got a lot to deal with as is. Thank you.” She wiped her eyes and stood up. Alex followed. “It means a lot to me tha- oh, wow, your shirt…”

There was a big damp patch on Alex's collarbone. “It's nothing,” Alex said, “I’m about to change for bed anyway.” That reminded her of the feelings she’d just managed to shelve, which made her uncomfortable again.

Kelley sensed her shift in attitude and thought it was a cue to say goodnight. She collected her broom and adjusted her cloak; the signs of departure prompted Alex to speak. “Kelley- don’t forget that-something I learned from being attracted to Dr. Couture is that there are lots of people who you might be interested in. If things a don't go your way with Hope-“

Kelley shook her head. “One hopeless crush at a time.” The weight returned to her shoulders; she shrugged as if to keep it off. “Alex, thank you for being here and letting me sprawl sobbing all over you. You’re the best and I'll never forget it.” She wrapped Alex in an incredible hug and then was gone out the window.

Alex stood there, watching the night sky, until she heard the trapdoor open and a pair of feet on the ladder behind her. “Ashlyn,” she asked without turning around, “is it hard for you to take your own
advice sometimes?"

"Yes," Ali’s voice answered.

Alex turned around.

“I got us kicked out of the library,” Ashlyn muttered.
“Listen, Hope, there are two ways to look at this and both of them are really fucking simple. First way: would you cut practice with the Quidditch National Team for whatever you were doing with Jessica?”

“N-Oh, shit.”

“Correct. Second way: is it worth burning your bridge with Kelley for an evening with Jess?”

“See, this is what I’m confused abou-“

“Yes or no, Hope.”

“No! Amy, I am really confused and kind of worried by the way you’re talking about me and Jess. That look you gave me when I told Kelley we were just friends-“

“Hope, that is not what you told Kelley and it’s not the way you act around Jessica.”

“We’ve talked about this before, Amy.”

“I know, and you said that you came here alone and needed someone to bond with, became BFF’s with Jess, then mixed in some ‘playful, no-strings’ flirting to get some stress-relief in your week. You told me you two were secure as ‘just friends’ because you were both dedicated to playing for your national teams on opposite sides of the world.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“Hope, she chose engineering over Quidditch and came back for her magister’s.”

“So?”

“Seriously, Hope? The thing that defined your boundaries is gone now.”

Hope opened her mouth to reply but stopped and swung it closed, slowly, while she reassembled her thoughts. “I honestly didn’t even notice. We’ve been doing our thing for so long that I don’t think about it anymore.”

“That’s probably a good thing, Hope, but you need to think about it now.”

Hope heaved an ugly sigh. “Dammit. I don’t want anything to change.”

Amy rubbed her friend’s shoulder. ”I understand, Hope. I’m a big fan of your friendship with Jess.”

“I need to go talk to her.” Hope shifted to stand up.

“I’m sure it’ll go just fine,” Amy smiled, then tugged Hope back down. “There’s something else you need to consider first, though.” She pursed her lips. “Two somethings.”

“What are those?”

Amy looked at Hope for a long moment. “Are you sure that you don’t want anything to change with Jessica?”
Hope stared at her, then closed her eyes and leaned her head back. “I wish you hadn’t asked that.”

“I’m sorry, Hope, but I wouldn’t be your friend if I didn’t prepare you to hear that question from her, no matter how unlikely it is.”

“A moment ago I was thinking that this couldn’t get any heavier.” Hope took a deep breath in and let it out again. “No, I’m sure. I’ve known her for three years now and she’s not who I’m looking for.”

Amy nodded. “Good that you know. Now, the other thing…”

Hope watched her. “I’m about to eat that comment, aren’t I?”

“Do you remember how we got on this topic?”

Hope followed the trail back. “…Kelley.”

“What on earth were you thinking when you brought her those books?”

“I was thinking about how she’s always so curious and eager to learn-”

Amy shook her head. “What were you thinking when you brought her those books, Hope?”

Hope stopped herself mid-glare and focused her attention inward. Her insides didn’t want the attention and pushed back. Amy saw the struggle and intervened; “Are you gonna wimp out on me?”

Hope let her have the rest of the glare, then sighed. “I was partly trying to stop her from hating me but mostly trying to make myself feel better. There. Fuck you, A-Rod.”

“Don’t shoot the messenger,” Amy smiled and returned a hand to Hope’s shoulder.

“Sorry, Amy. I owe Kelley two apologies, then.”

Amy nodded. “Why did you ditch her, Hope?”

“Habit,” Hope confessed. “Jessica wanted me to come look at an experiment she was doing – another of our ideas, trying to make broom handles hard to let go of by accident – and the potion she’d mixed to prepare the wood had an extremely short shelf-life. When I told Kelley it ‘couldn’t wait’, I meant it literally. Anyway, I said ‘yes’ automatically, since I’ve never had to say ‘no’ before - she knows my schedule with classes and Quidditch. Of course, we didn’t quite get the results we wanted, so we tried a few changes, then a few more. Next thing I knew, it was after dark and I’d forgotten about Kelley for four hours. I grabbed the books from our training room and you saw the rest.”

“If you could do it over, what would you do?”

“I’d tell Jessica that I had a commitment and to let me know how it went at breakfast.” Hope sighed. “This shouldn’t have been hard at all.”

“Telling Kelley all that would go a long way to fixing things,” Amy observed. “I think you’ll be fine, again. If you two don’t get better at communicating, though, I’m gonna start charging by the hour.”

Hope punched her shoulder and left to find Jessica.
"Which came first, the phoenix, or the flame?"

“African or European?” Hope grumbled.

The aquiline door knocker made no reply.

*Well, it was worth a try.* Hope leaned against the opposite wall and waited for a Ravenclaw native to appear.

Soon, two purple-trimmed second-years returned from the library. “Would you tell Jessica Landström I want to talk to her?”

“Uh…”

“Sure,” the second one said, preferring not to ask questions. He turned to the eagle knocker.

“What is black and white and red all over?”

“A newspaper.”

The door opened.

Hope stared. *Why the fuck didn’t I get that one?*

In a minute, Jessica emerged. “What brings you, Hope?”

“I, um…we…need to talk.”

Jessica looked at her, concerned.

“Ugh, I didn’t want to lead with that,” Hope slumped her shoulders and looked down. “Everything’s good. Great. It’s just, Amy pointed out to me that, well, you’re still here- shit, I’m bad at this.”

“Hope, what is wrong?”

“Probably nothing. Hopefully. Look, it’s just- remember when we started the flirting thing?”

Jessica nodded, wary.

*Oh, fuck the build-up.* “I want to stay friends. With you. No change because you aren’t aiming for Sweden’s national team now.”

“Oh.” Jessica looked relieved. “Ja, yes, of course.”

“Ohthankgod,” Hope sighed.

“Hope, we are fine,” Jessica smiled and embraced her friend. “Now, I have new thoughts about the broom-handle matter…”

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Hours later, after Jessica admitted defeat in the extra-grip broom project, Hope returned to the Slytherin dorm. The moonlight, since the night she’d first reconciled with Kelley, forced her to step carefully through the common room. It took long enough that her eyes began to adjust; she noticed that one of the couches’ silhouettes was the wrong shape and she made a detour to see why.

Someone was curled up on the couch. Hope paused and gave her eyes another minute to resolve the details: A broom, a curved nose, a reflective trace on a freckled cheek – tears. “Oh, Kelley…”
Why can’t I ever get it right with her?

Hope wanted to wake her up, talk to her, hug her – Kelley seems the physical type, right? – and make up with her newest friend. She wondered, though, if Kelley would react well: tear-stained, presumably hiding from her…. No, bad idea. Hope couldn’t just leave her here, though. Could she? Kelley would hate it if someone found her here in the morning. Could she carry Kelley through the dark rooms without waking her? Probably not. Unless…

“Wingardium leviosa,” Hope whispered, and floated the girl to her bed.

Kelley blinked. The water overhead was close to daylight brightness. She gave thanks that her morning rhythm had woken her up before anyone else made it out to the common room. Brushing the sheets aside, she-

Sheets?

She sat up in her bed and considered the possible explanations for falling sleep in one place and waking in another. She didn’t care for any of them.

Hope’s bed was empty and made. At least Hope’s still ‘caught up in something’ with Jessica. The thought tasted bitter. Alright, O’Hara, Kelley sighed, time to go run it out.

Workout clothes, towel, bottle, broom; walk up to ground floor. Don’t think about it.

Flight to Quidditch stadium. Think about today. Think about the Quidditch lesson tomorrow.

Things down, stretch. Sink into it, Kelley. Get out of your head and into your body.

Hear name. What?

Clench jaw. No.

Sigh. I can’t like her and hate her.

Face Hope. Let’s see what this is.

“Decided to join us?”

“Join you, Kelley. I owe you several apologies -”

Kelley folded her arms.

“- and a Quidditch lesson.”

Kelley raised her eyebrows.

“I messed up, Kelley. I’m not used to having appointments to keep, just practices and classes, so it was habit that said ‘yes’ to working with Jessica in the potions lab after dinner. We got carried away with that stupid broom and then I doubled down on my mistake by bringing you those books, which I did solely to make myself feel better.”

Kelley nodded. So far, Hope seemed genuine. Unimpressive, yes, but genuine.

“I was wrong to forget you and wrong again to try to cover for it. If I’d remembered, I would’ve told Jessica that I had a commitment. I’m sorry, and I’m really sorry I made these mistakes with you.
You’re a lot of fun to be with, Kelley. I’m sure you get that a lot but you really have been like a breath of fresh air this week. I’d hate to lose you.”

‘...as a friend’, Kelley expected her to finish. For a moment after Hope stopped speaking, Kelley’s heart hung waiting for the words.

“Kelley?”

“Wh-Yeah, I just…wasn’t expecting that. Hope…I don't want to stay mad at you, it’s just- it’s hard to trust someone who just forgets about you. I need to believe that you can keep - or even just remember - a promise.”

“Kelley, the first thing Amy did after you left was ask if I'd skip practice with the US National Team for whatever I was doing with Jess. The answer's 'no', of course, but I realized that, essentially, I did skip practice with the National Team. It called for profanity,” she allowed herself a wry, tentative smile, “and I used some. You’re my future teammate, Kelley, so you come before Jessica and anything not necessary for graduating on my priority list. Yes, I screwed up royally - I need to change my thinking to include you and the others - but I said I’d teach you and I’ll start now, if you still want me to.”

“You really put your teammates ahead of your girlfriend?” Kelley couldn’t imagine a better chance to get the answer to her big question.

“My gir- oh, no, Jess and I aren't together. Whatever you've seen and heard is all there is.”

“You had me fooled.” Kelley needed to hear more to believe it.

“Until this year, we were devoted to playing Quidditch on opposite sides of the world. Knowing that nothing would ever work between us made it possible to flirt just for the fun of it, no expectations. Neither of us want to change that now.”

“Huh.”

Hope waited to see if Kelley had more to say. Uncharacteristically, she did not. “So…Quaffle 101?”

Kelley brought herself back to the present. “Apology accepted, Hope.”

“Remember the ‘chest pass' from basketball? That's the best way to start. We'll add the cool one-hand stuff as you grow into it.” Hope tossed the quaffle from palm to palm. “Let's pass it back and forth a few times so you get a feel for the ball, then we’ll get in the air.”

The quaffle felt familiar yet very different from a soccer ball. It was about the same size but the surface was real leather, not a glossy synthetic. It wasn’t pressurized so hard – assuming it didn’t hold its shape by magic – as a volleyball or basketball. It felt odd when she touched it – like static electricity – and clung to her hands as though faintly magnetic. The hollow thuck of catching it reminded Kelley of…

“Do people back home play Quidditch with footballs?” Kelley asked Hope between passes. “American footballs.”

“I’m sure they’ve tried,” Hope replied between catches. “It'd be interesting…quick, close passes would be trickier…but the long ball would be amazing.” Hope stepped back after each catch to increase the range. When their throws threatened to become lobs, she stopped and returned to Kelley. “Now we're gonna make it interesting. We'll do the same thing on brooms, then we'll do it while
tracking parallel to each other so you start to learn how your movement affects your throws.”

Kelley's hours of practice in her Stanford dorm prepared her well. Hope abandoned stationary passes for moving ones, to Kelley's left side and to her right, from higher and lower, and at ever greater speeds. Each minute, Hope had to move less and less to catch Kelley's efforts. “Damn, Kelley, your body's going to be ready to learn the fancy stuff before you even know what it's for!”

“Hey, you can never be too good at the basics, right? Besides, leave a few lessons for Tobin and Amy! I don't want to be bored at our mini-camp tomorrow,” Kelley grinned.

“Don’t worry, they’ll keep you busy. There’s still passing to players at different speeds, different angles, flying in different directions…oh, and crosswinds.” Hope passed the quaffle and smiled brilliantly. “I’m so glad to have you back, Kelley.”

Kelley bobbled the catch; it was all she could do to not melt right off her broom.
Let's Get Down to Business

Chapter Notes

In this chapter: Quidditch, fun with Hope & Kelley.
Coming soon: More of Lauren and Tobin (I promise! I've written the drafts), House tryouts & results, Krashlyn.

The USA students gathered bright, early, and excited at the Quidditch stadium. Lindsay Tarpley’s arrival was as understated as a professional Quidditch player’s could be while in full kit, black on white with a graphic of a black bird emblazoned on the chest.

“Montrose Magpies!” Hope Solo blurted, “Damn, why didn’t either of you tell us?”

“Because I’ve held their noses to the grindstone all week,” Lindsay said.

“You fly all the way from Montrose to Hogsmeade every day?” Lauren couldn’t believe it.

“Above one hundred miles of Muggles? Heck, no, I apparate.”

“Ok, ok, clue me in: ‘Montrose Magpies’?” Kelley wanted to know.

“Just the most successful Quidditch club in the UK,” Hope replied.

“Yes,” Lindsay smiled wryly, “which also means I was second-string seeker for the past two seasons.”

“Seeker?!” Alex looked electrified.

“Yep, and I’ve got the start this season,” Lindsay smiled.

“So, since you’re the pro here,” Lauren asked, “would you like to be in charge?”

“I might, at least for some of it. You said that this year’s students are more or less at square one, right?”

“Squares one and two,” Hope replied. This time, Kelley was certain Hope winked at her.

“Ok. Let’s work on broom-and-quaffle basics as a group, then split off by position.” Lindsay went into coach-mode. “I’d say the first thing for someone coming from soccer to know,” she told them, “is that Quidditch long predates the split of football into soccer and rugby. You can carry as well as pass the ball, obviously, which means you can’t challenge someone for the ball as freely as in soccer.”

“And you can’t nutmeg,” Tobin noted. A hint of a pout crossed her face.

Lindsay laughed. “Yes, and you can’t nutmeg.”

“You really know your way around a quaffle,” Alex admired after they’d finished with the others.
“I grew up wanting to do everything my older brother did,” Lindsay replied, “and he liked playing chaser. It wasn’t until college that someone picked me out as a potential seeker.”

“What made you a potential seeker?”

Lindsay knew what Alex really meant. “Sharp eyes, fast reactions, excellent fitness, a knack for coaxing every bit of performance from a broom, and a heady blend of foresight and recklessness.”

Alex nodded along until the end. “I wouldn’t think those last two go together.”

“Well, you gotta think two moves ahead of the snitch and three moves ahead of the other seeker, then make a snap decision to, say, follow it through stadium scaffolding or else try to meet it on the other side of the bleachers. If you choose wrong, your team loses.”

“So…foresight to pick the right path and recklessness to take the risks that you need?”

“Pretty much. Most matches the snitch doesn’t get inside structures, though.” Lindsay fished in her pocket. “Well, Seeker 101. Catch!”

She surprised Alex, but not enough to miss catching the small round thing. She opened her hand to see what it was.

A Golden Snitch, of course.

“Your first catch! Victory, USA!”

Unbelievably lame as it was, Lindsay’s smile was infectious. Alex fought it and lost.

Ashlyn fought her frustration through shot after shot but, finally, enough was enough. “How does it not drive you crazy?”

Hope didn’t understand. “How does what not drive me crazy?”

“The quaffle! The way the damn thing wants to stick to your fingers.”

“It’s never bothered me. More grip is better.”

Ashlyn looked at her as if she was from another planet. “Not when you can’t get your hand completely around it. I would have saved half as many shots again if the damn ball had deflected from my fingers instead of trying to stick to them.”

It was Hope's turn to see an alien. “It’s not complicated, Ashlyn. You lay out and either catch it or punch or kick it away. Shouldn’t you know this stuff? I thought you were a goalkeeper.”

Ashlyn was incredulous. “I thought you were a goalkeeper! If I have to put my palm on the ball to make a save, that takes four inches off my reach!”

“Actually,” Hope looked chastened, “I was a forward before I came here. I never played keeper in soccer.”

“Well, there's our problem. Let me show you what I'm talking about.” She flew down and rifled through their friends’ gym bags. “I knew I should've started with Alex,” Ashlyn muttered, and puncted the girl's soccer ball in the general direction of Hope. “Let’s try that same thing again.” She re-assumed position in front of the goals and Hope sent in ball after ball. When she felt the same amount of time had passed, Ashlyn caught the soccer ball and asked, “Well?”
“You made twenty-nine saves out of sixty-six shots.”

“Compared to?”

“Twenty-one in sixty-eight.”

“Because I could use my whole hand to play the ball.”

“I see your point – and how it’s frustrating. I don’t know what we can do about it, though.”

“Some gloves with non-stick finger pads would be a good start.”

“They would,” Hope mused. “That gets into the game Laws. We’ll have to see exactly what's allowed and what's not.”

“Then let’s do that.”

Hope did a double-take. “You mean now?”

“Yes, now. I'm not going to practice the wrong skill.”

Alex ran through Lindsay’s instructions: Discipline your eyes to search instead of skipping around. Be alert to flashes of light, especially around the edges of shadows. The sun is your friend. Ha ha, she twisted a lip, if I can play seeker in Scotland, I can play anywhere.

Looking down from one hundred feet, that seemed like a very big ‘if’. Lindsay said her snitch would stay within the stadium, but Alex hadn’t seen it in the ten minutes since she’d released it. “Is it supposed to take this long?”

“You’re fine for your level. I’ve been playing seeker for seven years, and I spotted it about five minutes ago. I’d seen them around matches for most of my life, though…” Lindsay had an idea. “I think I started you with too much space. Let’s forget that happened and I’ll keep the snitch inside the triangle between you and those two towers.”

“You can control a snitch?” Alex asked while Lindsay waved her wand.

“A practice snitch. A regulation snitch can’t be charmed.”

After another few minutes, a tiny gold shimmer caught Alex’s eye. “There! That’s it, right?”

“Yes! That was great, Alex!”

“Do I go after it now?”

“Not quite. We’ll practice spotting it for another twenty minutes. If we don’t, your first chase will be very short.”

The keepers reconvened in the library, where they found every book on Quidditch - and Jessica Landström. “Are you sure we should be talking about this?” Ashlyn whispered.

“We've signed an agreement on confidentiality and intellectual property.” If anything, that made Ashlyn less willing to trust the Swede. It must’ve shown on her face, because Hope continued, “I know it sounds weird, but it lets us relax and be genuine when there's a lot at stake. Besides, if there's anything we can do under the rules, we'll probably need her expertise to make it happen.”
“Hope, my friend,” Jessica saw them and smiled. “What is on your mind today?”

Hope laid the books on the table and sat across from her co-conspirator. “Non-stick gloves.”

“So,” Jessica summarized the rules, “all rests on what it means to “enhance control” of the quaffle.”

“Countering the charmed stickiness of the quaffle reduces control,” Ashlyn pointed out.

“Yet, if the purpose is to enhance your kinetic control of the quaffle?”

Ashlyn nodded. “I see...I think. It sounds more like a question for lawyers than players now.”

“Ja, and I know none in this field. You have to get the question’s answer before we work. If you know – I should say, trust – anyone in professional Quidditch, I suggest you start with them. Insist upon an NDA.”

“ND-what?”

“Nondisclosure agreement.”

Ashlyn’s eyes glazed over.

“Told you she was intense,” Hope smirked at her.

“No, actually, you didn’t.”

Alex was hungry. Literally, pit-of-her-stomach hungry. This was ordinary for Alex Morgan at lunchtime. What was not ordinary was that she ignored it.

_I am not leaving without the damn snitch._

She’d been so close to catching it several times, but it danced out of reach as if it were teasing her.

_Freaking magic hummingbird._

Lindsay Tarpley flew close behind and above her, calling instructions and encouragement. “You got this, girl!”

Her fingertips brushed it again - _or did it brush me? Are these stupid things edible? Ugh, this is literally driving me crazy._

“Left!”

Alex tucked and lunged her broom left. The end of the handle batted the snitch into her fingers, but it bounced off of them and zipped away to her right. “Fuck,” she barked, and arced back the other way. The wind flipped her long ponytail across her face; she flailed and dragged at it and got it clear in time to avoid clipping the treetops.

“Relax, Alex!”

Alex spotted the snitch again and zoomed towards it. Just as she reached for the snitch, it jerked upward, out of reach. Alex forced the broom to curve upward as tightly as she could. Her vision narrowed; startled, she relaxed, leveled off, and shook her head.
“You okay?” Lindsay caught up with her.

“I…yeah.” Alex wasn’t convinced, either. “My eyes went funny when I tried to climb.”

“Like you were looking through gray tubes or soda straws?”

“Yes, just like that. What happened?”

“Have you ever heard of ‘g-forces’?”

“Maybe? It sounds familiar.”

“Basically, your brain outran your blood. Good sport brooms can push harder than your heart can pump.”

“Um, that sounds…bad.”

“If you kept turning like that, you’d pass out.” Alex stared and Lindsay was quick to reassure her: “There are ways to manage it. Make sure that your fitness plan is strengthening your heart. When you’re flying, clench every muscle in your body when you start a hard turn. That extra pressure will keep blood in your skull for few more seconds.”

Alex looked at her.

“Yes, even that one.”

Alex didn’t hear. She’d seen the snitch over Lindsay’s shoulder. Her expression showed it and Lindsay got out of the way. A glance at her watch told her they were late for lunch. “Don’t let hunger make you mad!”

When Alex finally, finally, got her finger tips on the snitch and drew it into her fist, she felt a burst of exultation - but had no energy left for expressing it. She drifted to the ground and slumped off her broom.

Lindsay landed next to her “You’re a Quidditch player now. Call me ‘Tarp.’” She grinned, “I’m proud of you, Alex, but I’m not carrying you.”

Alex, laying on the grass, grinned back and held the snitch overhead. “Victory, USA!”

“Hey, Hope,” Kelley smiled up from *Physics of Flight*.

“Hey, Kelley. Squirrel.” She joined the two on a couch in Slytherin’s common room. “How was your first ‘national team camp’?”

“Awesome! So much awesome. It was great to finally play two-v-two. Ohmigod, Tobin is unbelievable.”

“I know! She’s the most technical player at Hogwarts by miles. It’s hard to defend against her because I just want to relax and watch her play.” Hope held out her hand and the squirrel ran along her bare arm to her shoulder.

“Awww, he likes you!”

“I like him, too, now that I can see that he's not some freaky, furry death-crab.”
Kelley cackled at the memory. “Ahhh, how about your day, Hope?”

“Really good.” Hope lowered her voice, “I talked to Lindsay about playing pro in the UK. She said she’d make sure Montrose scouts me.”

“That’s awesome, Hope! Wow, and you’d still be around…” Kelley’s eyes unfocused.

Hope smiled. “I know, I want to stick close to all of you while you finish school. You know I started working with Ash on goalkeeping?” Kelley came back and nodded. “Well, that lasted about fifteen minutes before she had a potentially game-changing idea. Turns out no pro goalkeepers in Quidditch transitioned from soccer. We need Lindsay and Mia to find some things out for us, so she’s teaching me soccer goalkeeping while we wait.” Hope decided to leave Jessica out of it.

“Ashl-“ Kelley caught herself and matched Hope's volume. “She’s teaching you goalkeeping?!”

“I was actually a forward before I came here. Last time I checked,” there was the smirk again, “I still hold the Richland High record for goals in a season.”

“I had no idea! How did you become a keeper?”

“My first year, after I tried out to be chaser, the team captain and the senior keeper pulled me aside and said that they saw potential for me to be either the best chaser in my year or the best keeper in a decade. I didn’t believe them,” Hope said with a wry smile. “They told me they'd add me as a substitute chaser, on the condition that I spent the next two weeks training as a keeper. They also said they’d assume the attitude I brought to goalkeeping training was the same one I’d bring to being a chaser.” She pursed her lips. “That part stung a bit. Still, it worked and, once I got into it, I was determined to make ‘best in a decade’ an underestimate.”

“There’s my Hope. So, now you’re learning soccer goalkeeping. Is it that much different? I mean, aside from being on a magic broom and there being three goals.”

Hope smiled. “There are a couple other critical differences, like landing on your shoulder all the time.” She looked around the room. “We should get some privacy if we’re going to talk about those game-changers.”

Kelley nodded, eager as ever, and stood to go. Hope was about to follow but the squirrel, evidently sleepy, decided that the inside of Hope's shirt was a nice, warm place for a nap and burrowed into her bra. Hope was at a loss for both words and solutions.

Kelley sensed that Hope wasn't behind her and turned back. The sight that greeted her was hilarious but she didn’t want to embarrass Hope Solo in front of their whole House. “Fold your arms,” she suggested, fighting to keep a straight face.

Hope tried that and it seemed to support the squirrel. She held her chin up and walked stiffly to their room, all too aware of the bushy tail poking out of her collar.
Here's a longer one to keep you busy during the blizzard tomorrow :) The next chapter just needs a polish and the following three, wherein much drama occurs, are about 2/3 written. My goal is to have ch. 24 up tomorrow and ch. 25 up by Sunday.

Edited 18 Feb. 2016: "Byrne" is an Irish surname, not Scottish.

A crisp breeze from the northwest brought September to the moor and stole daylight for its journey south. Under the loch, Kelley lounged on a couch in the Slytherin common room and watched fish meander through the fish the darkening water.

“Hey, Kelley.”

“Hmmm?” She turned to see Hope behind her.

“I want to tell you – since we’ve had, well, you know…” Hope fidgeted. “Look, I’m not going to be your friend at tryouts tomorrow.”

Kelley inspected Hope’s face for hints. “Meaning…?”

“Meaning don’t freak out when I call you ‘O’Hara’ and give you the keeper-face. I’m supposed to evaluate everyone fairly, so I’m going to be all-business with everybody, no matter how well I know their play or how…whatever.”

“Ok,” Kelley nodded. “Thanks for the warning.” She pictured the scene. “Really, thanks. I would’ve handled it but you spared me the shock.”

“I just don’t want to upset you again.”

As the Gryffindor girls flew out to the Hogwarts stadium, Alex felt performance nerves. “Do you think we’ll make it?”

“You will,” Ashlyn replied, “I won’t, and-”

“Attitude, Ash!” Alex couldn’t believe her ears.

Ashlyn shook her head. “Not this year. I won’t make it on my soccer skills and, with all our studying, I didn’t have time to learn much Quidditch goalkeeping. I’m only doing this for the experience.”

Alex hated to admit it, but Ashlyn was probably right. “Won’t you be a year behind the learning curve, though?”

“Not if Mia comes through for Hope and I.” Again, Alex didn’t understand, but they were almost to the clump of red-trimmed students. “I’ll tell you later,” Ashlyn promised. They were early to tryouts,
of course, so they had some minutes to greet other students and talk shop.

An athletic-looking redhead, her cloak removed and sleeves rolled up to her shoulders, put a foot up on the Quidditch tackle chest, ‘Captain Morgan’ style. “This is the tryout for Godric Gryffindor’s Quidditch team,” she projected to the group. “If you haven’t met me yet, I'm Dani Byrne, team captain.” She had the Irish accent to match her hair and surname. “I’m sure you first-years have noticed by now that the other Houses think we're a wee bit high and mighty. Well, the purpose of these tryouts is to choose a Quidditch team which will give us something to be high and mighty about.” Dani grinned and several students chuckled. “We’re looking for the most driven, steely-eyed competitors and today we’ll find out who they are. We’ll select an ‘A’ team for Cup matches and another ‘B’ team for practice and substitutes. For our younger students, we aren’t expecting miracles today, just potential, motivation, and nerve under pressure. If you have those in spades, we’ll train you until you have skills to match. If you don’t make it this year, don’t panic. Keep improving and impress us next year.

“Now, chaser candidates stay here with me, aspiring keepers follow Dara,” she pointed, "beaters go with Matt. Seekers, your first test is to find last year’s starter, Jen Connelly. She's somewhere on the Hogwarts grounds and she's not hiding. Any que-”

Alex rocketed up into the sky. The other would-be seekers, surprised, took off in pursuit. “Someone’s motivated,” Dani smirked.

“I think I’ve met all of you before. Still, in case someone’s hiding in the back, I'm Geoff, Hufflepuff's Quidditch captain. Normally, that means I lead tryouts, but we're doing something a little different this year. We – the fourth-years – are going to evaluate Lauren Cheney,” he waved her forward, “as a future team captain. Her tryout is to lead your tryouts. I'll be watching both her and all of you.” He turned to Lauren and gave her a broad smile. “You have the floor.”

“Thanks, Geoff. Welcome to House Hufflepuff’s team tryouts. We select at least two full teams of players for our practice roster, usually with a third seeker, keeper, and beater.” Lauren’s initial cheer gave way to a challenging intensity. “After we post the roster, the number of players is fixed, but places on it can be won or lost by anyone at any time during the year, myself and Geoff included. We – meaning Geoff – choose the squad for each match from the practice roster. Starts in matches are earned by hard work in practice, constant learning, and a tireless drive to excel. In short, tryouts never stop. Nothing is given and there are no guarantees.”

Lauren paused to survey the crowd. “Judging by your faces, some of you’ve never heard a Hufflepuff be ruthless before. This team is for people who want the responsibility of competing for House Hufflepuff – and by ‘competing’, I mean ‘beating the other Houses’. We run our team this way to push everyone to improve and to ensure that we develop our younger players for future years. Believe me, if we place you in the practice roster, we will coach you and take care of you like family, but we’re a very driven family. If you want to play Quidditch without that pressure, there’s a student club that does just that. Talk to me or any of the older students at dinner and we’ll be happy to get you connected. It is totally okay to leave now if the House team isn’t what you want. Life’s too short! Besides, this isn’t Gryffindor,” she grinned; “your friends will probably think more of you for it.”

More than one-third of the first-years filtered out, but the rest of the group stayed. “If you’d like to try for more than one position, write your name and the positions down here,” Lauren waved a clipboard and set it on a camp table, “so we know not to pack up before we’ve seen you. Seeker evaluations are with Mark,” she gestured at a short, blonde man, “keepers are with Geoff, chasers with Stella,” a brunette waved a hand, “and beaters with me.” She suppressed the impulse to roll her
eyes when several pairs of eyebrows rose. “Remember them for later. First, we’re doing a general flying test for all of you.”

She outlined the flight course, drawing a diagram in the air with her wand and turning to launch magic beacons and rings for the turns and patterns. Eyes widened at the three-dimensional slalom. “That wasn’t part of it the last two years,” someone whispered, but not quietly enough.

“We’ve added several more challenging and technical elements to our rubrics,” Lauren explained. “The point is to sort out the great candidates from the very, very good ones.” She finished with the details. “Anyone have a question about what we’re looking for?”

No one did.

“Anyone have a question about anything else? Show me hands.”

Hands rose around the circle.

“If you are certain you know the rules of Quidditch and my directions were clear to you, keep your hands up. Otherwise, put them down for a second.”

Most of the hands stayed up.

“The answer to all of your questions is ‘Do the best you can’. Today is about showing us why you should be on the team, not about doing everything the ‘right’ way. If you do something that isn’t what we have in mind, we’ll tell you and ask to see it again or else we’ll wait and address it in team practice. Understand?”

They nodded, some confident and others concerned.

“Great. Now, other questions from before? We want to clear away every obstacle between you and doing your best today.”

“‘You’re late. Run a lap.’

Kelley and Kate, hurrying towards the cluster of would-be Slytherin players on the practice field, stopped short.

“A what?” Kelley expected it but Kate, to Kelley’s horror, didn’t know what Hope meant.

“Run once around the edge of the pitch before you join us. Get going.”

“Run?”

“Yes, with your legs,” Hope said, exasperated.

“Oh.” Kate sent Kelley a guilty look. “OK, but it’s my fault Kelley’s late. She stayed to help me get my gear together.”

“Noted. Run another lap for making someone else late. You, too,” she aimed her eyes at Kelley, “for choosing to be late.”

Kate gaped at her. “Are you serious?!”

“You can run or you can leave. Now.”
Kelley dropped her broom and tugged Kate’s arm. “Carry them,” Hope barked. Kelley, a bit shocked despite Hope’s warning, snatched her broom back and set off.

“What a bitch,” Kate spat, once they were out of earshot.

Kelley bit back a heated defense of Hope. “Have you never had to run laps before?!”

“No! Who does this crap? What’s even the point?”

“Well, in general, fitness. Extra laps, like this, are a slap on the wrist,” Kelley answered between easy breaths, “and probably also a test to see how we handle being treated unfairly.”

“Oh yeah? So she'll cut anyone who can’t put up with her?”

Kelley shook her head. “So she'll know how you'll respond when a ref makes a bad call. It’s not personal, Kate. Look at it like an extra chance to show Hope what you’re made of.”

“I still think she’s made of bullshit.”

I’m looking for Jen Connelly, and she’s not hiding, Alex thought. That means this isn’t an eyes test, just a speed test. What’s the quickest way to see all of Hogwarts?

Alex angled right and flew to the far side of Hogwarts castle, arced around the back, and - Yeah, they didn’t make this hard. Below, a figure lounged on a crimson towel by the lake. Alex swooped down and landed next to her.

“Jen?”

“Yes. Damn, I had four galleons riding on Rachel West. Are you Alex Morgan?”

Alex nodded. “Yeah. Who’s Rachel West?”

“Third-year from- there, her,” Jen pointed over Alex’s shoulder. A frustrated young woman with mouse-brown hair dropped next to them. “What kept you?”

“I guessed the wrong side of the grounds,” Rachel answered.

So did I, Alex managed not to say aloud.

“So did she,” Jen said, “and now I owe Dara four galleons.”

“Do you know who Dani had?”

The rest of the would-be seekers arrived in a flock. “Doesn’t look like it matters, at this point,” Jen muttered. She raised her voice to address the group. “Well, the plan was to make the first cut here, and I think it’s pretty clear where the cut goes. Housemates, thank you all for coming out. I hate to do this to you, but Morgan and West will be the only ones continuing from here. If you hurry back, you might still get into the chaser tryout.”

The flock dispersed, disappointed and awkward.

Alex and Rachel looked at each other and back to Jen. “Well, then, two of you and one spot on the B-team. Makes it simple for me.” She produced a snitch. “Regulation,” she showed them, then hurled it towards the castle. “I’m gonna go help Dani grade the chasers. Don’t come back without
Ashlyn settled onto her broom, reminded herself that she didn't need to plant her feet or push with her legs, and let herself play. It wasn’t easy – it was never easy – but she was relaxed and dug into her role with growing enjoyment. The satisfying smock of the quaffle against her hands stretched her grin after each save. She felt big, or the goals felt small, but either way she knew she was doing well. Then again, she wasn’t counting the shots that rolled back off of her fingers and through a hoop, but Ashlyn didn’t let those bother her. It wasn’t time to worry about that yet.

“You’re a challenging colleen to grade,” the senior keeper, Dara, said to her after one stint in front of the goals. “You act like you know what you’re doing and you’ve made some fantastic saves, yet you aren’t making the best use of your broom and you keep trying to tip balls with your fingers. I lost count of how many hoop deflections you turned into own-goals.”

“I…played a sport where that worked, right up until I arrived here. Since then, I've been studying like a madwoman.” She shrugged. “Just didn’t have time to unlearn my old game.”

“Ah.” Dara kept his eyes on the next keeper candidate. “So you’re trying out for a position which you don't know how to play?”

“Honestly, I'm really just here so I'll know what to expect next year.”

“You intend to make a House team next year?”

“Absolutely.”

He nodded. “I won't be here to see it, but I'm sure you'll do well. Really, you’re the most promising first-year I've seen since Hope Solo blew everyone away.”

Ashlyn raised her eyebrows. “Wow, I’ll remember that one. Thank you.”

“I promise not to tell anyone else. You don’t need to play with that kind of expectation on you.”

As the would-be Hufflepuff chasers, beaters and keepers formed queues for the six-a-side scrimmage, Tobin raised an eyebrow at Lauren. “What?” Lauren played along.

“Nice speech. I won’t say, ‘I didn’t know you had it in you,’ because I did,” Tobin grinned, “but I’m always a bit in awe when you go into win mode.”

“Win mode?” Lauren giggled. She hoped no one else heard.

“It’s the purest of your competitive modes. Get on a broom, and you’re in fierce mode. Pick up a bat, and you go into beast mode.” Tobin did impressions of the corresponding game-faces, making Lauren laugh much harder than she thought a woman with a clipboard ought to laugh. “Don’t forget to enjoy yourself when you’re in charge, Chen. You know what a difference it makes for everyone.”

Geoff joined them. “Good job explaining the evaluations, Lauren,” he said, looking a bit less than comfortable, “though I think you came on rather stronger than we were expecting.”

“That’s funny,” Lauren smirked and cocked an ear towards the castle, “I can already hear Ravenclaw saying the same thing.”

Ali Krieger did not take long to make a name for herself as the most physical of the would-be
chasers. If an opponent had the quaffle by only one hand, she went for it. If they had it by two hands, but loosely, she went for it. If they hugged it tight to their chest, as some started to, she went for it – from above. Inverted.

Ashlyn, seeing that last attempt during a spare minute, grinned and shouted, “Yeah, girl! Did you get a Polaroid of that one?” Nobody caught the reference.

When Ali subbed out to make room for the next candidate, Dani pulled her aside. “Do you have any idea how many fouls you committed?”

“No,” Ali replied, all innocence.

“I gave up counting at fifteen, seven of which were caution-worthy, three which would get you sent off by any ref with eyes, and two that nearly injured someone!”

Ali nodded. “Which challenges were legal?”

“Were you listening?! You broke every rule in-“ she broke off and began to laugh. “Oh, I see, you’re new to Quidditch. In that case, I like your style. You do need to study the rules and practice the hell out of those steals, but I like it.”

“The best place to do that would be on the team,” Ali suggested.

Dani smirked at that. “We’ll see.” She turned back to the scrimmage.

Ashlyn joined Ali on the sideline. “Dude!” She clapped Ali on her back, “that was incredible!”

Ali gave her a wry grin. “Apparenty most of it was illegal, too.”

“So what? You can fix that. The aggressiveness and creativity is what matters.”

“I’ve never played a full three-on-three before. I just kept seeing new ideas and I tried all of them.”

"It was fun to watch you."

"You always like watching me, Ash," Ali smirked.

Ashlyn was startled for a moment, but she shrugged and smiled. "Yeah, I do." Her smile became a grin. "And I think you like me watching."

Ali blushed, but she smiled back. "Yeah, I do."

Neither knew what to say after that, but neither wanted to break the moment. They held eye contact.

"Harris! You're on deck!" Dara’s shout ended it.

"I need to…" Ali grinned. "Go get 'em, stud."

Alex had this. Yes, they’d been chasing the snitch for a half an hour and, yes, Rachel was good and had given Alex a run for her money, but Alex discovered that she could out-turn the older girl. They’d started out shoulder-to-shoulder; now, each time the snitch turned towards her, she came out another foot ahead of Rachel. Thank you, Tarp, she thought - for the hundredth time - as she snapped into another tight curve. Keeping the snitch in the center of her vision, she held her turn at the rate
that just barely made her field of view contract. Behind her, Rachel’s flight sounded a little bit farther away; ahead, the snitch was a little bit closer.

Alex stretched, reached, turned, curled, felt, rolled, cut, climbed, touched, dove, had one fingertip on the snitch, two fingertips - *No!* It darted left and she set about reeling it back in. It was right there, right in front of her. She stretched to full extension again, hand out, palm open…

“AAAAH!” Pain exploded in Alex’s hand. Her whole body flinched and she nearly wrenched herself off her broom. Blinking back tears, she refocused her eyes.

A wasp was smashed, stinger-first, against her palm.

Alex, with a yell of frustration, slapped the mess off against her pants, then looked around and spotted Rachel. She was turning the snitch in her fingers.

Rachel couldn’t look Alex in the eye. “It’s only fair, I guess. You’re gonna crush me next year.” She flew away to the stadium. Alex set course for the infirmary, fighting tears of pain and bitterness.

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“Thank you all for coming out,” Hope concluded. "The fourth-years and I will confer and post the House roster and any notes at six tomorrow morning. We're all done for today.” She found Kelley and Kate in the crowd. “O’Hara and Meadows, stay for another minute.”

The pair moved in as the group dispersed. Hope waited until they had enough space to speak privately. “Kate,” she began, “I’m really pleased with the way you recovered. I’m sure Kelley told you that I’m not actually a bitch; it's just that, on tryouts day, I don't help our House by being ‘nice’. I have to sort the women from the girls and the men from the boys before I start on team-building.”

Kate nodded. “Kelley told me.” Kelley looked a question at her. “Not in so many words - and I didn’t believe you - but you did.”

Hope turned earnest. “Look, Kate,” she turned her palms up, “I get that shit happens. From a team perspective, though, the least useful kind of player is the one who isn't present. Make it a habit to get ready well ahead of time so you never have another last-minute crisis like today.”

“I will. Thank you, um…if you call me ‘Kate’ now, what should I call you?”

“’Hope’ works.” She gave Kate a small smile.

Kelley was surprised; she'd expected to see a full-sized one.

Chapter End Notes

Comments are always welcome :)
Kelley’s nerves woke her before full lake-light and wouldn’t let her go back to sleep. *Is the roster up yet? Is it six?* She pushed up on an elbow to see if Hope was up. *She’s not. Ah, I’m not going to back to sleep anyway.* Kelley got up and slipped out to the common room, where the clock read five forty-eight. She watched the colors until a door opened and footsteps entered.

Hope pinned the list up on the board and stepped back - into Kelley. “Oh, sorry, I didn’t hear you.”

Kelley nodded and nudged Hope aside.

_Slytherin House Quidditch Roster_

2007-2008

_Hope Solo, Captain._

Kelley scanned the column labeled ‘Match’ but her name wasn’t on it. She looked to the one labeled ‘Practice’.

_Chasers:_

_M. Kanawati_

_A. Rodriguez_

*S. Danes / K. O’Hara (TBD after first team practice)*

“Hope?”

“The two fourth-year chasers couldn’t come to an agreement on you versus that other second-year, Susan. They want to have a look at both of you in a practice.”

“Huh.”

“Not the result you wanted, I know.”

Kelley grimaced. “I just want it to be settled already.”

“I get it. Still, pressure’s pressure.”

“True.”

“Kelley.” She turned to face Hope. “What’s your goal for this year?”

“Score.”

Hope wasn’t surprised. “Our last match is in May. Since it’s their last one, the two graduating chasers will start unless someone else is a lot better. If you’re going to play this year, you’ll need to be the better than the two third-years and A-Rod before the end of April.”

“Then I will be.”

“If you’re committed, I’ll coach you, but it’ll be hard. Thi-”

“I’m committed.”

"For real, think it through. You’re gonna have to give it everything for the next eight months.”
“Do you think I won’t?”

Hope smirked. “I think the extra practices with you had better be worth any dirty looks I get from A-Rod.”

“It’s what I’m here for, Hope. Let’s go.”

“That’s my girl,” Hope flashed that small smile again.

*Is she not a morning person?* Kelley forced a larger one back. “Really, let’s go. Grab your gear.”

Alex and Ashlyn knew they hadn't made even the House B-team, but they went with Ali to see how she’d fared. Ali, of course, was first to the list. She scanned it, fast and eager, while Ali and Alex meandered through the names. A gasp from Ali yanked their attention back.

“You made it?” Ashlyn asked.

“No!” Ali beamed, “you did!”

“What?!”

“Ohmigod, Ash! Congratulations!” Alex bounced on her feet.

Ashlyn’s enthusiasm wore off fast. “They’re gonna expect me to unlearn deflection saves,” she muttered. “I wanted those gloves before I got named to a team.”

“There's still no guarantee you'll get them,” Ali pointed out. “Besides, maybe it'll be good to learn and practice both ways. You could keep the new gloves under wraps for a while.”

Alex grinned. “Secret weapon! I like the sound of that.”

“Alright, I'll try it. Maybe I'll practice soccer goalkeeping on weekends so my hands don't forget everything.”

“Ooh, how about Sunday morning soccer games? We could invite the others, transfigure ourselves some goals…”


Dani Byrne walked up behind them. “You Yanks made quite an impression yesterday. Ashlyn, congratulations! Dara insists that you'll be better than him soon. Ali, we just had too many good chasers this year, but I’d like to work with you after team practices.” She turned to Alex. “Jen told me you won the speed search. Sounds like you have a bright future with team Gryffindor.”

“I actually wanted to ask you about that,” Alex replied. “I’d like to borrow a snitch to practice against. Regularly.”

“Mmm,” Dani frowned. “That might be a problem. Gryffindor only has the one Quidditch tackle. We just can’t afford to risk losing the team’s snitch.”

“You don’t have any practice snitches?” Alex asked, surprised.

“No, seekers typically bring their own.”

“Oh,” but Alex was not about to leave empty-handed. “Are you going to let Rachel practice with
“That snitch?”

“Of course.”

“Unsupervised?”

“Yes, of course.”

“I’m as good as Rachel. If she can use it, I should be able to.”

“Begging you pardon but, according to Jen, you aren’t as good as Rachel.”

“She described us in detail?”

“Uh, no.” Dani looked frustrated. “What are you driving at?”

“Jen doesn’t know I’m as good because she didn’t watch us, Dani. I had the lead for almost all of the half-hour we chased that thing—”

“But you didn’t catch it, Alex, and that’s what wins matches.”

“I was finishing it when my hand rear-ended a wasp.” Alex held out her palm; the swelling was gone but the sting was still obvious. “Dani, I’m not trying to argue my way onto the team. My point is that I’m no more of a risk than Rachel is.”

Dani looked grim. “Even if that’s so, I still don’t think I can do it. Look, Alex, that thing’s been with Gryffindor for centuries. My second year, the A and B-teams missed an entire day of classes because our best seeker, a fourth-year, lost track of it. I can’t double the risk of losing it by letting it loose twice as often. Really, Alex, just buy your own.”

Alex preferred not to say that she had no wizard money.

They all gathered in the Gryffindor spire room after breakfast and relaxed in a loose circle on the floor.

“Ok, tell us!” Amy demanded. “How did it go?”

“Tobin and I are starting,” Lauren replied.

“Shocker.”

“What she’s leaving out,” Tobin added, “is that she’ll be Captain Hufflepuff next year.”

Amy shouted and grabbed Lauren in a celebratory hug. “That’s awesome! I bet Ravenclaw will be terrified when they hear.”

“Oh, dude, you should’ve been there when Lauren gave her pre-tryout speech,” Tobin grinned.

“You could see the exact moments when people realized, ‘Oh, crap, this just got real’. What was it you said? ‘Some of you look like you’ve never seen a ruthless Hufflepuff before’?”

“Ruthless Hufflepuff!” Amy was in stitches. “Oh, Chen, that is priceless!”

Lauren blushed and glowed with pride at the same time. “Alright, alright, what about the rest of you?”
Alex looked around at the others and sighed. “I might as well get this out of the way. It came down to me and a third-year, but I got sniped by a wasp,” she showed them, “right as I was about to catch the snitch. The other girl got it and the place on the roster.”

“Oh, that is such a shame!” Amy commiserated. “But still, shouldn’t they have seen you beat her and named you to the team?”

Alex shook her head. “Jen Connelly sent everyone else home at the first cut, then left to help Dani grade the chasers while the two of us duelled for the snitch.”

“What class?” Hope deadpanned.

“They should at least lend you a snitch to practice with,” Tobin offered.

“I asked. Dani Byrne won’t allow it.”

“Seriously?!” Lauren couldn’t believe it.

Alex shook her head. “It’s stupid, isn’t it?”

“It’s…it’s…I don’t even know a word!” Amy was incensed. “A first-year is the most promising seeker in the House but the captain won’t help her practice? She’s shooting their future teams in the foot! No wonder we have more Quidditch Cups than you.”

Tobin exchanged glances with the other New Kids. “Alex, one way or another, we’ll get you a snitch.”

Lauren nodded. “Who else?”

“Ashlyn made it,” Ali, lying on her stomach to play with Squirrel at eye-level, beamed up at the blonde. “Tell them what Dara said.”

Ashlyn looked away. “I’d rather not.”

“Oh, come on, Ash!” Ali made puppy-dog eyes.

Ashlyn sighed. “Dara said I’m the most promising first-year keeper he’s seen since you arrived,” she said to Hope.

Hope flipped through several unreadable faces before settling on her small smile. “Good. I live on pressure.”

“Ali,” Ashlyn changed the subject, “committed so many fouls that Dani stopped counting.” She grinned at Ali, who made a face and tossed the squirrel at her. Ashlyn fell over backwards trying to catch it.

“On purpose?” Kelley asked.

“No, I just didn’t know the rules,” Ali explained. “If I thought I had a chance to get the quaffle away from another chaser, I went for it. Basically, I wanted to see what was possible and worry about fouls afterwards.”

“I recall you making a few of those - on me,” Amy glared at Kelley.

“Better you than someone who doesn’t know me,” Kelley shrugged.
“What am I, your guinea pig?”

“Yep!” Kelley grinned, and wriggled away from Amy’s poking fingers.

“How did you do, Kelley?” Alex asked.

Kelley exchanged looks with Hope, who answered for her. “Our fourth-year chasers couldn’t agree on her or a second-year and it wasn’t my place to break the tie. We’re going to have them both to the first practice and decide after that.”

“We’ll practice with you to get you ready,” Tobin offered.

The others nodded, but Kelley thought she saw Hope’s expression twitch.

“Thanks, guys,” she decided to wrap it up. “Amy’s on the practice team and Hope’s in goal, obvi.”

“Well, good thing you’ve got until May to get ready for us,” Lauren grinned at the fourth-year.

“Oh, I’ve been ready since you introduced yourselves.”

“Remember, no smiling. Let’s do this.” Lauren brushed aside the flap of Team Gryffindor’s festival tent and stepped inside.

Dani Byrne, packing up after a one-on-one practice, heard the tent open. “Forget something, Dara?”

Thmack…thmack…thmack…

Dani stood and turned to find Lauren Cheney, five feet and eight inches of beater, smacking her bat against her palm. Tobin and Amy flanked her, arms folded. Lauren managed not to grin at Dani’s widened eyes.

“We heard you and Alex Morgan had a little disagreement this morning,” Lauren said, smooth and casual with a hint of menace.

Dani stared, wondering why two Hufflepuffs and a Slytherin would ambush her.

Tobin walked to lean against the wardrobe of team robes. On the other side of the tent, Amy absorbed herself in a tapestry hanging against the canvas wall. It listed the dates of Gryffindor’s Inter-House Cup championships, going back centuries. There were a lot of them, including the previous three years.

“It must be tough being captain,” Tobin said. “So many talented newcomers, but so few experienced players to teach them…”

“Oh, what, you want me to let Alex use our snitch? I told her, no. Both she and the team will do just fine without letting her loose the bloody thing.”

“They might. Connelly’s doing well for you. West probably will, too, next year. After that…?”

Tobin let it hang.

“What a nice winning streak you have,” Amy said, then turned away from the tapestry. “Such a shame if something were to…happen to it.”

Lauren spoke. “If you know what's good for you, you'll let Alex practice with your snitch.” It was all menace.
She turned and walked out. Tobin and Amy followed, not once looking at Dani.

“Morgan.”

Alex twisted away from her dinner.

“Sign this.” Dani held out a parchment and quill pen.

Alex read it; it was an agreement to return Gryffindor’s snitch before the start of team practices and replace it promptly if she lost it. “Dani, I would, but I have literally no wizard money.”

Lauren, sitting across from her, intervened before Dani could form a reply. “We’ll cover for her.”

“Fine, you add that at the bottom and sign it, too.”

Alex signed, Lauren wrote and signed, and Dani pocketed the agreement. “You have a bright future with Gryffindor, Alex.” She scowled at Lauren, who gave her sweetest smile in return, and left.

“What was that?”

“Just us looking out for you,” Lauren aimed the smile at Alex.

It made Alex suspicious. “What did you do?”

“We…persuaded her,” Lauren smirked, “to see things from another point of view.”
Christen,

Miss ya, girl! You must love soccer more than life itself to turn down a full ride to Hogwarts, because it is amazing here! Oh, you're never going to believe what House I sorted into. It's your favorite, Slytherin! I can't begin to tell you how much I love it. Really! Our dorm is IN THE LAKE. UNDERWATER! All the walls and ceilings have glass panels that let in the coolest, most soothing light you've ever seen. It's like living inside a blue-green lava lamp. Seriously, I can't imagine how an evil conspiracy ever got started down here. They say a lot's changed, though. I do get occasional distrustful looks from students in other houses, just because I'm in green, but having Lauren and Tobin as friends spared me the worst of it. Literally, the first morning, Lauren went out of her way to give me an enormous hug in the middle of the Great Hall and had me eat breakfast next to her. I almost got Hufflepuff, too, actually. The Sorting Hat had a hard time with me (lol!). Alex and two other USA kids sorted into Gryffindor, btw.

Oh, you will love this. You know how we got to bring an animal, like an owl or a cat, to witch college? Well, yours truly bought...a SQUIRREL! I have a squirrel! His name is Squirrel and he's SO CUTE and he loves me and I love him and we go on adventures together. Sometimes I let him outside alone, so that he's not stuck underwater during the day, and he's always so happy to see me when I come get him in the evening. Oh my God, Christen, I HAVE A SQUIRREL.

So, there's this girl – closer to a woman, honestly – who I like. She's a fourth year from Washington state and she is the most badass goalkeeper you will ever meet. I mean, WOW. I'm intense, but when she gets in front of the goals, I swear, she could stare down a tiger. What's so wonderful about her, though, is that she has the sweetest soft side! My first night here – oh, I forgot, her name's Hope Solo – I wasn't liking the dorm – isn't that the most beautiful name? – so I went out to the common room and ran into her. She opened up about her first year and how she learned to love the underwater life. I think I fell in love twice that night: once with my House and once with Hope. She even likes Squirrel!

I wonder if I'm being silly about all of this, though. I mean, she's a senior! She's only eight months from starting a whole new life, while I'll be here for the next three and a half years. Besides, she could probably have the world at her feet if she wanted. I mean, she's funny and she's smart and she's strong and she's so, so gorgeous, and I'm just this silly girl who's good at sports. What am I gonna do, Christen?

OK, enough about me. How is the Stanford life? How is soccer going? Are you getting on well with the team? Do you like your classes? Have you met any cute boys?! TELL ME EVERYTHING!

Love ya,
Outside Hogwarts Castle, it was the season of changing colors and falling leaves. Inside the Great Hall, it was the time of hooting owls and falling mail. A thick packet landed in the middle of the Gryffindor girls, addressed to Ali Krieger. “What is…” She used her butter knife as a letter opener and pulled out another packet, this one with no markings or closure flap - just one blank, unbroken envelope. “What…” but as she handled it, writing faded into view. “Ok, that’s weird. It says it’s actually for you, Alex.”

Alex took the envelope. It split open, revealing another blank envelope. Alex drew it out; more writing appeared at her touch. “Um…oh. Ash, it’s for you and Hope. From Mia.”

Ash seized the envelope, took a deep breath, and stuffed it inside her sweater vest. “I’ll open it with Hope in our room.”

Hope and Ashlyn,

They say a brilliant idea is one that makes you say, “Why didn’t I think of that?” This certainly fits that definition. I’ve enclosed everything you could possibly need to prove the legality of your idea. Here’s the short version: to be allowed, the gloves (or any other article) must be made to be ignored by the quaffle. Quidditch kit may not be enchanted, charmed, or spelled, so the effect will have to come from a potion applied to the glove material.

Ashlyn looked up at Hope. “Is Jessica good with potions?”

Hope shook her head. “Yes, but not this good. We need a master.”

Ashlyn looked back at the folder. “Wait, why are these all blank?”

Hope scanned the rest of the letter:

For confidentiality, the file is enchanted to only show its contents when one of you is touching it. A password (the “magic words,” in witch-speak) allows you to authorize other people’s hands. Do not do so without first having them sign the NDA I have included.

“Where’s the password?” Ashlyn asked.

“It says it’s on the back.” Hope turned the letter over, saw it and grinned. “Oh, I like that. I really like that.”

Knock, knock. “Doc Valence?”

Ashlyn tried not to look horrified while they waited for the Potions Master’s door to open.

“Hope! What a pleasant surprise.” This time, Ashlyn couldn’t hide her astonishment. “There are two ways for students to get first-name terms with me,” Dr. Couture explained. “One is to get an ‘Outstanding’ in the Potions N.E.W.T. The other is to shutout my old House’s team and then sign up for my N.E.W.T. course. Come in.”

Ashlyn followed Hope into the Potions Master’s office. “You shutout Ravenclaw?”
Hope gave a wicked smirk. “That was a good game.”

“I’ve never even heard of a shutout in Quidditch! All the Gryffindor games we’ve talked about had goals in the double-digits!”

“Thus the first-name basis. Now stop it, Hope, you’re dripping smugness all over my floor.” The professor sat and gestured for them to join her. “How can I help you two?”

“We have an applied potions question, and not for school. This is the real deal.” Hope reached into her cloak and pulled out a lengthy document. Dr. Couture’s eyebrows rose. “Is that an NDA in your robe or are you just happy to see me?”

“Who says it has to be one or the other?” Hope handed it to Dr. Couture, who took her time and read it twice. Ashlyn just started at them.

“I appreciate that you promise to include my name on any patents that come out of whatever this is.”

“We need someone who’s a master with potions. That’s you. Believe me, if you help us make this work, you’ll deserve it.”

“Allright, Hope, I’m intrigued. Count me in.” She signed the agreement. “So, what do you need help with?”

Hope pulled the folder of papers, all blank at the moment, from under her cloak. “Place your hand on it,” she instructed, and laid hers on it as well. “Third star.”

Ashlyn grinned.

Writing appeared. Dr. Couture opened the folder and turned it to face herself.

“You’re going to help me-“

“Us,” Ashlyn corrected.

“Help us,” Hope smiled apologetically, “record more shutouts.”

“Gloves…fingers treated with an enchantment-immunity potion…nullify the enchanted grip of a quaffle…interesting. And the objective of reducing your grip is….?”

“Give the keeper more options for deflecting shots.”

Dr. Couture pictured it. “So you could tip it with your fingers if you can't quite get to it in time. I see the potential. I presume one of these documents includes the part where this isn’t cheating?”

Ashlyn nodded. “Almost all of them. You would not believe what it took our contact to get an official answer without actually asking the question. The plain-English version is that this is legal as long as the gloves aren’t enchanted and have no influence on the quaffle.”

“Basically, we need a glove that isn't magic and causes nothing to happen,” Hope said with a sideways grin.

Dr. Couture nodded, ideas already stirring. “I think it can be done. I’m in my lab every evening Monday through Thursday. Come by with some gloves you’re willing to ruin and we’ll get started.”

“I have one more question,” Ashlyn said. Dr. Couture nodded for her to continue. ”Are you speaking in contractions now because you're not teaching or because you’re friends with Hope?”
Dear Whit,

I hope this finds you well. Wow, I can’t believe it’s been more than a month since I left! It’s that weird thing, where it feels like no time at all yet also like forever. So much has happened, I don’t even know where to start! Just kidding: I’m reserve keeper for my House’s Quidditch team! I didn’t think I’d make it — I was too busy with school to practice more than a few times — but the current starting keeper says I have more potential than anyone he’s seen in years. Practices are great and our first match is in November. I don’t expect to play, but it’ll still be great to dress out with the team.

The ‘House’ thing I mentioned: imagine if each dorm building at UNC had a mascot and a set of character traits assigned to it, and the school put you in dorms based on those traits. I’m in what I think of as the ‘chivalrous’ House, Gryffindor (“Golden Lion,” I think), with two other US students sent by You-Know-Who*. One’s a great girl from CA named Alex and the other, Ali, is from northern Virginia (she makes it sound like a separate state!). Ali and I are falling for each other, Whit. We agreed early to try to take things slow and be wise about it, but the closer we grow the less practical that seems. I don’t want to rush things with someone who will be my teammate for the next ten-plus years, because that seems like a huge risk to our game, but. But. Sometimes all I can think about is how much I want to hold her hand everywhere I go, or how wonderful it would be to massage her shoulders while we talk about her day, or how peaceful it would be to just lie on the grass with my head in her lap and her fingers in my hair. My heart can’t stand hedging my bets anymore, Whit. I have to talk to her about going all-in, and soon.

I haven’t been able to go surfing yet. There’s another former UNC girl here, Tobin Heath, who claims she can magic herself some worthy waves on the lake here. When I’m caught up on all the pre-college wizard education I missed, I’m gonna go see what she’s about. Oh, and the person doing remedial tutoring for Alex and I? Lindsay Tarpley, also formerly of UNC, now a professional Quidditch player in Scotland. Small world!

How are things with the Tar Heels? I want to know everything, naturally! I hope to hear from you soon. And, of course, don’t let anyone see this, ever.

Your sis,

Ash

*P.S. Apparently “You-Know-Who” is an old nickname for some sort of British wizard-Hitler. That caused some awkward moments.

Chapter End Notes

I may be 25 chapters in (that escalated quickly!), but this is still my first work of fiction in a very long time. I’d love to hear what you’re thinking, what you like, and constructive comments on ways to improve.
Hope watched Kelley fly the slalom course she’d marked out. At each direction change, she tossed the quaffle ahead for herself to catch at the next. The girl was getting good at it.

*What are you doing, Hope?*

“Yeah, that's it! Good movement, Kelley!”

*What were you thinking?*

“Keep your eyes up! You don't have to dribble, so always be looking!”

*You weren't thinking, of course. You were feeling.*

“Don’t stop! You won’t get to stop for mistakes in a match. Keep going!”

*You were starting to like her, idiot.*

“Good, good, now take the pace up another notch.”

*You like – no, liked – her, and now you're committed to this.*

“Yeah! That's what I'm talking about. Now, work on making it smoother.”

*If she makes the team - which she will, thanks to you - you'll have to see her even more.*

“Excellent! Run it five more times, just like that, to start getting it into muscle memory.”

*How long can you keep this up?*

“You go, girl! Gryffindor won't know what hit them! Finish strong and we'll do cool-down.”

*What the fuck were you thinking?*

The second-year who’d competed for the final spot on the Slytherin team was pissed, and she let the starting chasers know it. “It's not fair and you know it. Hope Solo coached her, for Salazar’s sake! Kelley was practically on the team already!”

“Enough, Susan.” Fara Williams was unimpressed. “You could've asked someone to work with you, too.”

“But…”

“No 'buts!';” Joanne Love chopped with her hand. “Kelley worked her ass off; you're complaining after the fact. Who would you want on your team?”

“I'd want people who run fair tryouts, not ones who play favorites! Is Kelley the teacher's pet or something?”

“Problem?” Hope stepped into the argument between the fourth-year chasers and the cut second-
year.

“Uh...” Susan marshaled her courage. “Yeah, there's a problem. How is it fair that Kelley gets private coaching ahead of practice?”

“Nothing’s fair.”

Susan stared.

“We're here to win, Danes. Joanne and Fara,” she gestured to the fourth-years, “tell me that Kelley improved from Saturday and you didn't. That shows us that we can count on Kelley to find a way to win, but not you. If you want to make the cut next year, then prove that you will.”

“Oh, and her being your little favorite had nothing to do with it?”

The rising frustration vanished from Hope's face. In its place was nothing. Empty, cold, brutal nothing.

“Jo,” Hope said, without looking away, “did I give you any suggestion that I wanted you to pick Kelley?”

“No.”

“Did you know I was practicing with her?”

“No, I didn't.”

“Fara? Same questions.”

“No and yes, respectively.”

“Did that influence your decision?”

“It did. I graded her harder than you, Susan.”

“Are we done here?”

Susan opened her mouth, shut it, and slouched away.

“Something wrong?” Kelley appeared at Hope's side and examined her face, concerned.

“No.” Hope dug at the grass with her shoe. “Someone just couldn't handle the truth.” She looked up at Kelley and most of her face smiled. “Welcome aboard.”

The image stuck with Kelley: Hope congratulating her on making the team, but with a smile that didn’t reach her eyes. She ruminated on it for days.

“Hope,” she finally asked.

“Hmmm?” Hope looked up from her book.

“I was wondering...why did you offer to train me in Quidditch?”

Hope blinked. “I, uh, wanted to get you on the fast track to being a world-class chaser. The next World Cup is in 2011, so we need to get all of you in matches as soon as possible.”
“Oh.” Kelley realized that was a terrible way to end the conversation; “Thank you, Hope,” she added, with a smile that almost reached her eyes, “it means a lot to me.”

“No problem.” Hope turned back to her book and Kelley turned away. What were you expecting? That was silly of you. As she left the room, that silly part of her looked back over her shoulder. Hope’s head was bowed and her eyes were shut.

"So," Alex sidled up next to Kelley at her locker in the Room of Requirement, "How is Slytherin practice going?"

"Really well. Practicing against the older chasers is doing so much to improve my game. That's not a surprise, though, right?"

"Yeah, I guess that's true for anything. So...have you scored on Hope Solo yet?" Alex's eyes and words asked very different questions.

Kelley fixed her eyes on the back wall of her locker, "I, um...no, we haven't got to that stage."

"Are you making progress that way, though?"

Kelley risked looking at Alex, who wore an impish smirk. Kelley went pink around the edges. "Is this your revenge for that time I embarrassed you about Dr. Couture?"

The smirk dropped. "I don't do revenge like that. I was just curious. I mean, you told me you like her and, from what I’ve seen, she looks like she enjoys having you around...?" Alex turned it into a leading question.

Kelley picked up her necktie and stared through it. "I thought she did, but she doesn't seem to now."

"What do you mean?"

"It's like...you know sometimes when you hear a new song, and it sounds amazing, but after a few weeks of listening to it you lose interest? Like, there are the songs that become your favorites and then there are the ones that you decide aren't really that great?"

Alex nodded. "Kinda, yeah."

"It's like I'm one of those songs. I don't make her laugh much anymore, we don't really talk, her smiles feel forced..." Kelley sighed. "I don't get it, though. I'm not a song."

Alex went with it. "Hmmm. For her to just go from 'friend' to 'meh' doesn't seem right. Like, it would make sense if she had a crush on you for the first two weeks, then realized that you aren't who she daydreamed you were, but she didn't look like that to me."

"Exactly. I asked Amy about it - if I did anything to offend Hope - and she said she didn't think so, that this was just a 'Hope thing' and I should just give her a week or two."

Alex frowned. "I don't like that."

"Me neither. In a weird way, I kinda - ugh, this is gonna sound bad - I want it to be something serious, because I don't think I could handle being with someone who just randomly checks out on you."

"You can't." Kelley gave Alex an odd look. "I mean, I know you that well by now. You wouldn't be happy with someone who just quits being your girlfriend for a week every month or two."
When the girls congregated for another meeting and hang-out in the Gryffindor spire room, Hope hung back at the edge of the socializing. Lauren broke away to talk to her. “Hey, Hope! How's your week going?”

“Oh, you know. Studying charms, making saves.”

“Yeah?”

Hope shrugged. “Honestly, it's just a week.”

Lauren nodded. “Um, have you heard anything more from Lindsay about playing professionally?”

Hope shook her head. “No, no news.”

“Oh. I guess it’s not really the season for that yet, is it?”

“No. I'll probably hear more in the new year.”

“Cool. Well, I hope that goes well for you.” Lauren turned to the group. “Okay, thank you all for coming. I wanted to ask about…”

When the party broke up, Kelley, still seated, turned to Alex. “Did you notice the way Hope's acting?” Alex answered her with a solemn nod. “Am I imagining that Hope was fun before?”

Alex shook her head and put a hand on one of Kelley's. “You aren’t imagining it. When we first met here, she was laughing and telling stories. Something’s wrong.”

Kelley pulled Amy aside after Slytherin practice to gauge her thoughts. “I know I asked you before, but it’s been a while. Is Hope really withdrawn or is it just me?”

Amy squinted at something only she could see. “Yeah, it's not just you. She’s giving me a lot of one-word answers lately.” She looked back at Kelley. “I saw her do something like this last year. There was something bothering her - I never found out what - and in a few weeks she got through it and was back to normal.”

“I'm starting to wonder what 'normal' is for Hope.”

“Me, too. Again. I thought I had her figured out last year, but then people commented that her attitude was better since we New Kids arrived. Then you newer kids arrived and she was different again. Lighter.” Amy sighed. “Now she's being distant. I don't know what to tell you.”

“Have you talked to her?”

Amy sighed again and shook her head. “I learned last year that Hope will open up to me if she wants to, but she won't let me open her up.”

“You gave up?”

“Kelley, I've never seen anyone get as angry as she did when I tried to find out what was going on that other time. I had to let it go to avoid the kind of fight that ends friendships.”

“So you gave up.”
“Yes, I gave up,” Amy snapped. “I get it, you're Kelley 'All-or-Nothing' O'Hara, and that's great, but I decided to keep the friendship we had instead of demanding she confide in me and getting pushed away permanently. If you can't accept that, then try your luck.”

“Sorry, Amy. I'm frustrated.” Kelley breathed for a minute, but it didn’t help to steady her voice. “She's already pushed me back from being her friend, really, so I don't know that I have anything to lose by asking.”

“Your personal Quidditch coach, for one thing. I'm sorry, too. Maybe she will let you in. She seemed to before, more than I expected.”

“Well, she’s not brought much positivity to our practices lately, so…I guess I'll let you know how it goes. I'll send word if I end up in the infirmary.” Kelley's attempt at humor was as lifeless as the fallen leaves.

Despite her words to Amy, Kelley desperately hoped that Hope would come back out of her shell on her own. That's what Ashlyn had called it; “I've seen that plenty back home,” she responded when Kelley asked for advice, “someone can't handle what's going on or who they are and pull back into their shell.”

“When do they come out?”

“When they stop believing it'll hurt more than staying in their shell. Is your next question, 'How do I get Hope to believe that?'”

Kelley nodded.

“You can't force her, that's for sure; Hope will just see you as an extension of whatever's hurting her. Sometimes you can coax someone out, but sometimes all you can do is wait,” Ashlyn seemed to cut her thought short.

And sometimes they never come out, Kelley’s worries filled in. “Have you seen any clues about what's bothering her?”

“I know what it's not about,” Ashlyn said. “It's not about you. I can tell because it started after you and Hope started growing close; if it was about you, she would’ve have slammed the door on you, not closed it slow on everyone. Maybe she’s afraid of you finding out what’s wrong and trying to keep you from getting closer.”

“Then why push away everyone?”

“Maybe to mask the issue, maybe because all of this is making her depressed. Maybe because she's that scared.” She considered for a moment. “Yeah, I guess that's my main piece of advice: remember, whatever happens, whatever she says, it's because she's afraid.”

Alex and Kelley looked up as Hope walked to her locker in the Room of Requirement, eyes down and headphones on. Kelley, changing back into her school uniform, felt an all-too-familiar weight take hold of her chest. “Hey,” she tried.

Hope glanced up, a beat late, and acknowledged Kelley’s existence. “Hey.” Her eyes went back to her locker.

Kelley stifled a sigh. “How are you today, Hope?”
“Good.” Hope didn’t look at her.

“Are you excited for the Gryffindor game next month?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you going to give me more than one word at a time?”

Hope said nothing.

Kelley looked across at Alex, who shrugged helplessly. October was in its closing act, and the weeks of playing nice and hoping for improvement were wasted. *I can’t take this anymore,* Kelley thought.

Chapter End Notes

I always love to hear what you think! Comments appreciated :)}
Kelley, waiting up late in the Slytherin common room, gave up on drawing yet again. Her pounding heart wouldn’t let her focus, so she tried to relax, again. *This is the right thing. It'll be fine. You’ll be fine, Kelley. Probably. The worst she can do is kill me. Well, that or-

The door from the hall opened and framed Hope Solo in the full-moon lake-light.

“Hope,” Kelley called, her voice soft to suit the hour.

For a fraction of a second, Hope's face was the picture of despair. Then the blank, unapproachable look was back in place.

“I miss you, Hope.”

“What? You see me every day.”

“You know what I mean. This last month-and-a-half, you've shut down. What's going on?”

“Nothing’s going on.”

“Don't tell me there's nothing, Hope.” Kelley took a breath and reined in her frustration. “It's obvious to a lot of people.”

“I don't want to talk about it.”

“Well, I do want to talk about it.”

Hope shook her head in silence.

“Hope? Say something.”

Hope clenched her jaw and walked towards their dorm room.

“Alright, I'll say something. Hope - okay, don't look at me - you aren't talking to anyone and it's hurting your friends.”

She kept walking.

“Does that matter to you, Hope?”

Nothing.

“Hope?”

Hope stopped with her hand on their door.

Kelley thought she heard a whisper. “What was that?”

“Yes.” Hope sounded waterlogged.

“Yes? Then explain yourself!”
“Because this hurts less.”

“Hurts less?!” Kelley was flabbergasted. “Hurts who less?”

“Everyone.”

“Did you ever think…” Kelley swallowed against the pain in her voice, “that maybe we'd rather hurt with you than watch you drain the life out of yourself?”

“You wouldn't be hurting with me.”

“You know what I-”

“I mean you'd leave.”

“Hope!” Kelley, stunned, reminded herself to not take it personally. “Hope, what's got you so afraid?”

Hope shook her head.

“Well, then, what do you want?”

Hope’s brow furrowed.

Kelley clarified for her. “All of this - you shutting down and icing your friends out - what's your goal?”

“I told you.”

“Not very clearly, Hope.”

The older girl sighed. “It's the least painful way.”

“Least painful way to do what?”

Hope bit her lip and looked at the floor.

“Least painful way to do what, Hope?”

She closed her eyes. “To…”

Kelley held her breath and stared, hoping for a sign, a hint of what Hope was feeling. She got one; the dark curve where Hope’s lashes lay glistened in the moonlight. At the sight of tears, everything in Kelley shouted ‘hold her!’ She went to Hope and reached for her hand. Hope flinched at the contact. Kelley blinked at the first of her own tears and reached for Hope again, this time with two hands. Hope tried to pull away again, but surrendered; the fight seemed to have gone out of her. Kelley half-led, half-pulled her to the nearest couch and sat next to her. She put one arm around Hope’s shoulders - at much as she could - and held Hope’s hands in her other hand. Hope shuddered against Kelley’s side and worked her jaw. She looked pained, frustrated, even angry.

Kelley asked her question again, gently. “What's your goal, Hope?”

“To get you to leave.”

“What?” Despite experiencing it for weeks, hearing it from Hope shocked Kelley. “Why? Why push me away?”
Hope looked at Kelley with pleading eyes. “Kelley, I’m begging you, stop asking.”

“Hope, I care about you too much to not ask.”

“You ‘care’,” Hope scoffed, bitterness evident in her tone.

“What?! Yes, Hope, I care about you! Is that somehow hard to believe?”

“No, it’s just that I’ve heard that one before. Ask my family how the story ends,” she added, almost to herself.

“Your family?”

“We are not talking about this.” Her tone was fortress wall, and it made Kelley worry.

“Hope, it’s the full moon tonight. Isn’t this when you do all your self-examination anyway?”

Hope bristled like a cornered wildcat. “Some things are best buried and forgotten. We are not talking about this.”

Kelley filed that for later. “Well, no matter what your story is, I do care about you, so watching you hurt yourself is hurting me. Please, let’s have it out, even if it kills me, so that you can get past this! I can’t watch any longer.” Fresh tears shoved old ones out of Kelley’s eyes to run down her cheeks.

“Then stop caring about me.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Please, Kelley.”

“No.”

Hope hung her head. “Why do you have to be so stubborn?”

“Why do you want to make me leave?”

Hope stared at a thread fraying from the cushion. “Because then you’d be rejecting my behavior, not me.”

“What? Why, Hope? Why push me to reject you at all?”

“Because…because if you knew the real Hope Solo, you’d leave.” Despite fresh tears, Hope’s gaze intensified. “I know you think you wouldn’t, Kelley, but you would. You would.”

“The ‘real’ Hope?” Kelley tried to understand. “Are you afraid,” she ventured, “that I wouldn’t want anything to do with you if I knew you better?”

Hope nodded. “One way or another, sooner or later, you wouldn’t. I’m trying to keep you from getting hurt worse, Kelley.”

Kelley tried to look behind Hope’s eyes. “You’re seriously resigned to me rejecting you?”

Hope lifted her shoulders and made a face of helpless confirmation.

Kelley couldn’t believe her eyes. “Hope, what happened to you?! How did you lose hope when it’s literally your name?”
Hope rolled her eyes. “Fucking hilarious, isn’t it?”

“No, it’s not! It’s tragic!”

“Heh, yeah, I’d make a great Greek play. Hope Solo-pus Rex.”

“Stop it!” Kelley got on her knees on the couch cushion. “Stop. That is not who you are. Why are you living it?”

“Because it is me, Kelley. The Hope you thought you knew? Not the real me. This is the real me.”

“Hope, I know you. I.”

“No, you don’t know me.” Hope held Kelley’s eyes. “Not the real me. I’m a mess. I let people in, either I hurt them or they hurt me. Nothing else, Kelley. No happy endings when I’m not on the field. I’m a disaster, and I’ve learned to live with it by keeping people like you out.”

“People like me?”

“People who ‘care’.”

“Because you’re so broken that it’s impossible to know the ‘real you’ without getting hurt somehow?”

“Yes.”

“What about Jessica?”

“I’m pretty sure I hurt her this week.”

“Because you’re depressed about how you expect to hurt people! That’s a self-fulfilling prophecy!”

Hope looked exasperated. “Dammit, Kelley, look at my relationship with her! Why do you think we were never more than friends?”

“Um…” Kelley hadn’t let herself wonder why. “Because you weren’t the right fit for each other?”

“Because I would’ve lost my only friend when it went wrong!” Hope responded, in a burst of desperation.

Kelley rubbed her forehead and tried to process it all. “And now you’re trying to get rid of me, before I get to know the ‘real you’, so that my inevitable rejection of you won’t be personal?”

“Yes. There, you got your answer.” Though her language was brusque, Hope’s delivery was despondent. “Now just go.”

Kelley shook her head to clear it, then leveled her gaze at the older girl. “Hope, let me put this in terms you can’t miss: fuck that. I’ll tell you who’s the ‘real you’: it’s the you that shows up when you aren’t buried under all of…this,” she waved her hands around, then reengaged. “The real you is the you that was making jokes after Sorting. The real you is the you that offered to practice Quidditch with me, forgot but made it right, and said ‘I’m so glad to have you back’ after I made you laugh. Do you remember how you smiled when you said that, Hope?”

Hope tightened her lips.

“Do you, Hope?”
She nodded the smallest nod.

“That was the real Hope. This is drowning-in-despair Hope. I miss the real Hope.” She watched Hope.

Hope watched her.

“I miss her more than I’ve ever missed anyone.”

Hope softened. Just a little, but enough that Kelley noticed and shifted forward.

“I miss her - you, Hope - and I’d bear anything to bring her back. Anything, Hope.”

Kelley saw Hope soften more. Her body started to relax and her face was no longer drawn taut. Kelley leaned forward a little more. “Do you miss that Hope?”

After a pause, she nodded and matched Kelley’s movement.

“Does that Hope miss me?”

Hope closed her eyes and whispered, “Yes.” When she opened them, Kelley brought her head closer and Hope mirrored her. Kelley’s eyes found Hope’s lips, asked Hope’s eyes, and Hope’s eyes went to her lips and back and Kelley leaned in. She wet her lips, Hope did the same, and Hope’s eyes closed for the final connection. She shut her eyes and closed the distance.

And kissed air.

For a moment, Kelley held her eyes shut. No. No. Why? Have I read this wrong? Do I have Hope utterly wrong? Oh, no, no, no…

She felt Hope’s breath against her lips and opened her eyes. Hope seemed frozen, unmoved since Kelley had closed her eyes. For a half-second, Kelley hoped the problem might be with time itself, not with Hope, but then Hope’s lips moved and sounds came out.

“I-I can’t…I don’t…you…”

Kelley’s tears bled anew. I knew it. I told Alex, I knew she wouldn’t really want me. You’re an idiot, Kelley. She twisted and pushed off the couch and away. I am such a fool! Why did I think Hope would… She hurried to their room. In a moment, she was back, heading the other way, broom in hand and something dark and bushy clutched against her chest.

Chapter End Notes

More to come, of course.

I always love to hear what you think! Comments appreciated :)
Alex had no interest in waking, but the noise insisted. She pried herself out of bed and shuffled towards the source of the noise. She found it: a fist on the other side of the west window.

“What is it?” Ashlyn's groggy voice demanded.

Alex wiped more sleep from her eyes. “I’m…” She put her face to the window and instantly regretted it; the glass was frigid! Alex blinked yet again and now she could see that not all the blurriness was in her eyes and not all the noise was in her head. It was raining, hard.

“Oh, shit.” All the pieces fell into place. “It’s Kelley! Ash, I need your help!” Alex unbolted the window and pushed it open. “Kelley!” A gush of rain answered her. Ashlyn appeared at her side and the two pulled broom and rider into the room. The Slytherin girl collapsed, soaked and shaking, against the wall. Ali, now awake as well, closed the window behind her and secured the broom, while Alex helped Kelley stand. “Here,” Ashlyn proffered a towel and Ali’s Gryffindor bathrobe, “dry off first, then we’ll get you warm.” Kelley nodded, teeth chattering too hard to reply, and darted behind the bath’s privacy screen.

“What are we gonna do?” Ali whispered to her roommates.

“She needs to warm up and the only place for that,” Ashlyn answered, “is the common room’s hearth.”

Ali’s eyes widened, but there was no alternative. “You're right. The fire spells I know aren’t human-rated.”

“Isn’t that…” Alex stopped and shook her head. “Screw the rules. It's almost two, I think, and she’ll be in Gryffindor colors. I doubt we’ll see anyone and most won’t recognize her in red, probably. We can get away with it.”

Ashlyn nodded. “If someone does walk in, we can try the ‘Good Samaritan’ defense.”

“Or threaten them,” Ali added. The other two looked at her. “What? You know you would.”

“We didn’t know that you would,” Alex said.

“For Kelley? I'd stun and ‘obliviate’ a prefect, if I knew how.”
Ashlyn grinned, then turned a serious face to Alex and whispered, “Are you going to be OK?”
“OK?” Alex whispered back, confused.

Ashlyn dropped her voice as low as it could go. “Feelings for Kelley.”

“Oh.” Alex blinked. “That. Yeah, I’m good.” She didn’t fidget or look away, Ashlyn noted.

Kelley returned, tinged blue inside the crimson robe. She held her arms folded for warmth and shivered. “Th-thanks, g-g-guys. What n-now?”

“Now we get you warm by the big hearth. We need to be silent; we’ll be walking right past most of the girls’ rooms.” Ashlyn opened the trapdoor, gently, and started down.

Kelley balked. “I d-don’t th-think this is a g-good…”

Ali shushed her. “Neither is hypothermia.”

The three helped their friend climb down the ladder and descend the spiraling steps to the Gryffindor common room, which was deserted, as expected. The lights were turned down and the fire had burned low.

“Put more wood on it,” Ali ordered Ashlyn. “I'll get it roaring.”

Alex guided Kelley into a comfy armchair by the fire, then stepped into the kitchenette. In a minute, she was back with a steaming mug of hot cocoa. “Scoot,” she smiled, handed Kelley the mug, and then snuggled in next to and under her. Ashlyn carried over a third chair for Ali, who cast a spell which made flames leap and snap from the fresh firewood.

After the spots left her eyes, Alex kissed Kelly's wet hair. “We love you, Kelley. and we'll do anything for you. Anything.” She felt Ashlyn look at her and returned reassuring eye contact.

“You're our sister,” Ali continued, “and you can stay in our room any time you need.”

“Thank you,” Kelley said, voice thick. “Thank you,” she said in a clearer voice, this time making eye contact with Ali and Ashlyn and squeezing Alex's hand.

Alex gave her another minute to drink the chill away, then asked the question. “What happened, Kelley?”

“Hope…” She sniffled. “She-.” Her voice caught. “I-.” Speech wasn't happening.

Ashlyn took an educated guess. “Hope did something and you feel rejected?”

Kelley nodded but the tears were flowing again and she couldn't say more. Instead, she handed the half-empty mug back to Alex, reached into the bathrobe – where her other arm had remained folded – and drew out Squirrel. He crawled up the robe and nuzzled her neck.

“I remembered him this time,” Kelley spoke over her shoulder to Alex, with effort and a joyless smile. “Now he's as soaked as I was, poor guy.” The squirrel shivered and she stroked him as if his heart was broken, not hers. The mutual warm and fuzzy affection seemed to compose her, and she began again.

“She stayed out late, probably to avoid me, so I waited up for her in our common room. She didn’t want to talk, but I pressed. She pushed back and went to leave and finally I asked if she cared that she was hurting her friends.” Kelley paused to breathe through her mouth. “She whispered ‘yes,’ and
it was one of the saddest things I've ever heard anyone say. She wouldn't tell me what was wrong, so I tried asking what she wanted - what her goal was in turtling up - and she started to crack. It was like she wasn’t sure she wanted to answer, and then she was but the answer hurt, and then I saw tears…”

Kelley took another, more ragged breath. “I pulled her to a couch – she didn’t want me to but I think she didn’t have the spirit to fight – and I asked her again, why, what’s wrong and so on. She never really told me, but it’s, like…” Kelley thought for a second. “She believes she’s a terrible person, or relationship poison or something, and, if I really knew her, I'd hate her. I said-” Kelley stopped and closed her eyes against a new welling of tears. Alex rubbed her shoulder in sympathy.

“I told her that- that she was wrong, that the ‘real’ Hope Solo was the person she is when she's not…not burdened with…whatever's going on.” She heard Ali hum approval. “I told her I...I missed that Hope, that I wanted her back…” The teardrops were rolling. “Wanted her more than anything, and I asked her if- if she missed that Hope, too, and she nodded, and I asked her if that Hope missed,” Kelley swallowed, “me, and she nodded again, and I- I leaned forward a little…”

“Oh, Kelley,” Alex whispered, sensing where the story was headed.

“She did too, and everything seemed right, felt right, and she closed her eyes and I closed mine and then she…she just…” Kelley searched for a word which she could bear to say. “Stopped. Her lips weren’t there and I opened my eyes and-” she broke off into full sobs. Squirrel sat up on his hind legs to nuzzle her cheek and lick away salty tears.

Alex hugged Kelley from behind and beside. “Did she say anything?” Alex nudged, after Kelley’s breathing evened out.

“She said,” Kelley’s voice tore with fresh pain, ‘‘I can't, I don't,’ and then her voice caught on…on a word, and then th-the next w-word was ‘you’.”

“Oh, Kelley,” Ali murmured, “I’m so sorry.”

“What happened next?” Ashlyn asked, gentle.

“I- I ran. Here.”

“Did Hope say anything as you left? How did she look?”

“I…she might’ve called my name, but…”

“But you were past the point of hearing,” Kelley could only nod. They gave her time.

“I knew it was too good to be true,” Kelley resumed. “I told you, Alex…”

Alex wasn’t sure what she meant. “I don’t remember that you did.”

“Last time I was crying on you; ‘why would she like me?’ and all. I should’ve- I did know better. She'd never, really…”

“Honestly, Kelley, that sounds like fear talki-” The sound of footsteps on the stairs stopped Ashlyn. Kelley pulled Squirrel into her robe, tucked her head against Alex, and listened as the footsteps traveled from the staircase to the boys' dorms across to the kitchenette. Glass clinked; in a minute the footsteps came back the other way. Then stopped.

Ashlyn dove from her chair, wand in hand, and hissed, “Arresto momentum!”
Surprised, Alex and Kelley turned to look. The boy stood frozen, staring at Kelley with his mouth - and right hand - hanging open. A glass of water hovered an inch above the floor. “Wow, nice save,” Kelley blurted, and then her broken heart leaped into her throat. She looked back at the boy - from her Potions class, she realized - and her eyes were as wide as his.

Ali stood. “Lucky for you that there was a goalkeeper in the room.” Alex was astonished by how calm she sounded. “Otherwise, people would’ve woken up, we'd have to rush Kelley out of here, and you'd be wondering whether to tell that three model students invited a Slytherin into Gryffindor’s common room. You should thank Ashlyn for saving you that headache.”

The boy glanced at Ashlyn, bewildered.

“Now, it’s easy for you,” Ali continued. “Kelley is our friend. She was desperate for help, so we took her in to sit by the fire. If you have a problem with that, tell someone. If you don’t, then there’s nothing to tell.”

Ashlyn moved between the boy and Kelley, set her feet shoulder-width apart and folded her arms. Her sleeveless night shirt showed off her tattoos and muscular build. The boy’s eyes widened even further. “N-no, nothing to tell.”

“Not even as a story for your friends or a letter home?”

“No. It's a…uh…a non-event.”

“I’m glad to hear you agree,” Ali said, with a lovely smile. “Have a good night!”

The dazed boy walked back to the stairs. When his footsteps no longer reached their ears, Alex buried her face in Kelley's shoulder to stifle her laughter. Kelley chuckled at her, then beamed at Ali. “You are amazing!”

Ali grinned back. “Thank you. Wow, thank goodness he wasn’t older.” She turned to Ashlyn. “You know what else is amazing,” she growled.

“I have a pretty good idea,” Ashlyn smirked back. She moved towards her seat and ran a hand through her hair, flexing her bicep in the process. Ali’s eyes turned smoky as she drank it in.

Alex rolled her eyes. “Alright, you two. Don't forget we have a guest.” Alex said.

Ali suppressed a pout, for Kelley’s sake.

Chapter End Notes

I always love to hear what you think! Comments appreciated :)


Hope had no ideas, no wants. Not anymore. This must be what death feels like. I wish I could just sink into the couch and disappear. The common room reminded her of Kelley’s first night underwater, though, and she couldn’t stay in that memory. Bed? No, that might wake Amy. Just go somewhere. Anywhere.

She walked, dazed, out of the Slytherin common room and down the hall. It was long past curfew, thankfully, and nobody was around to see-

“Hope?” Dr. Couture’s voice came from behind her.

I’m fucked.

“Why are you up, Hope? Is something wrong?”

If I say ‘no’, my voice will give me away. If I say nothing, she’ll know something’s wrong. Fuck.

“Yes.”

“Yes”? Merlin’s beard, it must be bad.” Hope felt hands on her shoulders turning her around.

“Hope, you look devastated.”

She couldn’t lift her eyes to meet the professor’s, but she knew they were searching her.

“Hope…did someone break your heart?”

“Yeah,” Hope sniffed. “Me.”

“Here, come to my office. Unless you were going somewhere in particular?”

She couldn’t lift her eyes to meet the professor’s, but she knew they were searching her.

The next time she used her eyes, she found herself nestled in a chair in Dr. Couture’s office, sipping something warm and encouraging. Her professor had pulled her own chair close. Those violet eyes, normally piercing and uncanny, were soft with concern.

“Do you feel more alive now?”

“Yeah. A little.”

“I’ll take ‘a little’,” she smiled. “Now, talk to me. How did you break your own heart, Hope?”

“I guess I had help,” Hope stared at her hands. “Really, though, I knew better than to…”

“To let someone in?”
“Yeah.” Hope looked up. “How did you know?”

A dash of pride entered the woman’s smile. “Top of my class in Ravenclaw, plus a few months of watching you. You have to let someone in to have your heart broken, but you don’t let people in. So, you tried letting someone in and you blame yourself now that it’s gone wrong. Am I right or just mostly right?”

“You’re right, Doctor Vale-“

“I’m not a doctor after curfew, Hope. Unless I’m still in my lab.”

“You’re right, Valence.” It still felt a little weird, but Hope went with it. “I let someone in, and they got upset, and they left, and it- it hurts.” She blinked back fresh tears. “Hell, I didn’t know it was possible to cry this much.”

“What happened, Hope?”

Hope stayed in the back of the library, alone, until well after midnight. She did not want to see anyone, did not want to talk to anyone, could not bear to feel Kelley's eyes on her for one more second. I've had enough of life for today, she thought, as she returned to Slytherin Dungeon. Let me sleep.

“Hope.”

Why?

“I miss you, Hope.”

Please, don't do this to me.

“You know what I mean. This last month-and-a-half, you've shut down. What's going on?”

It's the best thing for both of us. Just let me be.

“Don't tell me there's nothing, Hope. It's obvious to a lot of people.”

Wonderful.

“Well, I do want to talk about it.”

I promise, you don't.

“Hope? Say something.”

Don't you get it? Are you stupid? Damn it, I'm going to sleep.

“Alright, I'll say something. Hope - okay, don't look at me - you aren't talking to anyone-”

Sherlock.

“-and it's hurting your friends.”

Please, Kelley, don't make this worse. All I want is to dissolve into my bed.

“Does that matter to you, Hope?”
That's exactly what I meant.

“Hope?”

Yes.

“What was that?”

Damn it…yes.

“Yes? Then explain yourself!”

Because I don't want to hurt you.

“Hurts less?! Hurts who less?”

Both of us.

“Did you ever think…” Kelley swallowed as if it pained her, “that maybe we'd rather hurt with you than watch you drain the life out of yourself?”

I did. That never lasts.

“You know what I-”

Oh, I know.

“Hope! Hope, what's got you so afraid?”

No.

“Well, then, what do you want?”

Want? The word felt foreign.

Kelley clarified. “All of this - you shutting down and icing your friends out - what's your goal?”

Aren’t you listening?

“Not very clearly, Hope.”

Damage control, Kelley. That’s my goal.

“Least painful way to do what?”

To get...damn it, if we keep talking about this...

“Least painful way to do what, Hope?”

To get out of your life. To get you over me, Kelley. Shit, I’m tearing up.

Hope felt softness against her hand and flinched. She opened her eyes, blinked back tears and saw Kelley sniffle and reach for her again, this time with both hands. Hope made a feeble effort to pull away, but two months’ worth of emotional exhaustion burst open and she had no energy to move or resist. She let Kelley half-lead, half-drag her to the nearest couch and sit her down. The girl put one arm around Hope’s shoulders - or tried to - and kept Hope’s hands in the other. Hope shuddered; Kelley’s touches made her ache and tense. She felt trapped, both by Kelley’s insistence and her own
emotions.

“What's your goal, Hope?” The girl wasn’t giving up.

To avoid this.

“What? Why? Why push me away?”

I can’t. Please. Stop. Asking.

“Hope, I care about you too much to not ask.”

You care? Oh, thank you! That makes everything all better.

“What?! Yes, Hope, I care about you! Is that somehow hard to believe?”

Oh, I believe you think you do. I learned all about that, growing up.

“Your family?”

NO.

“Hope, it’s the full moon tonight. Isn’t this when you do all your self-examination anyway?”

You go and fuck yourself!

“Well, no matter what your story is, I do care about you, so watching you hurt yourself is hurting me. Please, let’s have it out, even if it kills me, so that you can get past this! I can’t watch any longer.”

Tears streamed down Kelley’s cheeks.

Then don’t!

“You can’t be serious.”

I’m telling you, this is the least painful option.

“No.”

Damn you, why do you have to care?

“Why do you want to make me leave?”

Because... because then it won’t be personal.

“What? Why, Hope? Why push me to reject you at all?”

Because it’s inevitable, once you really get to know me.

“The ‘real’ Hope?” Kelley paused. “Are you afraid,” she began again, slower, “that I wouldn’t want anything to do with you if I knew you better?”

Yes... and I don’t think I could take it.

Kelley peered at her like an optometrist. “You’re seriously resigned to me rejecting you?”

Yep. You will. There’s only so much of me that anyone can stand.
Kelley gaped at her. “Hope, what happened to you?! How did you lose hope when it’s literally your name?”

*Oh, I just love the constant reminder that there is none.*

“No, it’s not! It’s tragic!”

*Yeah, ‘tragic’ is apt.*

“Stop it!” Kelley got on her knees in front of her. “Stop. That is not who you are. Why are you living it?”

*Trust me, this is me.*

“Hope, I know you. I-”

*No, you don’t, and you don’t want to. This ends badly, especially with people like you.*

“People like me?”

*People I…could care about.*

“Because you’re so broken that it’s impossible to know the ‘real you’ without getting hurt somehow?”

*Yes! Do you get it now?*

“What about Jessica?”

*My fake girlfriend? Perfect example.*

“Because you’re depressed about how you expect to hurt people! That’s a self-fulfilling prophecy!”

*For fuck’s sake! Why do you think I never let it be real, Kelley?*

“Um…because you weren’t the right fit for each other?”

*Because I wasn’t about to push my luck with my one relationship that seemed to work!*

Kelley shut her eyes and rubbed her forehead. “And now you’re trying to get rid of me, before I get to know the ‘real you’, so that my inevitable rejection of you won’t be personal?”

*Exactly. Run. Please, Kelley. Hope slumped back into the couch corner, done.*

Kelley shook her head as if to clear it, then locked eyes with her. “Hope, let me put this in terms you can’t miss: *fuck that.*” Hope felt Kelley’s gaze as if it was a tangible force. “I’ll tell you who’s the real you: it’s the you that shows up when you aren’t buried under all of…this,” she waved her hands around, then returned her eyes to Hope’s. “The real you is the you that was making jokes after Sorting.”

*Sometimes I don’t even know who that person is.*

“The real you is the you that offered to practice Quidditch with me, forgot-”

*Yes! Exactly, that’s wha-

“-but made it right,”*
That was the real Amy.

“-and said ‘I’m so glad to you have you back’ after I made you laugh.”

Back when I felt alive, most of the time.

“Do you remember how you smiled when you said that, Hope?”

I wish I didn’t.

“Do you, Hope?”

Yes, and it felt so good it hurts, now.

“That was the real Hope. This is drowning-in-despair Hope.”

Drowning-in-reality, you mean.

“I miss the real Hope.”

I don’t know what else to tell you.

“I miss her more than I’ve ever missed anyone.”

Kell—…if bringing her back…but she wouldn’t stay. It never lasts.

Kelley sat forward. “I miss her - you, Hope - and I’d bear anything to bring her back.”

Oh really? You would, would you?

“Anything, Hope.” Something in her tone, or her eyes…

You…I might actually believe you. Hope felt stress leave her arms and shoulders, which were still tense where Kelley had touched.

Kelley leaned a little closer. “Do you miss that Hope?”

I try not to set myself up for disappointment…but, yeah, I guess I do.

“Does that Hope miss me?”

Yes. Oh, yes. She might be a fool, but…

Kelley leaned closer still.

Is this..?

Kelley’s eyes found her lips, asked her eyes…

This might really be happening.

She looked at Kelley’s lips and back and the girl leaned in, wet her lips, and she did the same.

This is really happening.

She closed her eyes to meet Kelley in the middle.
This is—oh, fuck, I am such a fool—

No! No, Kelley’s for real—

Is she?

I think she really is. I feel she is.

But do you know, Hope?

No, I don’t know.

I can’t do this. The tears came back, in force. Not until I know that she knows me. I can’t do this if she’s only kissing who she thinks I am.

Hope stopped and breathed. The emotion clogging her face prevented her from speaking in anything but a whisper, and that was still difficult, but her words wouldn’t wait. “Kell— I—I can’t…yet. I don’t—know that…you—really know me.”

There was a moment of cemetery silence.

Shit, I think I only got half of that out.

Hope heard the cushions crunch, opened her eyes and saw Kelley run.

“Kelley…”

Fuck me. This is what happens, Hope, this is what always happens. Either they hurt you or you hurt them, and you just did. Now she’s leaving, just like you knew she would. Just like always. Because that’s who you are.

Oh, god, it hurts worse than ever.

“Kelley…”

But she was gone.

“You think you should have known better?” Valence asked.

“I did— I do know better. I wanted to believe that she—” Hope broke off and shook her head, growled in frustration at the emotions which kept hijacking her voice, and tried a less raw answer. “Whenever I let someone near the real me, at least one of us gets hurt.”

“Are you not yourself around other people?”

Hope tilted her head side-to-side and looked at a corner of the room. “It’s not that. I don’t put on a fake personality or something. It’s just that I keep people at a distance, don’t let them really get to know Hope Solo.”

“Because you expect people to hurt you?”

Hope nodded. “And I’ll probably hurt them, too.”

“Is that why you had a play relationship with Jessica all this time? So you could have the fun without the vulnerability?”
“Part of why. A big part. Fitting, isn’t it?” Hope turned bitter. “My most successful relationship would be the one that I don’t take seriously.”

“You’re selling yourself short, Hope Solo. It’s natural that your most successful relationship is the one where you’re most relaxed.”

Hope thought about it. Of course, that’s what drew me to Kelley... The pain washed over her yet again.

“Have you been hurt a lot, Hope?”

Alex picked up the conversation from before the interruption. “Kelley, I think I agree with what Ashlyn was saying about fear. We all thought exactly what you thought when you said, ‘I can’t, I don’t blank ‘you’, but we could all be wrong.”

“What else could it be?” Kelley didn’t buy it.

Alex, Ali and Ashlyn looked at each other, trying to think of something that fit.

Kelley watched and waited.

“I just couldn’t! I needed to know – and believe – that she was kissing who I really am, messes and all. I wish I could’ve done it anyway. I wish I had.”

“Hope, you did the right thing.” Hope nodded absently; Valence wasn’t having it. “Hope, look at me.” She did. “You made the right choice. I mean it.”

“I guess, but…”

“But what?”

“But if I had just…” Hope couldn’t finish.

“If you had just kissed her?” Hope nodded. “She wouldn’t have left, but you’d be living in fear that she would. You’d be miserable, Hope, and you know that, which is why you didn’t do it in the first place.”

“Yeah.” Hope sighed a bushel of air. “She’s still gone, though, and I’m still miserable.”

“I know, Hope. I’ve had my heart shattered more than once. I know.”

“What do you do?”

Valence sighed, softly, and looked over Hope’s head. “You take what lessons you can, quickly, and then just do your best to put it back together and refill it with things you love. Eventually, it heals like a physical injury; new and different, yet still the same.”

She brought her eyes back. “Hope, in the long run, you have a lot to work on to bring your emotional health in line with your admirable physical health, and that will include letting people in. You can’t go on like this.”

Hope nodded. “I know. I convinced myself that I could, because I didn’t know what else to do, but you’re right.”
“I promise, Hope, I will help you or get you help with all of that.”

Ali took a deep breath. “Trust.”

Ashlyn hung her head. “That’s it. That’s the right idea, if not the exact word.”

“Trust?” Kelley looked between the two, confused. “What would…?”

“Remember when you and I talked about fear?” Kelley nodded at Ashlyn. “Did she express any fears tonight?”

Kelley thought back. “Fear of getting hurt…and she was afraid of hurting me…and fear of being rejected if she showed people her real self…”

“That might be why,” Alex suggested. “What if she was afraid to take that step with you before she knew that you knew what you were getting?” Ashlyn made a noise of agreement.

“So…you think maybe Hope didn’t kiss me because she didn’t trust me to stay afterwards. And I left.” Kelley collapsed. “Oh, god, I left…”

Valence sat forward in her chair. “Returning to the present: it’s not on you that Kelley left instead of asking what you were trying to say.”

Hope could almost believe it. “It was…impulsive of her, wasn’t it?”

“It was,” Valence affirmed. “From what I’ve seen of her, she’s a fiery one.”

Hope mulled her words. “We had some…flare-ups in the first week. Like, she’d take something I say or do as a personal attack and get angry.”

“But you two got past those?” Hope nodded. “Would you like to get past this one?”

“I-I don’t know.” Her voice was suddenly very small. “I don’t know if I can.”

“Why not?”

“Because…” Hope turned her free hand over, helpless. “Because now I know. She left.” Her voice went ragged again. “I warned her she’d leave, but she got me to believe that she was different. Now I know.”

Valence set Hope’s cup aside and held her hands and eyes. “Hope, Kelley misunderstood you in a way which set off whatever she is afraid of. She ran from that, just like you’ve been running from your fear of being hurt. She did not leave the ‘real you’.”

Hope felt a new feeling, something she had not felt in a very, very long time.

Chapter End Notes

That was the low point, I promise! Your thoughts are welcome, as always.
In her dream, Alex was spooning with Kelley.

Seriously? I thought I was over her! It took her a moment to register that she was lucid, and another to realize that she wasn’t dreaming. The night's events came back to her, and she held her friend a little tighter. You poor girl. If it'd been…but no. She thought back to their first weeks at Hogwarts. I’d started to enjoy watching you and Hope together. I’m so sorry it's gone this way.

Kelley shifted against Alex, felt the arm around her, and froze. “Hope…” Alex wasn’t sure if it was a question, a statement, or a plea, but it was heartbreaking.

“You'll talk to her today,” Alex murmured in her ear.

Kelley shivered and squeezed Alex's hand. “Ho-hopefully.”

Alex felt the pain in the word. “You will.”

“How do you know she'll want to?”

“She came within an inch of kissing you. There’s something there, Kelley.”

Kelley rolled to face her. “Alex, I’ve run or stormed away from her three times now, and each time, it's been worse. What if…?” It didn’t need to be said.

Alex sat up against her bed's headboard and pulled Kelley next to her. “If you ever had a chance with her, she’ll be praying that you to want to talk.” She hugged Kelley for another moment, then shoved the sheets back. “Come on, let's get you living again. Your clothes should be dry now.” As she spoke, the castle bell rang once.

Kelley jolted bolt upright. “Crap, is that…oh, no, we overslept!”

“Well, yeah, we were up until, like, two!” Alex shrugged. “We still have ten minutes before breakfast opens, so we're okay.”

Kelley shook her head. “You’re okay, but I,” she sprang towards her hanging clothes, “can’t leave through your front door,” tugged her sports bra off a hanger, “and I can't bring my broom to breakfast!” She and her underthings ran behind the screen.

“Oh.” Alex seized the opportunity to do her own changing. “How about we fly to the quad, then I bring your broom back here and take the stairs down?”


“You have two months of practice, don't you?” Alex didn’t mean to question Kelley, but she was genuinely surprised.

“Yes, I know!” Kelley sigh-snarled as she pulled the knot apart. “It’s just…I'm too nervous to focus. I keep getting the length wrong.”

“How do you know she'll want to?”

Kelley glared at the tie and huffed. “Yes, fine. Thank you.”
Alex walked over, took the ends, and became very aware of how close she was to Kelley. “So,” she kept her eyes on her task, “are you nervous or anxious?”

She sensed Kelley knit her brows. “I didn’t know there’s a difference.”

“Nerves are when you feel on edge about something important to you. Anxiety is when you're on edge because you're worrying and you can’t stop, even if you think you shouldn’t be.”

“Both, I guess.”

“Try to focus on how far you did get with her.” Alex snugged the knot up and smoothed the tie against Kelley’s shirt with her hand. *Crap, I just did that!* She made eye contact and played it off: “It’s Saturday morning, you’re Stanford’s star goal-scorer, Mia Hamm’s personal pick to represent our country, an awesome person, and my new best friend. Bring it and go get her, Kelley.”

Hope’s internal clock woke her at the usual, early hour, which posed a problem. Saturday morning meant aerobics for Kelley; get up now and find her at the stadium? But if she’d been up as late as Hope had, she might sleep in until the breakfast bell woke her, and Hope wanted the extra rest. Or, maybe…if Kelley understood anything, she’d understand…besides, Hope needed to be…be awake for…for…

“Hey.” Something nudged her. Hope pushed back.

“Hey, Hope, you need to get up.”

*Mmmfffgrrrhmmmm,* Hope protested into her pillow.

“Like, for real, you need to wake up now.”

“’s a weeken’,” Hope mumbled.

“Come on, sleepyhead! Do you want to be asleep when our Brit roommates get back from breakfast?”

“S’rew ‘em.” Something about the question seemed wrong, though. Hope tried to put her mind in gear, but the shift lever was sticking. “Back…breakfast?”

“It’s eight, Captain Solo.”

Hope tried the clutch again, found a gear, thought backwards, and remembered where her exhaustion came from. “Kelley.” She stalled out.

“I brought food.”

Hope rolled over, and there she was. Her eyes were a little red, her hair a little insubordinate, and her smile a lot uneasy, but it was Kelley, and she was there. “Oh. Uh…thank you,” and Hope’s smile was unsure as well.

“Um…” Kelley felt an abrupt weight of awkwardness. “You do, uh, need to sit up. To eat. And, you know, get dressed.”

“Right.” Hope felt unbelievably silly. She shook her head, rolled out of her bed and buried her face in her wardrobe. Resisting the temptation to go UW T-shirt and sweats – no sense in changing twice at this point – she extracted a uniform shirt, skirt, and training tights; “Good enough for Saturday.” Kelley was already at the door to the common room, looking up through the underwater skylights.
“Well, we match.” Kelley took that as her cue to return and found that they did: Hope's eyes were rimmed pink and her hair resented the organization of even a ponytail. She’d left her top two buttons open and opted for trainers on her feet. ‘When did you wake up?’

“Like, a minute before the bell. Alex and I must've set a record for putting on the full uniform.” Kelley reminded herself to get on with it. “Do you want to go somewhere? To talk. I mean, I want to talk. And apologize. For leaving.” She couldn’t settle. “You.” On a stopping point. “Without Amy or Fara interrupting. Do you?”

“Yes, Kelley.” Hope knew her attempt at a reassuring smile wasn't a complete success, but she hoped it helped anyway.

“Do you know a good place? I mean, I haven’t been here all that long.”

“Yeah, easy.” Hope led Kelley through another corridor off the common room to a cozy sitting room – as cozy as a corner room with all but two walls and the floor transparent can be, anyway. Two love-seats along the interior walls offered views out of the single-piece quarter-hemisphere dome, while an ornate coffee table, glass top on carved marble frame, rested in the quarter-circle of space between them. With her wand, Hope traced “H. Solo. D.N.D.” in glowing green on the door, shut it behind them, and added a soundproofing charm for good measure. “One perk of being known as a bitch,” she said ruefully, “is you can have all the privacy you want.”

Kelley wanted to grin, but her heart was too busy fluttering. After all, they were in a private – and rather romantic, she realized – room to talk about why they hadn’t kissed. It was a lot, she was still anxious, and her fight-or-flight response kicked in and made her glance at the closed door. Hope didn’t miss it and Kelley saw her face fortify. She turned back to the door and the lock she’d noticed. Click.

“There. Now you know I won’t leave.” She let out a breath as Hope's features relaxed. “I guess we should sit?”

“Yes, let’s.” Hope went to the far end of a love-seat, and Kelley took that as permission to sit next to her. From under her cloak, she pulled a small, mangy-looking drawstring pouch with worn, stained writing stitched on the side. “’+3 Bag of Holding’?” Hope squinted at it. “What does that mean?”

Kelley shrugged and undid the drawstrings. “I have no idea, I found it in a wizards' secondhand store. It looks like crap but the price was right.” Her hand disappeared inside past her wrist and pulled out a substantial breakfast for two: fruit upon fruit, muffin after muffin, a great mass of bacon strips bundled up in cloth napkins, and several glasses of apple cider, sealed over with lid charms. “Third-best thrift shop find of my life.”

“Impressive. What were second and first?”

“Shoes,” Kelley admitted.

“For looks or for soccer?”

“One of each.”

Kelley sustained the marginally comfortable small talk while they attacked the smuggled cornucopia. When she judged that Hope was adequately refueled, she folded her legs on the cushion to square her shoulders to Hope and kicked off their talk.

“Hope, when you tried to say why you wouldn’t kiss me, I only heard, ‘I can’t, I don’t…you,’ and
my heart assumed the missing word was ‘love’, or something like it. That's why I ran away. The Gryffindor girls took me in and set me straight, so I'm back, and I'm going to be a better listener. I am so, so sorry I did that to you, Hope. Like, I thought you broke my heart, but…honestly, I’m surprised you’re speaking to me at all.”

“It…” Hope chose the simplest words, “hurt, a lot. After you…left, though, I ran into Doctor Valence. She showed me that, since you didn’t hear what I meant to say, you didn’t reject the ‘real’ me. I forgive you, Kelley.” Kelley sat straighter. Hope continued, “I don’t know if it’s like this for other people, but when I’m crying, I can’t talk. I feel the emotion of what I’m about to say in my throat and my face and it locks everything up. What I wanted to say was, ‘I can’t yet, I don’t know that you really know me.’”

Kelley nodded. “That was their guess, pretty much. I respect that, Hope.”

“Kelley, I apologize for treating you like shit this fall. I knew it was a bad thing to do but I didn’t believe I could do any better. I am at least that broken, Kelley.”

“I forgive you, too, Hope. Does this mean that you don’t want to live like that anymore?”

Hope looked at her hands. “I…Kelley, if I- if we do anything, you have got to be patient with me.”

Kelley put a hand on Hope’s. “I’ve got all weekend,” she smiled.

Hope smiled back, but hers was sad. “It’s going to take a lot more than that.”

“I want,” Kelley leaned forward to grip Hope's shoulder, “to be as patient as you need. I told you I'd bear anything to have my Hope back, and I will, even if I don't get it right on my first try.”

Hope's smile was happier or, at least, less sad. “I’m not sure I like it when you say ‘my Hope’. It reminds me of everything you don't know about me.”

Kelley sat up and slid towards Hope until their legs were touching, laid one arm along the seat back, and took one of Hope’s hands. “Then tell me about the real Hope.”

Hope smiled, happiness finally edging past sadness. “Where to start?” She thought, then smirked. “My name is Hope Amelia Solo, commander of the armies of the north, captain of the Slytherin Quidditch team and future goalkeeper for the United States of America. Daughter to an absent father, sister to an abusive brother…” her smirk withered and died as she spoke. Kelley’s eyes softened and she gripped Hope's hand tighter.

Hope breathed and stared at Kelley’s hand around hers. “My story began when my alcoholic mom visited my grifter dad – who turned out to have a whole other family we didn’t know about – in prison. From there, my childhood went pretty much how you'd expect…”

“Alex…listen, I…” Ashlyn's hesitance put Alex on her guard.

“What?”

Ashlyn took a breath. “I care about you and so I feel like I should triple-check with you about Kelley.”

“I'm fine, Ash,” Alex assured her. “That ship sailed months ago, and I let it go.”

Ashlyn nodded. “Alex…romantic feelings have a way of convincing us not to question them. Is it
possible that you were feeling more than friendly when you kissed Kelley's hair last night?"

“No, because I wasn't. Ash, I appreciate your concern, but…” Alex trailed off into a frown. “Yes, it is possible. I…I'm not sure what to call it, actually. It's like, I’m not pining, I'm over wanting to be with her, but I still have…warm feelings when I'm around her. I've kinda been hoping they'll fade if I ignore them, or else I tell myself that Kelley’s needed the extra support and…affection, really, to help her through all the stuff with Hope. I don’t really know what to do, though.” She noticed Ashlyn relaxing as she elaborated.

“I get you. That's a…thing that can happen, when you give someone a piece of your heart and then want them to keep some of it after things change.”

“Do you think that's bad?” Alex couldn’t sense Ashlyn's opinion.

“The proof's in the potion, as they say here. If it makes it harder to be and stay her friend, it's bad. If it helps, it's good.”

Alex had mixed feelings about that. “Why can’t the answer ever be just plain ‘yes’ or ‘no’?”

Ashlyn shrugged. “Well, which came first, morality or humankind?”

Alex's eyes went blank. “Wha…I…I think you just tied my brain in a knot.”

When Hope paused in her sharing, Kelley spoke up, “Hope,” and took her time choosing her next words. Hope misunderstood.

“Pitiful story, isn’t it?”

“What? No!” Kelley dove in. “That’s not what I was thinking at all. I'm so proud of you, Hope.”

“Proud.” Doubt filled her voice.

“Yes, proud. When I hear your story, I hear your pain from all you’ve been through—”

“That wasn’t even half of it. Wait until I tell you about the time Dad kidnapped us.”

Kelley was taken aback, but she wasn’t as shocked as she would’ve been a day earlier. “I hear your pain in what you tell me, yet I also see a bigger story. You’ve been through so many kinds of hell, Hope, but you’re here now, finishing your college degree, leading and coaching a Quidditch team, you have loyal friends on two continents, and you’re learning to open up. You’ve overcome so much to get to where you are now.”

“Badly, and I hurt a lot of people along the way.”

Kelley sighed and wished she could force Hope to see things her way. “If I’d come in as a first-year when you did, would we be having this conversation?”

Hope looked away. “I’d probably have gotten fed up and hit you a long time ago.”

“What about the year after that?”

She cringed. “After that first summer back home? I would’ve hurt your feelings on purpose to make sure you never spoke to me again.”

“How about last year?”
“I would’ve felt overwhelmed and never opened up to you.”

“This year you did. I call that improvement.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“Hope,” Kelley turned up her intensity, “you have always found a way to get through whatever life’s thrown at you, and you were learning to find better ways before I met you. I am proud of you.”

Silence filled the room.

Hope closed her eyes, swallowed and breathed deep, and looked up at the sunlit water. “I can actually see myself agreeing with you, one day.” She turned a smile at Kelley. “Quidditch break?”

“Yes, please!” Kelley sat back, eager, then panicked. “I mean, I'm not- I don’t- I'm sorry, I didn’t mean that.”

Hope, watching with a growing, amused, and, now, mischievous smile, reached and put a finger to Kelley’s lips. “I know.” Kelley’s eyes ballooned wide. “We had an intense emotional workout and we both need some recovery.”

“R-Right…” Kelley remained frozen.

“What’s the matter? Cat got your tongue?” Hope teased.

Kelley stared for another moment, then buried her face in her hands. “Oh my god, are you flirting with me?”

Hope wanted to reach out again and tilt Kelley’s chin up, but that seemed like too much, too fast. She settled for, “Yes, silly girl, I’m flirting with you.”

Kelley let her hands down. “Do you know that was the first time you’ve ever touched me?”

Hope took one of Kelley’s hands in hers. “Then I’d better make it two.” Kelley looked up again, and her smile melted Hope's heart. “I like you, Kelley. I just realized I never said that.”

“Thank you. I l-like you, too, Hope.” Hope let her feelings show, gave Kelley’s hand a squeeze, and began collecting the debris from their meal. Southern hospitality pushed Kelley out of her bliss and back to earth. “Oh, Hope, you don’t have to do that. Let me.” She stood and bustled.

Hope tried to wave her off. “No, no, you brought the food. I’ve got it. Go get your kit and I’ll catch up in a minute.”

“Seriously, I’ll—” Kelley paused to look up at her. “Is this our version of arguing over the check?”

Hope laughed, but broke off and looked at Kelley with wide eyes. “Oh god, do not tell anyone about this. It will get back to A-Rod and I will never hear the end of it.”

As they walked to the Quidditch grounds, Kelley couldn’t remember a time when a breeze felt so good and smelled so sweet. “I’m so glad you’re back, Hope. It was draining, having to face BitchFace McColdShoulder every day.”

Hope’s own laugh surprised her and her face fell. “I didn’t mean to make light of that, sorry.”

“Hope, I wanted you to!” Kelley chucked her in the shoulder and switched on a mock glare. “Don’t
you dare start feeling bad about not feeling bad.”

“Sorry, I…” Hope didn’t know what she wanted to say.

“You’re out of practice at being forgiven, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Lucky you, Coach O’Hara is here to whip you into shape. Ten push-ups every time I catch you hating yourself,” Kelley grinned. “Now, lighten up or I’ll make you run a lap!” Hope laughed again and Kelley clung to her upper arm. “Hope, I love hearing you laugh. I have since we met.”

Something in Hope’s chest melted into a warm puddle. Longing to touch Kelley diffused throughout her body, and it spooked her. She aimed her eyes down and tried to think of something else to do with her affection.

“Hope?” Kelley wasn’t missing anything.

“Kelley,” Hope looked back up, “why were you so ready to believe that I didn't value you?”

Kelley blinked and her lips parted. “What?”

“I mean, we came so close that I felt your breath on my lips and you still believed that I rejected you outright, and there were our conflicts that first week. It feels like you came in assuming that I wouldn’t respect you.”

Kelley closed her eyes and shook unwanted thoughts out of her head. “I don’t know. I guess you just felt…out of my league.”

“'League?' As if you’re unworthy of me somehow?”

“Eh, more like you just wouldn't be interested in me.”

“No.” Hope stuck to it. “That’s all just another way of saying that you didn’t think I'd value you. Actually, it's worse, because it means that you didn’t think I should value you.”

“Really, Hope, you’re about to graduate and I'm a silly first-year. Why wouldn’t I think you weren’t interested?”

“Because you’re interesting.” Hope let it sit there for a beat. “I believe you were concerned about that, but the way you reacted when I forgot about my practice with you…you weren’t just frustrated, you were injured. There's something way more personal going on.”

“Oh,” Kelley bit, “so you’re the expert on this stuff now?”

“Yes,” Hope spoke softly, “I am.”

Kelley hung her head in shame.

“I know how it feels when someone is pushing you towards a truth that hurts. I've said some really terrible things to Amy.” Kelley nodded, heavy-headed, and Hope felt another surge of longing, this time to be her comforter, and this time she acted on it.

Strong arms gathered Kelley into a massive hug. It would've overwhelmed her, if it didn’t feel so safe. “I have a confession to make,” she finally mumbled against Hope's shoulder.
Hope didn’t know how to respond to that, other than to say, “I’ve got you.”

“I have to admit,” Hope felt Kelley make a face as she spoke, “that this seemed easier when you were the only one with problems.”

Hope enjoyed a chuckle or two. “Kelley, meet the ‘real’ Kelley O’Hara.” She stepped back to look inside Kelley’s eyes. “Someone once said to me that it’s only in relationships that we learn who we really are.” Kelley clearly didn’t like it. “I thought it was bull-…B.S. until just now, minus the ‘only’. It’s kind of like sports; the more intense the competition, the more it exposes your weaknesses. I see the same thing going on with us. The closer we try to be, the more we expose the parts of ourselves we’d rather avoid.”

Kelley held Hope’s hands in silence for a minute while occasional expressions flickered across her face. “I had a dream that first night. A nightmare, basically, which made me want to get out of our bedroom. It was Slytherin tryouts, except it was soccer and – well, you know how dreams don’t have to make sense. Long story short, I was completely outclassed trying to defend against you and you were kinda disgusted. You called for the next person and said they had better be worth your time.”

“That’s why you perked up after I said it’d be worth it for me to watch you,” Hope realized.

“You remember.”

“I’m never going to forget that night.”

Kelley glowed for a brief moment before continuing. “When you didn’t show later, it brought all that back for me, and when you said you’d been with Jessica…”

“It felt personal.” Kelley nodded. “But what started you thinking that way in the first place?”

The girl was silent again. “After you said you were done with me, Ali, Ashlyn and Alex – they were there, too – got on brooms, and their clothes turned into USA jerseys, and they flew away. When I looked back, you and Amy and everyone else were gone.”

“And you were left alone on the field?”

Kelley nodded.

“May I do what you did last night, and make you put your fear in words?”

Kelley closed her eyes to think, leaving Hope with nothing to do but study every detail of her face. It was unsettled, yet Hope could imagine how Kelley would look when at peace. She wanted to help Kelley get there and stay there.

When Kelley’s eyes stayed closed, however, Hope had time to question herself. What business did she have helping anyone find peace? She was a walking conflict, for Salazar’s sake! Why would she even think that she could help Kell-

“I’m afraid of being left behind,” Kelley spoke slowly. “I feel a drive - a positive drive - to be a champion, and I’d grown confident as a soccer player, but coming here and being almost completely new to everything… I think coming into a new sport at a new school took away everything I’d built up that reminded me of who I am and what I can do. Like, as the star freshman at Stanford, I knew I was at the head of the pack and I knew what I had to do to stay on top. Here, I leave every Slytherin practice frustrated with how far behind Jo and Fara I am, I’m barely keeping up with Alex and Ash in potions…” Kelley sighed. “It’s like I’m running from not being good enough but not getting any farther away. I know I have you all as friends, but all this Slytherin crap means I don’t get a sense
that I’m welcome in this new world, so I feel like I need to prove myself to everyone, but I’m coming from behind on everything…”

“Nobody who knows you needs you to prove anything,” Hope mumbled, insecure in this new role.

Kelley clung tighter. “I think the Sorting Hat saw that part of me and tried to ask me about it, but I’d forgotten about it since starting at Stanford. When I met you, your intense…self-presentation set off that fear, and then, when I started feeling attracted to you, the stakes felt even higher…” Hope felt, more than heard, her sniff and swallow. “Ugh, this sucks,” she groaned. “I don’t need this crap holding me back! Thank you for pressing on this, Hope.”

Hope held her and blinked away a tear. “I care about you, Kelley.” Her voice felt rough and Kelley noticed. She stepped back to examine Hope’s expression and saw the water in her eyes.

“Oh, Hope, you were thinking the exact opposite about yourself, weren’t you?”

Hope bit back her apology, smirked, and dropped to the ground. Kelley stared in bewilderment as Hope began slamming out exaggerated push-ups. By the tenth, she was laughing so hard she couldn’t breathe. Her universe was a flood of joy through her whole being and Hope’s warm arm holding her upright.

“Holy crap!”

Ali’s head snapped to look at Alex “What?”

“That’s what,” Alex answered, still staring at what had her attention. Ashlyn and Ali followed her eyes.

Hope was walking towards them with her arm around the shoulders of Kelley, who was laughing so hard she could barely stand.

“She’s smiling!” Ali observed of Hope.

“Wow,” was all Ashlyn could say.

“Oh my god, they are so adorable,” Ali continued. “Aww, I’m so happy for them!”

“You deserve a pat on the back,” and Ashlyn gave her one, “since you figured it out for Kelley.”

“Yeah, and you also get the blame if they get to be sickeningly cute together,” Alex smirked. Ashlyn gave her that look again. “I’m kidding, and before that I was just suprised to see Hope so…free. I’m for them, so please stop reminding me.”

If Ashlyn had a reply, Hope and Kelley’s arrival kept her from speaking it. “Hey, Gryffs,” Kelley had recovered enough to articulate, “mind if we join you?”

“Smooth, Kelley,” Alex smirked, “rolling in on Hope Solo’s arm like it’s no big deal.”

“Does it need to be?” Hope asked. The Gryffindor girls looked at each other.

“No.”

“Yes,” Ali and Alex overruled Ashlyn. “This is pretty much our only chance to embarrass you without incurring your wrath,” Ali smiled impishly at Hope.
“I mean, the fearsome goalkeeper finally let one in,” Alex said. “Operation Score On Hope is a success!” She grinned as Kelley turned scarlet.

“I, uh,” Kelley looked up at Hope, “we haven’t…”

“We came up for air before we got to what we are,” Hope explained, looking longingly at Kelley, “but I’m hopeful.”

“Yeah,” Kelley gasped, “me, too.” She turned back to their friends. “So, um, green versus red with Alex seeking?”

“Bring it on, Slytherin,” Ali smiled.

“Battle of the couples,” Alex smirked. “This is gonna be good!”

Green beat Red; Hope had more experience than Ashlyn while Kelley, on Slytherin’s roster, was practicing at a higher level than Ali. Game and banter concluded, Kelley and Hope showered, changed, and picked up where they’d left off in the underwater sitting room. As dinner approached, their conversation shifted from Hope’s past to their present.

“I, want…” Hope found her word and continued in earnest, “I want something real with you. I like my life better with you in it and I want to let you into all of it.” Kelley, already holding one of her hands, collected the other. “The thing I’m still concerned about – well, aside from everything else, I mean – is I have no clue what I’m like as a girlfriend. We could get together and work through all my shit but still break up because we don’t fit together as well as we thought.”

“That’s true of anyone you could date,” Kelley countered. “It comes down to taking the risk and not giving up on ‘us’, Hope.”

“So, ‘we just have to believe’? Is that it?”

Kelley wrinkled her nose. “Mmm, maybe. I think a better sports analogy is, ‘how much do you want it?’ If either of us stops wanting the relationship, or doesn’t want it enough to keep going when things are hard, we’ll stop maintaining it and it’ll fall apart.”

“I like that better, too; I don’t like to believe in things I can’t control. Do the things coaches teach about ‘wanting it’ apply, too? Visualization, for example.”

Kelley cocked her head. “I never thought of that before. Maybe that could help you break out of all your negative thinking about yourself.”

“It might. I’d worry that I was creating some unrealistic fantasy, though.”

“Promise me you won’t.” Kelley’s demeanor turned timid. “I’m not perfect, Hope. I’ve let you down before, and-”

Empathy – she recognized the feeling, now – welled up from Hope’s chest. She untwined her hands from Kelley’s and pulled her into a cuddly hug. “I meant unrealistic for me, actually. Still, I promise.”

“Oh.”

“Were you afraid I’ll think you’re not good enough, like in your dream?”

Kelley nodded against Hope’s chest. “I wasn’t, before that, but you have no idea how scared I felt when you let go of my hands.”
Hope tried to think of something to say. Once she did, she tried to think of something else to say. No luck. “Kelley, this is going to be an awkward and very Hope Solo way of reassuring you. If I ever…end…something with you, it won’t be because I don’t think you're good enough.” Kelley crinkled her lips and Hope mirrored her. “Yeah, like I said.” The right thing to say occurred to her: “Oh, here we go: Kelley, you proved today that you are way, way better than ‘good enough’. You are…” Hope shook her head. “I can’t even put you in words.”

Kelley raised her head to again. Joy, fear, and affection blended in her eyes. A happy smirk crept into her face and humor crowded out the fear; “Try anyway.”

Hope chuckled and rolled her eyes. “You are the most fun of anyone, ever. Even your teasing makes me happy.” Her eyes returned to Kelley. “You are so caring and….just good to me. And good for me. You’re fiercely focused and driven about the things that matter to you, like Quidditch, and you’re amazing and beautiful to watch when you pursue them. It’s…thrilling to imagine myself as one of those things.”

“Then watch out, goalkeeper,” Kelley smoldered and dropped her voice. “You’re next.”

Hope’s breath caught at Kelley’s new, husky tone. “Too late,” she managed to say. “Like Alex said, I already let you in.”

“This game never stops,” Kelley purred, “and I could get addicted to giving you that thrill.”

Hope stared into those eyes, somehow darker yet just as warm, and felt a tug towards them. Far from mere organs with pretty irises, they swirled with smoke, burned like stars, and pulled Hope in like magic. They enchanted and captivated and terrified her.

“Uh,” her voice scratched and she cleared her throat, “I...hell, I need to get a grip. Kelley, I want to try living with someone this close before we seal it with a kiss.”

“This close’?”

“I want to see what day-to-day life is like now that I’ve let you in.”

Kelley examined Hope’s expression. “Are you stalling because you’re worried?”

“I’m scared and I am stalling. I stuck my toe in the water in September and, now, I’m in and learning to swim. I want to go dive in the deep end with you, but I need to swim first.”

“Is this what life is like on defense?” Kelley tried lightening the mood.

“In a way, yeah, but it’s…I’ve been playing defense for a lot longer than I’ve been a goalkeeper, Kelley. I told you, one weekend isn’t enough. Please, be patient with me, and let me see us together before I kiss you.”

“Ok, Hope. Whatever you need, I’ll give you. What do you want us to be, then?”

“Together. Girlfriends. This girlfriend comes with baggage and a learning curve, that’s all.”

“Are we ‘official’, then?”

“We are.” Months of wondering, frustration, and desperate dreaming sublimated to pure warmth. Kelley snuggled closer, Hope held firmer, and each melted into the other. For the first time, Hope felt another’s heartbeat. She lost herself in it.
“There’s something I need you to know about me, too,” Kelley spoke up. “Touch and physical affection are huge to me. You basically can’t speak to my heart without using your hands.”

“I caught on that you were a cuddly one,” Hope smiled.

Kelley leaned back to find Hope’s eyes and returned the smile, with added seriousness. “It scales with what you’re trying to say. You can tell me ‘I love you’ all day, but, if you never kiss me, it’ll feel like just words.”

“I’ll remember that - and look forward to it.” Kelley glowed at Hope's words. “You make me feel like a good person, Kell. When I see you happy because of me, it reminds me that I'm not a disaster waiting to happen.”

“You called me ‘Kell’.” Her glow grew into a beaming smile.

“I did,” Hope admitted. “It just kinda happened.”

“I like it.”

“I noticed, Kell.” Hope grinned. As she held eye contact, her grin faded into a smile and she felt that gravity again. “Is it alright with you if we get up? We're just going to keep running into the kissing problem if we stay.”

“Ok, but we need to come back when it’s not a problem.” Kelley un-snuggled from Hope and stood. “This is a perfect make-out spot.” Hope blushed, just a little, but enough that they both noticed. “Ooh, I love this side of you! I never thought I'd be the one drawing the cute reactions.”

Hope blushed all the way. “I don't think anyone's called me 'cute' since my age reached double digits.”

“Oh, Hope, you're adorable!” Kelley reached and helped Hope up.

“I don’t know that the Quidditch team will see it the same way.”

“I'll stay serious when we're with the team. Ok, not serious, but the same as now.” Hope looked no less concerned. “Are you worried that they won't respect you as much if they see us together?”

“I'm not sure I want to come out to the school as a giant teddy bear with a squirrel girlfriend the week before we play Gryffindor.”

Kelley frowned. “I don’t like that.”

“I know,” Hope volunteered, before Kelley could elaborate, “it sounds like I care more about my image than about you. I just don’t think I should shake things up this week. Would you be okay if we did something like Ash and Ali do? Everyone can tell they're close but only their good friends see how close.”

“That feels better.” Kelley nodded to herself and went on, “So, no PDA in front of the Brits for now? Is that what you want?”

“If you’re willing, yes.”

“I’m willing, but I’m also not Ash or Ali. These rules need to end at some point, Hope.”

“Kelley, I wish the Yule Ball was this year so I could take you and sweep you off your feet in front of the whole school! I just want a little time to grow into it. Into us. Then, we'll hold hands in the
halls or feed each other breakfast in front of Jo and Fara, or…” Hope trailed off as Kelley stared at her. “What?”

“Sorry, I just haven't heard you get romantic before. We’re totally doing that, by the way.”

“Deal.” Hope poured finality into the word. “Speaking of our teammates, there’s also your plan to earn a start this year. Being the captain’s girlfriend might complicate that.”

“Oh…” Fires lit in Kelley’s eyes again; “My play will make it simple.”

Hope grinned. “You’re hot when you go intense, Kell.”

Kelley gave her The Look again. “You’re next, keeper.”
“So,” Alex smiled knowingly at Kelley and Hope, seated across from her, “how does it feel?”

“How does what feel?” Hope had no idea what she meant.

“Being together for a week!” Alex grinned.

Unlike on a weekday morning, students arrived in trickles and spurts for Saturday’s breakfast, so the early risers had space for a private conversation - and enthusiasm. “We made it to our one-week anniversary, Hope!” Kelley beamed. “How does that feel?”

The feelings rose as Hope thought about them, making her smile. “It feels good. I can't remember the last time I felt this happy for this long. Already - I can’t believe I’m saying this - I don’t know what I'd do without you.”

Kelley grinned. “Play Quidditch like a lonely badass at war with the world.” Hope chuckled, though chagrin showed on her face. “Oh, Hope, I am so happy that you can laugh about that. That’s huge!”

“It is.” They looked up and saw Dr. Couture, who slipped in across from Hope and next to Alex. “I'm thrilled to see you so well, Hope.” Kelley stared at the imposing woman. Alex stared straight ahead.

“Thank you…” Hope trailed off. “What are you on weekends?”

“Given last Friday night,” the professor spoke softly, “I think we should speak plainly, outside of academics.”

“Thank you, Valence.” Hope’s eyes dampened at the memory. Alex continued staring.

“And you,” Valence addressed Kelley, whose eyes widened further, “take care of her. I'll leave the best friend's warning speech for Jessica, but I don't think you need it, anyway.”

Kelley stole a glance at Hope and felt a surge of confidence. “She’s in good hands, Ma’am”

“Your results speak for themselves, Kelley O’Hara.” She stood to go. “Good luck today, Hope. Get that Quidditch Cup back from Gryffindor! Nothing personal, Ms. Morgan.”

When the sound of her boots receded, Kelley spun to Hope. “Since when are you BFF’s with Doctor Scary-Hot?!”

“Since I shutout her House's team last year,” Hope smirked. “My, my, Kelley, is tall, strong, and intimidating your type?”
“What? No! I- Everyone- Alex, help!”

“I see why you like teasing me so much,” Hope laughed. “Oh, I’m gonna have fun with this!”

Kelley buried her face in her hands. “Ugh, I've created a monster!”

“Fear not, I know an Amazon who’ll protect you!”

Kelley’s embarrassment dissipated and she looked up. “That would be you, Hope.”

“I don’t know, I’m not six-one in black riding boots…”

“If I had a time machine,” Kelley pinned Hope’s eyes with her own, “or some kind of time spell and I could go back to when she or anyone was my age, I’d use it to meet you sooner. You compete with no one, Hope.”

For Hope, everything melted away, until only Kelley and her feelings for her remained. She wished the moment would never en-

Alex’s arm snapped out like a chameleon’s tongue and saved an owl post from landing in Hope’s oatmeal.

“Impressive, thank you,” Hope smiled, and took the envelope.

“I’ll leave you two lovebirds to yourselves,” Alex announced. “See you after the match!” She left in search of less gooey friends.

Hope looked back at the envelope. “Lindsay Tarpley…”

“Lindsay? On game day?!” Kelley energized. “Does that mean-”

“Scouts,” Hope confirmed, reading the letter. “Montrose and two other clubs!”

“Yeah! They’re gonna be fighting over you before the match’s even over! You so deserve this, Hope.”

Hope’s smile was unconvincing.

“I know you’re thinking about off-the-field stuff,” Kelley insisted, “but you really do. Besides, think about it: a fresh start in a new place, new first impressions on new friends, getting paid to do what you love; it’ll be so good for you! Let them give you a chance, and I promise you’ll surprise yourself.” Hope’s smile had turned genuine, but now it looked troubled. “What is it?”

“Chances,” Hope replied. “I’ve been thinking. Most times when you meet someone, they give you a chance, but you really, consciously gave me chances, and that made a huge difference.” Hope looked down, left, sighed, and met Kelley’s eyes. “I feel like putting Bardsley in goal.”

The gears in Kelley’s brain ground and lashed.

“Hear me out. She’s good - you know, you practice with her as much as I do - and she’s dreamed of playing for a premier club since she can remember, but she’s been in my shadow since we got here. This is probably her only chance to play a real match in front of pro scouts. I know I’d be crossing Lindsay by not showing, but they’re all far more likely to come back to see me than they are to see Karen.”

Kelley felt hoarse. “Do what you think is best, Hope.”
Hope took a deep breath. “Excuse me, then.” She left.

“Karen,” Hope spoke, nervous and tentative.

The blonde goalkeeper looked up from her breakfast. “Oh, hey. What’s up?”

Hope glanced around at the other seated students, feeling more uncomfortable by the second. “I want to talk to you about something. Um, would you step outside with me?”

Karen looked confused, but got up and followed her into the corridor.

“Karen,” Hope began, “I…are you pre-” she stopped and shook her head. “Sorry, I know you are. Karen,” she started over, “do you still want to play professionally after we graduate?”

“Yes.”

“I can get you in front of scouts from three British-Irish League clubs. When can you be ready for them?”

“Immediately. Now, whenever, anytime.”

Hope let out her held breath. “Good. You’re starting today. Montrose, Appleby, and Caerphilly will be in the stands.”


It took Hope a moment to decide if she should tell the truth. “Because they’re here to see me.”

“What?! No, no way. Why in hell would you even think of not playing?”

“A week ago, someone gave me a chance that I didn’t think I deserved, and I surprised myself with how well it turned out. You do deserve a chance, so you’re starting, Captain’s orders. Be proud and show them why you belong on their lists.”

Karen nodded, still shocked. Hope punched her in the shoulder. “And smile, dammit! Don’t forget to enjoy yourself.”

Inklings of a grin tugged at Karen’s mouth. “Uh, thank you. Have you told…no, of course not. Will you?”

Hope nodded. “I’ll go around the tables. Do you have a game plan?”

At last, Karen smiled. “You know I always make one. I’d like to compare it with yours before we-” Hope nodded. “Before I brief the team.”

“Sure, find me when you’re done eating.”

“That won’t take long,” Karen grinned, and jogged back into the Great Hall.

So, Hope thought, this is what it feels like to make someone else happy.

Karen will take it from here,” Hope concluded, and handed her the captain’s armband. “Don’t look at me,” Hope whispered, “you’re in charge now,” and went to sit behind Amy and Kelley.
“Right, then. We’ve studied Gryffindor this past week, so you all know what to expect from each of them in terms of style and attitude. To maximize our strengths, we’ll have Jo and Fara live in their half of the field, Jo left and Fara right. Kevin, you’ll play-make from a center-midfield position. Use your judgment on whether to serve the quaffle to them or press forward yourself. Beaters, stay behind the midfield line and keep your bodies between Gryffindor and me. Greg, last I checked, you and Jen were evenly matched as seekers—”

“She won’t be a problem.”

“Oh, then never mind what I was going to say. Any que—”

“Sorry. What were you going to say?”

“I was going to suggest,” Karen answered with a severe look, “that you do what you can to keep her low over the game, where there are more hazards to distract her.”

“Right, yeah. Any other questions?”

Hope raised her hand. “Yeah, I’ve got a question.” Karen looked at her, but she looked at Greg. “Why did you interrupt Karen twice and then try to do her job?”

“…”

“Whose team is this, Greg? Yours?”

“What? No, yours.”

“Wrong, though it explains why you don’t treat me like this. Someone want to answer for him?”

“Whoever is wearing the armband,” Amy spoke up.

“I appreciate the thought,” Karen replied, “but that’s still not right.”

Fara Williams knew. “This is House Slytherin’s team.”

“Yes,” Karen resumed, “it is, so we respect each other like we’re House Slytherin’s players. Need I say anything more?” Heads shook all around, including Greg’s. “That’d better be true, because there will be consequences the next time this happens, and I might not be wearing the armband when it does. Now, let’s think through our plays again.” Karen turned to the board behind her and began her chalk talk.

Lauren and Tobin went early to the stadium to get the best seats. “How do think this’ll play out?” Lauren asked her House-mate.

“I’m thinking Slytherin has it. Their field players aren’t as good defensively as last year, but I think they’ll still be better than Gryffindor’s defense, and there’s no question that Hope is better than Dara, good as he is. Offensively, I think they’re close, but I don’t think Gryffindor will be able to get through.”

“I agree, mostly. They’ll score, but Slytherin will outplay them overall.”

“Oh, absolutely. I didn’t mean to imply that Hope would get another shutout.”

“Shame that their best defenders graduated,” Lauren mused. “Hope told me once that her biggest sporting failure was not pushing last year’s seniors to prepare harder for this match, because she’s
sure she could’ve held Gryffindor scoreless.”

“They certainly had the potential, as Ravenclaw learned the hard way,” Tobin grinned. “How about the seekers?”

“Coin flip,” Lauren shrugged. “Too close to call, but I think Slytherin will be up in goals no matter who gets the snitch. Think there’ll be any drama?”

“Is there ever not, with these two?”

“Hope springs eternal.”

The stadium din echoed through the tunnel, where the two teams awaited their entrance. “Just like back home,” Ashlyn reminisced.

In front of her, Dara half-turned. “Yeah? Where’s home?”

“Florida, but I was actually thinking of UNC - University of North Carolina.”

Dara furrowed his brow. “Is that a Muggle school?”

“It is. I studied there for a year.”

“Hmm, interesting, and you played a sport there, too?”

“Soccer,” Ashlyn confirmed, “better known as ‘football’ over here.”

“Oh. Oh, that explains everything,” he grinned. “Your habits and the quaffle and all.”

“Yep, that’s where all that comes from.”

“Nice. So, you’ve done this whole tunnel thing before, yeah?”

“Yeah, although…” Ashlyn stopped herself mid-thought.

“Spit it out, Ash,” Dara grinned.

Her face apologized in advance. “When we had a big game, it was a lot louder than this. Last fall, we had eight thousand people at one match in Texas.”

“Eight thousand! Wow, I can only imagine what that felt like.”

“Just awesome,” Ashlyn grinned. “Made me damn proud to be a Tar Heel.”

“A what?”

Mercifully, the music started and the procession began.

“Either Hope’s gone back to her blonde days or that’s…Bardsley.”

Lauren was instantly concerned. “Do you think Hope’s okay?”

“Mmm…well, there she is.” Tobin pointed; Hope was walking to the bench with A-Rod and Kelley. “She seems to be in good spirits, moving normally…”
Lauren turned to her. “Could she have decided to play Karen instead of herself?”

“That’s a big question. I wouldn’t have thought so, but, then again…”

“We didn’t think she could date squirrel-girl, either,” Lauren finished.

“Good thing Kelley didn’t ask us for advice,” Tobin muttered.

Lauren rubbed her back. “Nobody gets it right every time, Tobin. Learn and let it go.”

“You make me feel like I was the one with relationship trouble,” she chuckled. “So, does this change your prediction for the match?”

“Not really. Closer, but still Slytherin on top. You?”

“Same.”

“We’ll find out here in a minute,” Lauren nodded toward Madame Hooch, who was speaking to the two captains.

The whistles came, and the teams leapt into the sky. Raucous cheers followed them.

“Dang, I forgot how the energy felt,” Tobin murmured.

“I know! Everybody has an opinion on Gryffindor-Slytherin. It’s only going to get more electric.”

It did – Slytherin opened the scoring in the second minute.

“Twenty minutes and they’re up three goals to one,” Alex said to Ali. “What sort of score is that for Quidditch?”

“It’s a little low,” Ali replied. “I think both teams are better on defense than offense. This kind of score-line doesn’t long, though. We need to pick up the pressure, because either we close the gap and level the game, mentally, or else they get on a streak.”

“Then we’d better close the gap or end it now.”

Ali shook her head. “If we catch the snitch with the scores this low, both teams will be behind in the Cup standings for the rest of the year. We gotta get a significant goal differential to make it a meaningful win.”

“Complicated,” Alex commented.

“Only if you’re losing.”

As she spoke, a Gryffindor chaser picked off an errant pass and rushed for the left end of Slytherin’s scoring area. The other two dashed towards the goals, one above and near and the other low and far. Slytherin scrambled back as Bardsley shouted instructions for them, but it looked to be too late; the chasers were perfectly bracketing her for shots at both outside goals.

“This might be it,” Alex thought out loud.

The chaser with the quaffle hurled it across the face of the scoring area. It arced up towards the near chaser, but she let it pass and fall towards the far player. Bardsley slid down to track the quaffle on its way to the far chaser, but he surprised everyone but popping up to meet it and heading it back to the
high player, who caught it and threw it towards the left goal in one movement. Karen raced back up to intercept it. The whole stadium gasped.

Karen got a fist to the quaffle just in front of the goal. It clanged off the inside edge of the hoop and flew wide.

Alex groaned and Ali made a face. Across the pitch, they could see their Slytherin friends cheering.

“That brings it back to five goals,” Lauren commented, as Gryffindor managed to slip the quaffle past Karen Bardsley. “140 to 90. Good showing for...” she checked the game clock, “fifty-two minutes.

“Gotta wonder if Slytherin will keep trying to stretch their lead. Six was the most they’ve been up.” Tobin looked up at the sky. “Doesn’t look like the seekers have found much to do yet.”

“Yeah, I don’t think either of them have seen it since Madame Hooch let it go. I wonder when Greg is gonna give up on trying to lure Jen down from her perch.”

“She’s way too good to fal—” a growing roar called their attention back. Gryffindor collected a rebound from Dara and attempted to charge their way through to Slytherin’s scoring area, in a tight arrowhead formation. Slytherin, instead of giving way, closed around the arrowhead to block the Gryffindor players’ views. Before they realized what was happening, they’d crossed into the scoring area. Madame Hooch blew her whistle.

Lauren grimaced. “I’m not sure whether I’m impressed with Slytherin for reacting so clinically or disappointed in Gryffindor for getting lured into a ‘one player in the area’ violation.”

Tobin nodded. “Yeah, no matter how good the trap, it always looks like a rookie mistake.”

The Gryffindor players surrendered the quaffle to the referee and dropped back. Karen collected it and waved her players forward, Madame Hooch blew her whistle, and she punted it ahead for Fara. All eyes followed the quaffle down the pitch, towards Gryffindor’s goals and the Hufflepuff stands.

So it was that Lauren was one of the few to see the collision over the far side of the stadium.

Seekers Jen and Greg zoomed in low, shoulder-to-shoulder, hip-to-hip, and flat out. They leaned and pressed against each other, skidding and slipping left and right as they barreled on, and then their legs seemed to tangle and Jen lurched and Greg lost control. He rolled underneath her, somehow got twisted sideways, and the abrupt increase in drag yanked Jen’s legs back and made her tumble forward. The jerk was enough to separate their legs; Greg managed to regain control and landed, albeit hard and inelegantly. Jen wasn’t so fortunate. When the tension in her legs released, her broom shot out from under her. Karen Bardsley’s back broke her freefall, for a moment, and then they both tumbled to the ground. There was a moment of startled silence.

When the whistle pierced it, the floodgates opened. Boos erupted from every House. Both benches were on their feet, yelling and gesticulating at Madame Hooch and the two seekers. Madame Hooch’s back was to the events, but an assistant referee dashed to her and launched into an animated retelling of the crash. Hooch shut her up and flew to the downed players, prompting both teams and the infirmary staff to do the same.

“Drama,” Tobin sighed, drained of enthusiasm.

“Dirty drama. I forgot how much I hated this rivalry.”
After seeing the downed players attended to, Madame Hooch conferred with her assistants, but she didn't appear satisfied. She flew up to the faculty box and, presumably, asked what they'd seen. She returned, looking grim, and called for the team captains. Karen, strapped into a flying litter, was already halfway back to the castle and nobody had thought to remove her armband, so Kelley tore a strip of green from a Slytherin banner and tied it around Hope's arm. She left to meet with Dani Byrne and the referees.

“I am informed by my assistant,” Madame Hooch told them, “that the collision was the result of reckless, possibly deliberate, actions by Jennifer Connelly,” Dani's eyes bulged, “Gryffindor, to regain a leading position in front of Gregory Cameron. I am ejecting her from the match and awarding Slytherin a penalty attempt.” Dani went red; Hope's face turned to stone. “I am not inviting comment; I thought it courteous to inform you before dismissing her. Return to your teams.”

Walking away, Hope heard Jen's yowl of protest and the crowd's roars – approving and disapproving – as though they were dull and distant. She felt hands on her arm and found Kelley looking up at her, wide-eyed and worried. “Are you okay?”

Hope made herself breathe and focus. “I'm okay. This is just not how I wanted to win.” She looked across to where she’d spotted Lindsay. “Damn it, the last thing I want is those scouts leaving with a bad taste in their mouths.” She started her warm-up.

Back on the bench, Kelley had to speak into Amy's ear to be heard over the noise. "What happens now?"

“They can’t win without a seeker. Since they're down in goals, they need all three chasers, so they sub Rachel West in for one of their beaters, play restarts, and we win,” Amy projected back, “in the least satisfying way possible.”

“Least satisfying?”

“Unless we beat Gryffindor cleanly and decisively, we’ll hear about it for the rest of the school year.”

Kelley frowned. “It looks pretty clean and decisive to me.”

“Sure, but do you think anyone in Gryffindor believes that Jen took out Greg?”

Kelley's frown deepend. “No, you're right. D-.”

“So, once again, Slytherin wrongs Gryffindor and gets away with it, or so they'll say. If they somehow come back and win, they'll be insufferable, and I'm not sure which is worse.”

“But they can't win now, can they?”

“Down a player? It’d take a miracle – or a disaster, from our side. They have to score to stay in the game, which means sacrificing their defense, and that’s just going to play to our strengths. Plus, Greg can beat Rachel nine times out of ten, even with cuts and bruises. It's not over, but it's in the bag.”

Across the pitch, Rachel West hurried after the dismissed seeker. “Jen! Jen, wait up a minute.”

“What?” Jen rounded on her, dripping venom.

Rachel faltered. “Jen, I…”

“Just get up there and get it the hell over with! Do you want a caution for wasting time, too?”
“N-No, it’s…” She took a deep breath. “If you still want to win, we can, but there’s something you have to do.”

“And that is?”

“This is bad.” Alex didn’t need to say any more.

“This is bullshit,” Ali snapped, surprising Alex. “Come on, you know Jen didn’t wreck that asshole.”

“Chill, Ali! I’ve never seen you like this before.”

“It’s the luxury of not being involved.”

“Morgan.”

They turned to find a fuming Jen Connelly, in undershirt, tights, and wounds, glaring at her. “West sends her regards. Put this on.” She tossed a balled-up team robe at Alex, who caught it and exchanged a look with Ali. “Now, dammit, before Hooch books Rachel for stalling.”

Alex jumped up and pulled the robe on, realized it was backwards, spun it around and looked for a broom. “Take mine,” Jen said, and shoved it at her. Alex, Ali, and everyone within earshot gaped. “What? If you fucking win this, I won’t need it anymore. Go!”

Alex went.

“At least Hope will get some time in front of the scouts,” Kelley thought aloud.

“Even that’s going to suffer,” Amy griped. “Their first impression of her will be against a teemed weakened after a sketchy foul. However well she plays, they’ll leave here wonderi-“

Kelley grabbed her arm and pointed across the stadium. “Look! Look! They brought in Alex!” Their long-haired friend, crimson-clad, rose out of the opposite stands and flew to join the Gryffindor huddle. Rachel West, robe-less, caught her arm and said something, then jogged into the tunnel and out of the match.

“Can they do that?” Amy wondered.

“Who cares? This is awesome!” She hopped off the bench and cheered. “Yeah, Alex! You get that snitch!”

“Kelley!” Amy hissed.

“What?”

Amy, speechless, gestured at the green-trimmed mass behind them.

“Oh.” Kelley shrank. “Ah, screw that.” She swelled again as she filled her lungs. “Go get ‘em, Alex! Go Slytherin, but go Alex, too!”

Amy fought conflicting urges to grin at her friend and curl into a ball. The other players on the bench – no, Amy decided she didn’t care what they thought. “You got this, Alex! Hope, shut ‘em out! U-S-A! U-S-A!” Kelley joined in: “U-S-A!” From across the pitch, they heard Ali and Ashlyn echo back, and Lauren and Tobin picked it up from the Hufflepuff stands. “U-S-A!”
“I’m getting chills,” Kelley told Amy between chants.

Amy rolled her eyes. “You are such a dork.”

“For real, though, imagine if this were a World Cup stadium, half the crowd was chanting, and we were out there in the middle of it.” She saw goosebumps rise on Amy’s arms and grinned. “Yeah, that’s right. 2011, baby!”

A tap on her back turned her attention away. Mark, the third chaser on the practice team, leaned over - he’d scooted away, Kelley realized - and asked, “You know this new girl? Is she good?”

“Alex Morgan?” Kelley grinned wider, “She’s the best! We’re so screwed.”

Dani pulled Alex aside. “Can you go shoulder-to-shoulder with Greg?”

“I haven’t practiced the physical side,” Alex answered, “just searching and maneuvering.”

“Okay. Don’t try it today. Alex, you absolutely, positively, have to beat Greg to the snitch, but we also need all the extra time you can allow us. If Greg spots the snitch, if they increase their lead by more than one more goal, or we go five minutes without closing the gap, then end the match.”

“Go down two or five minutes scoreless, and beat Greg. Got it.”

Dani reformed the huddle. “Our winning strategy is possession and pressure. There’s literally no point in defending now, so, as soon as we get possession, Dara, you move to mid-pitch and anchor our attack.” Dara nodded, grim. “Matt, you’ll play escort beater and get in the thick of it with the chasers. Be alert for opportunities to play the quaffle, as well. We can sub Chris or Megan in for you if you get worn out. Chasers, press high and make every throw an accurate one. We can’t afford turnovers.

“The goal difference is small enough that we’ll win if we catch the snitch now, but I know we can do better and our House needs the raw points. We had momentum on our side before and we can get it back. I know this looks bad, but that’s all in our heads. We’re playing an emotional game now. They expect us to come in hard and angry and blunt ourselves on their defense, but if we conquer our frustration and take heart, they’ll be the ones discouraged. We haven’t lost a man, we’ve gained a chance at glory. Victory to the brave! Who are we?!”

“GRYFFINDOR!”

Hope laid it out for her team. “This match is now a contest of possession; if they can’t keep the quaffle, they can’t score. Jo and Fara, I want you going after that ball like sharks. Kevin, hang back in the center for back-passes and defensive transitions. If there’s any risk, don’t go forward. Beaters, get in the space between them chasers and focus on breaking up Gryffindor’s passes. If they form an attack, Fara stays forward while the rest of you drop back into our usual defense: beaters on the outside goals, chasers marking. Greg, we need the snitch as soon as you can get it.” The players nodded in turn.

“That’s it, then. Skill, points, numbers, and time are all on our side. This is our game to lose, so we’re not going to. ‘Win’ on three. Fara?”

Fara called it. “One, two, three!”

“WIN!”
Hope caught Greg’s wrist on his way out of the huddle. “If you have a ‘collision’ with Alex Morgan,” she spoke so none could hear, “I’ll break your fingers.”

Alex called on every focusing technique and calming trick she knew. She stretched; she jogged up and down the sideline; she visualized flying, searching, seeking, winning. She replayed what she’d seen of Greg and chose her tactics. *I’ve got this. He’s good, but I’ve got this. I’m better. I’m ready. Let’s do this-*

“Alex! You forgot something!” Alex wondered who thought they knew her needs better than she did, and turned.

“I thought you’d want this.” Ashlyn held out a roll of pink pre-wrap.

Alex laughed, hugged her, and tore off a strip. “You rock, Ash.”

“Not as much as you’re about to rock their seeker.”

Alex grinned and ran to her place on the field, where she finished her makeshift hairband just in time. Madame Hooch whistled and waved them airborne, where Fara Williams would make the penalty attempt. As Alex rose, one voice pierced the noise surrounding her. “Yeah, Alex! Get it, sister!”

She looked down and saw Kelley jumping and cheering on the edge of a sea of green. “Thanks, Kelley!” She grinned and shouted back, hoping her words made it to her friend. *Love that girl. I bet she’s gonna need Hope at her back after this, though.*

The odds were stacked against Dara; at Hooch’s whistle, Fara threaded the quaffle past him with practiced assurance.

90-150. Game on. Alex put all else out of her mind and began her scan for the snitch. *It’s not at my level, Alex concluded. Twelve seconds, pretty good time. She made a fast scan of the sky. Not close above me. Twenty-five seconds. She spiraled upward while searching the scene below her. Nowhere obvious. One minute. She heard a swell of cheers below and glanced at the pitch again, but it wasn’t a goal, just a promising breakaway. Now at height, she began her rhythm: check position, check opponent, search a sector…check position, check opponent, search a sector…Two minutes. Not within the pitch and not over Ravenclaw. Greg’s got no idea, either. He circled about ten yards above her, watching her actions and reactions as well as looking for the snitch. Keep cool, don’t give anything away. Two minutes thirty.*

At three minutes and five seconds, Alex caught a flash of gold from behind the Hufflepuff stands. *Stay cool, stay cool, keep circling. It’s not time yet. At three minutes and twenty, another, much louder roar erupted below. 100-150? Good! Get us another one. She continued her search as though she’d never seen the snitch.*

An unfortunate deflection on Slytherin’s first effort landed the quaffle in Dani Byrne’s hands. “Here we go,” Lauren announced to herself. “Let’s see what Gryffindor’s made of.”

The counterattack began. Discipline born of desperation restrained Dani from attempting several potential passes. Instead, she and the other chasers made dashes in and out and jockeyed with the defenders to try and create a secure play, while Matt beat back bludgers like a beast.

“This is a totally different game now,” Tobin commented. “More like a chess match than anything.”

“Which would favor Slytherin,” Lauren suggested.

“It might, or might not. Cunning trumps bravado, but daring might draw errors.”
As if on cue, a Slytherin beater, hovering in front of the goal to Hope's right, shifted forward and outward to double-mark an encroaching chaser.

Dani, on the opposite side of the pitch, saw and hurled the quaffle through to the center, where Matt redirected it forward. The third red chaser, lurking on the edge of the scoring area, rammed her head into it and sent it flying towards the space abandoned by the Slytherin beater. The chaser he'd moved to cover slipped behind and punched the quaffle at the near goal.

Hope, rushing right as the attack changed sides, discovered that she had three more yards to guard than she planned for. It was too late.

Lauren groaned. “She almost got there, too,” Tobin commiserated.

“If that beater hadn’t lost focus, she’d never have needed to.”

“Seriously! What did we always say in soccer? ‘Don’t give up the far post!’”

Judging by the way Hope spoke to her teammate, she felt the same way.

“Oh, come on, Steve!” Kelley shouted her frustrations. “You had one job!”

“We're still up by five, and they can't hold us on defense,” Amy reminded her.

“Yeah, I know. I just hate that one of ours let Hope down.”

“That's because you're in wuv with her,” Amy reminded Kelley, who tried to glare but couldn’t keep from smiling.

“Yeah. I am.”

“Wuv, twoo wuv,” Amy continued, but Kelley seized her arm again. “Look! Greg's making a dive! Alex is chasing!”

“I would've thought Alex would see it first,” Amy wondered.

“Maybe she did and tried stalling for time?”

“Maybe,” Amy doubted. “It takes a lot of confidence to see the snitch and turn away.”

The two seekers streaked overhead and out of the stadium, Alex trailing by only half her initial handicap. “Looks reasonable from here.”

In a moment, the seekers returned from another side. The tiny golden snitch glinted about twenty yards ahead of Alex, who led Greg by another five yards.

“Oh, yeah, she knew exactly what she was doing,” Kelley grinned. “Get it, Alex!”

“Dang, she’s quick,” Tobin admired. “I mean, I see her fly every weekend, but it’s different with another seeker for comparison.”

Dani intercepted another Slytherin pass and broke for the goals again, this time with a clear path. The assembled school rose to its feet as she went one-v-one with Hope Solo.

“Slytherin’s giving away too many opportunities.”
“It looks like the classic ‘lose a player, play twice as hard’ mentality. Gryffindor wants it more right now.”

Hope, staring at Dani’s hands, recognized Dani’s fake throw to her right and then saw her commit to throwing the quaffle left, with spin. She flung her body left and let her broom shove her across the face of the goals. The quaffle rose above her on its way to scoring, and the Houses gasped, before the spin tugged it back down – right into the palm of her hand.

“It’s moments like this,” Lauren yelled through the din of cheers and jeers, “when I’m glad she’s from America!”

By Dani’s instructions, Alex was out of time. She stole a glance over her shoulder at Greg, who looked flushed and sweaty. Six minutes and you’re already wearing out? You’re done. Alex angled to block his view of the snitch and slowed just enough to let him think he was reeling her in while still gaining on the snitch herself. She thanked the snitch again and again for holding a straight path for so long; it seemed to make a beeline for the faculty box. Come on, come on…any second now...

Tobin and Lauren gave up looking for the seekers just in time to be surprised when they raced in from behind.

“Tell me she won't follow the snitch through the box,” Lauren said.

“She won't follow the snitch through the box.”

“Thanks. Any time, now, Alex…”

The snitch darted left to avoid the stands. Alex threw herself into a quarter-roll and hauled her heels down, snapping her into a vicious turn after it. Her vision immediately turned to shades of gray and she fought to keep her head up against the acceleration. Hold it, hold it, hold it…she pushed the limit and tunnel vision set in. Almost…she reached a path paralleling the snitch and unloaded herself.

Blood surged back, color returned, and she was just two arm-lengths behind the prize. She didn’t bother looking for Greg; there was no way he’d followed that turn. As long as the snitch didn’t turn back to the right, she had at least twenty pressure-free seconds.

With Alex’s body blocking his view forward, the abrupt appearance of the obstacle caught Greg unprepared. He almost made it despite himself, wrenching to follow Alex and calling on all the deceleration his broom could muster, but it was only enough to turn his impact into a scrape along the front of the box. His feet slapped into the wood, dragged, and flipped him head-over-heels, horizontally. He fell, tumbling, into Ravenclaw.

For a moment, no one breathed. Then Lauren cleared her throat. “Well, that puts things in perspective.”

“Alex should have an easy time with the snitch now.”

One and a half arm-lengths.

One arm-length.

Alex stretched her arms out on either side of the snitch, sacrificing reach for reaction time.

Three feet.
The snitch darted up and right, but she got her fingertips in the way and tapped it back in front of her.

*Two feet.*

She brought her arms in and spread her fingers around it.

*Two feet. Thaat's it…*

Alex turned back toward the stadium, snitch held overhead.

“Game over!” Tobin cheered. “Add Alex to your ‘glad she’s American’ list.”

Chapter End Notes

To be continued...
As she walked off the field, Hope’s expression broadcast, “I’m pissed. Don’t talk to me,” so Kelley did exactly that.

“Hope, hey,” Kelley caught up and touched her arm. “I know we had an ugly game, but those scouts will want to talk to you.”

“Not until I see Karen,” Hope growled.

“Oh, okay.” Kelley forced the smile she wanted but didn’t feel. “That’s a really good idea, but perk up for her, please? You played great, Hope. Focus on that, at least until the pros leave.”

“I’ll stop being mad when I see that she’s okay.”

“I’m coming with you.”

“Kelley,” Hope snapped, “I…” She saw Kelley flinch and caught herself. “I’m sorry, Kelley. I’m mad at a bunch of people about a bunch of things, but not you.”

“Hold me and I’ll believe you.”

Hope embraced her and tried to force herself to relax into it. That didn’t work and she sighed at failing Kelley once again, but the sigh softened her and she felt Kelley melt in.

“Thank you, Hope. I know there’s a lot to be upset about right now, so please remember to keep the outside, outside. Oh, and you’re awesome.” Kelley stepped back, now smiling for real. “Do you want to see Karen alone?” Hope nodded. “Alright, I’ll go congratulate Alex. Catch you later, girlfriend,” Kelley grinned and clapped her on the back, at waist-level – a very low estimate of waist-level. Uh…oops. Should I apologize? She didn’t seem to react…a smirk warped her face. I’m so doing that on purpose next time.

So many celebrating House-mates surrounded Alex that Kelley couldn’t see her. She did, however, have her broom, and took advantage of it to reach the center of the red-on-black mass. Some of the Gryffindor students noticed her overhead, and a shout, then three, and then a barrage of boos and jeers assailed her.

Alex cursed the founders of Hogwarts. “Kelley! Wait!” Ashlyn and Ali helped her make space for one more. “Get down here so I can hug you!”

“Is it safe?” Kelley questioned the wisdom of her idea.

“It’d better be safe, if they want me to fly for them again!” Alex shouted for all to hear.

Kelley lowered herself into the gap and the crowd went quiet. “I feel like I’m in West Side Story,” she muttered.

“Now would be a good time for your irrepressible squirrel side,” Alex smirked, and Kelley’s spirits lifted.

“I wanted to bring him, but Hope didn’t think he’d be welcome on the bench yet. Wow, Alex! You
killed it up there! I mean, I knew you were good, but *damn!*” Alex laughed and Kelley’s tension fled. “That was such an awesome first match! I’m so happy for you!” She grabbed Alex and hugged her. “Congratulations! And don’t tell anyone I said this,” she lowered her voice in pitch, but not volume, “but thank you for making Greg look bad. He’s kind of a dick.” The nearer Gryffindor students snickered.

Alex felt the crowd’s attitude lighten and capitalized on it. She threw an arm around the green-robed girl and announced to her House-mates, “This is Kelley O’Hara. She’s my best friend and, one day soon, she’ll be the top chaser for Slytherin.” A murmur rippled through the crowd. “If any of you treat her like that again, I’ll be through playing for Gryffindor.”

“Alex!” Kelley was as shocked as Alex’s comrades.

“I’ll find a club team to practice with, if it comes to that,” Alex shrugged.

Someone, emboldened by the anonymity of the crowd, challenged her. “You would seriously choose a Slytherin over your entire House?”

“I choose my friends over anything.” Her retort brought silence again.

“Kelley’s legit.” Kelley recognized the voice of the friend she’d made in her first days of classes. Heads turned to face the girl, who straightened under their scrutiny. “She…is.”

“She’s honest,” Ashlyn spoke up.

“She’s the sweetest!” Ali cooed, making Kelley blush and her friends laugh.

“Ali!” Kelley hissed, “What was that?!”

“Just humanizing you,” Ali whispered back.

Now that her embarrassment was wearing off, Kelley noted that the Gryffindor students did appear more at ease. “Um, thanks, I guess.”

“My pleasure,” Ali replied, with a cheeky smile.

“I noticed.” Kelley pivoted back to Alex. “I still can’t get over how cool that was! Lindsay must be so proud.”

“Lindsay?”

“Oh, right, you left before Hope read the letter! She and scouts from three British-Irish League teams came to watch her.”

Alex’s jaw dropped.


“I’m not sure anyone does yet,” Kelley said distantly, “including herself, but each new thing keeps getting better.”

When the congregation dispersed, they discovered Amy waiting on the Slytherin bench. “I stayed in case you needed rescuing from the mob.”

“Thanks,” Kelley said dryly, “it was touch-and-go for the first minute.”
“I felt like I'd invited you into a lions’ den.” Alex showed her nerves for a moment.

“That is your mascot,” Amy pointed out.

“Hopefully, that helped—” Ashlyn heard running feet and looked back.

“Congrats on your first catch!” Lauren and Tobin chorused, and dumped a cask of water on Alex's head.

Karen,” Hope told the nurse, who pointed her to the goalkeeper’s bed. “How is she?”

“Banged up, but nothing we haven't fixed before. She'll walk to dinner this evening. Gregory's in better shape, should be all set in another hour. Jennifer, though, turned out to be pretty badly injured internally, and her storming around on adrenaline didn’t help matters. She'll be here overnight.”

Hope grunted and went to Karen. “Hey,” was all that came to mind.

“Hey.”

“How do you feel?”

“Like I fell forty feet.”

“I…I’m sorry, Karen.”

Karen narrowed her eyes. “Who are you and what have you done with Hope Solo?”

“Uh…did the nurse check you for concussion?”

Karen laughed, though it pained her. “That’s more like it. What on earth were you apologizing for, Hope?”

Hope sighed and sat in a chair by the bed. “I’m not sure. It feels weird that I suddenly put you in and you got hurt—“

Karen shook her head, gingerly. “There's no way that’s your fault, Hope.”

“I can think of one way…” Karen questioned her with eyes and face. “I should've pulled Greg when I saw his attitude problem in the pregame meeting.”

“Why do you think that?”

“You didn’t see any of what happened, right?”

Karen shook her head. “I remember serving the quaffle forward and then I woke up here. They said that Jen and Greg collided and Jen hit me on her way down.”

“Hooch ejected Jen for recklessness.” Karen raised her eyebrows. “The thing is, she and everyone else were looking the other way. All she had to go on was what one of the assistant refs saw in her peripherals.”

“Are you saying…?”

“I think Greg did it on purpose and made it look like Jen's fault.”

Karen groaned. “I hate how that’s more believable than Jen wrecking them by accident. How will
we ever know?"

“I have a really bad idea about how to find out.”

“If it involves injuring him, don’t,” Karen warned. “You'll get expelled.”

“No. Besides,” Hope smirked, “I already used that threat to keep him off of Alex.”

“Alex?”

“Alex Morgan, a first-year. Rachel West gave away her robe and they subbed her in for a beater. Fara scored on the penalty, and then neither team wanted to risk losing possession, so nobody created many chances. They scored once when Steve left his zone, but that was it. Alex outclassed every seeker we've seen here, lured Greg into clipping the faculty box and crashing in Ravenclaw’s section, and caught the snitch like it was easy.”

“So…250-150 Gryffindor?” Hope nodded. “Ugh, can we get a replay?”

Hope shook her head. “They’ll go undefeated now that Alex is in, but we can still win the Cup on goal difference. We did well today: You were great, Kevin was on point, Jo and Fara tore it up in the final third…” Hope grinned. “I was great.”

Karen laughed again, with a little less pain. “Stupid ribs. You're different, Hope. Maybe it's all the time you spend with that little ball of sunshine, Kelley.”

Hope just smiled.


Hope heard noise at the entrance and stood up. “I'll be by later to see how you’re doing. Right now, though, I think you have some visitors.”

“Thank you, Hope.”

As she made her way out, Hope told herself that she'd done the right thing – at least, she thought it was the right thing – okay, maybe not the right thing, but a good thing, and she was on her way to do another good thing. She thought. If nothing else, Kelley would be proud of her. Is proud of you, Hope. She already is proud of you. The thought provided the spark of warmth and confidence to stride into the corridor and look Lindsay in the eye. “Thank you all for coming to see us today,” she said to the waiting professionals.

“We got quite the show, Hope.” Lindsay’s tone mixed dry humor and pleasant surprise.

“Yeah. Karen Bardsley's awake and recovering well,” Hope gestured over her shoulder. “I need to take care of a couple team captain’s chores before I’m done for the day. Can I meet up with you later?”

Lindsay looked at the scouts, who nodded, “Maybe we can talk to your seeker protégé while you do,” one suggested.

“I'll meet you back here in ten minutes or so,” Lindsay told them, and left with Hope.

Once they were away, Hope started explaining. “Lindsay, I know today makes no sense to you. When I read your letter, I realized that today was probably Karen's only chance to have a moment in
“At your own expense? And now, when we're right in front of you, you have something else which can't wait? Is something wrong?”

“No. I thought that your high opinion of me would inspire at least Montrose’s scouts to come back for my next game.”

“Maybe, or you may have burned me as a reference, not just for you but for all the others, too. These are businesspeople, Hope. They don't take kindly to having their time wasted.”

“Was it?”

They stopped. “No, it wasn’t, thank heavens. Alex, this Karen, and your two striking chasers made strong arguments for themselves. Did you tell them we were coming?”

“Only Karen and Kelley.”

“That’s good, it'll help the others' cases. Hope,” Lindsay looked around and wrinkled her nose back and forth, “Hope, I think I understand your choice and I see the good side, but you cannot ever just not show up! It makes you seem unreliable, it makes me seem unreliable…look, we were all impressed with your goalkeeping, but what good is that if the scouts go home questioning your commitment?”

Hope tried and failed to find a rebuttal. “That is actually the worst that can happen, isn't it?”

Lindsay nodded. “When money’s at stake, the only part of your reputation that matters is whether or not you get results. If people get the idea that they can’t count on you…”

“I know, I've cut players in tryouts for that reason.”

“I did my best to not seem surprised or concerned when you didn’t start, so hopefully my credibility as a reference is intact. You need to hold up your end by going back to our scouts and selling yourself as a human Rock of Gibraltar.”

“I will.”

“I mean now, Hope.”

“Lindsay, I need to see Madam Hooch, the referee, before anything else. I’ll be back as soon as I possibly can be.”

“You’d better convince them that your stubbornness will work in their favor,” Lindsay warned, and headed back.

*This had better be the right thing.*

Three professors and two captains arrived at the now-deserted stadium. “I must admit, Hope, this is original,” Headmistress McGonagall commented.

Dr. Couture smirked. “What, you've never needed five invisibility cloaks and a time-turner for something before?”

“Have you, Valence?”
“Not if you’re asking me in front of students, no.”

Madame Hooch rolled her eyes, but all that got her was eye contact with the tall Potions Master. “If you’re quite finished bantering, we’ll get on with this.”

“This is time-travel, Rolanda,” McGonagall quipped. “Why the haste?”

“Cute. Don your cloaks and let’s get this show on the road.”

Headmistress McGonagall spun the time-turner and sent them back to the time of the incident. In a flash, the sun jumped backward across the sky, the clouds writhed into new – old – shapes, and the stadium roiled with spectators. The professors spread out to watch the collision from three angles. Hope and Dani, their wands clipped to the outside of their cloaks, stuck close to Madame Hooch and watched each other as much as anything else.

Jen and Greg arced in from the south and headed for the stadium, losing separation in their focus on the snitch ahead. The initial knock of elbows surprised both of them and they bounced apart, but came back in again and pinned their shoulders together. They whooshed overhead and then it happened.

“I knew it,” both captains said together.

Dani flipped off her cloak’s hood and rounded on Hope, who did the same. “Then why are we here?”

“Because a suspicion isn't enough reason to kick him off our team.”

“Do you have something personal against him?” Dani looked suspicious herself.

“No, until just now. I won’t have a dangerous player in my squad.”

“Because he might concede penalties?”

Hope looked at Dani with frustration. “Because he gets people injured!”

“Which weakens your team for the rest of the season?”

“Seriously?! He could’ve killed Karen, for fuck’s sake!”

“Language, Ms. Solo!” Hooch, invisible and forgotten, chastised. Dani eyed her wordlessly until the other professors returned.

“Greg hooked his legs inside Jen's,” the Headmistress stated. “An entirely deliberate attempt to have her sent off.”

Dr. Couture, jaw clenched, nodded confirmation. “Bastard.”

Madame Hooch glared for a moment before agreeing. “Shame on us for missing it. Hope, I owe you thanks. Now, back to the present to sort this mess out.”

“Why didn’t you start?”

“So you’d all see Karen play.”

“Maybe you aren’t aware of this, but Hogwarts is the only wizards’ college in the Isles. It's not like
we could miss anyone.”

“I’m aware, but would you rate her as highly as she deserves if you only saw her in practices?”

“We’re talking about you, now, and altruism is not a trait we look for in goalkeepers.”

“Oh, I’ve got ‘arrogant’ covered. Ask anyone.”

“Actions speak louder than words, Ms. Solo. We need players who’ll step up under pressure, not
down.”

“Alright, then tell me this: what did my performance in goal say to you?”

The teams’ scouts exchanged glances. “It said that whoever signs you had better pray that nothing
important to you comes up on the day of a big match.”

“Ok.” Hope put her hands flat on the table and leaned forward. “Now I’ll tell you what I think. I
think you’re probing me to see if my decision was a one-off event or part of a pattern. I think you’re
on very thin ice, talking about my character like this, when that could’ve been me in the Infirmary. I
think you had better pray that you can trade for first pick in next season’s draft, because I’m going to
the top, with or without you, in this league or another.” She locked eyes with the older of Montrose’s
scouts. “You can advertise the rookie goalkeeper of the decade in your colors or you can have a
bidding war over me once I’m a free agent. If you have any questions, come back next Saturday.”

She got up and left, noting Lindsay’s bright red face on her way out, and prayed that she hadn’t
made a huge mistake. Any team but Montrose meant living farther from Kelley.

At dinner, the Houses returned to self-segregation. Hope and Dani claimed seats and met below the
Headmistress at the foot of the faculty table. “Do you ever think about how fucked up all this is?”
Hope whispered.

“What?”

“This whole House-hatred thing. Can you even imagine what this place would be like if Gryffindor
and Slytherin hadn’t been at each other’s throats for a thousand years?”

“Not really, given the amount of reasons you’ve given us to distrust you.”

“You don’t even know the first thing about me, Danielle.”

“Your attention, please,” Headmistress McGonagall stood and addressed the assembled school.
“Following the…contentious Quidditch match this afternoon, Hope Solo, Captain of the Slytherin
team, asked Madame Hooch to revisit her dismissal of Jennifer Connelly, Gryffindor.” Waves of
shock, incredulity, and schadenfreude rolled through the Great Hall. “On Captain Solo’s suggestion
and with herself and Captain Danielle Byrne in attendance, Professors Hooch, Couture, and I used a
time turner-”

Chatter rose from every table. Headmistress McGonagall rolled her eyes, produced her wand, and
intoned, “Sonorous.” Her amplified voice cut through the noise: “Your attention and your silence,
please. Using a time-turner, we observed the collision of Ms. Connelly and Gregory Cameron from
every angle. We found, unanimously, that the collision was a deliberate foul by Mr. Cameron—” noise
swelled again, “-intended to deceive the referees and remove Ms. Connelly from competition.

“Given the significant consequences of the incorrect call, I declare today's result and all associated
House points void. The match will be replayed one week from today.” The Hall exploded. “Quiet,” McGonagall’s voice boomed. “Furthermore, for willfully risking bodily harm to a member of the Hogwarts community, I hereby bar, in perpetuity, Mr. Gregory Cameron from any and all aerial activities within the space defined by the Hogwarts Trust property boundary. That is all.” She sat.

“Holy shit,” Amy breathed.

“I can’t believe it,” Kate agreed.

“Can’t believe which part?” Kelley asked her classmate.

“Well, all of it, but the first thing I’m stuck on is how Hope thought through this whole thing – the collision, the ambiguity, even the time-turner – when the team earned the result without Greg. I mean, Gryffindor is only going to do better next week. Why not just cut him and keep the +5 GD?”

“There’s a few reasons, I think,” Kelley suggested. “His foul and the sending-off made a circus out of the win Hope wanted, and he got Karen hurt. Plus, I think she just doesn’t want to hear about what bastards she and her teammates are for the rest of her final year. Disgracing Greg answers all of that.”

“I thought the other Houses would respect her for it,” Amy said, “but they look more wary than anything.”

“It’s shock,” Fara spoke up. “The Slytherin Uber-Bitch gave up our goal differential, which we won without Cameron, in the name of fair play. They don’t know what to think, except to wonder what angle she’s playing.”

“Hey,” Hope appeared and spoke to Kelley, “I’m gonna go see Jen.”

“Thanks. Talk later?”

“Yeah.” Hope smiled, sort of, and left.

“‘Thanks’? For checking on Jen?” Kate questioned Kelley.

“For not just disappearing on me,” Kelley explained, and then watched the smoke pour from Kate’s ears.

“No…you are not…”

“We're together,” Kelley preened. Kate’s jaw hung wide until Amy reached across and closed it for her.

“That was my reaction, too,” Fara said, “but they seem to go well together.”

“Her’s asleep, but much better than she was when you were here earlier. Would you like me to wake her for you?”

“No, thanks, I’ll handle it.”

The nurse looked at Hope skeptically. “Be sensitive,” she warned.

“I'm getting a lot of practice,” Hope mumbled, and went to sit at Jen's bedside. She looked over her bruised and bandaged opponent and felt the familiar guilt rise. “Enough,” she muttered, then leaned forward and waved her hand over Jen’s closed eyes.
Jen stirred, blinked, woke, and groaned.

Hope made her voice as soft as she could accept and spoke. “I came to see how you’re doing.”

Jen rolled her head to look at her. “What the fuck?”

Hope looked away. “That sums up the day pretty well.”

“You’re one to talk,” Jen snorted. “All the cards fell your way and now you’re here to…what? Act sorry?”

“I told Hooch that I thought she made the wrong call.”

“How sweet of you. A little late, snake-eyes.”

“I suggested we get Dani, McGonagall, and a time-turner and go have another look.”

Jen had no answer to that.

“Hooch, McGonagall, and Couture watched it from better angles and they agreed that Greg fucked you over. They just announced to the school that we're replaying the match next Saturday. Also, Greg's banned from all flying.”

Jen stared at her. “What the fuck?”

Hope sighed. “Basically nobody can accept that I did all this.”

“Yeah, especially not your Housemates.”

“Only some of them. You’d be surprised, again.”

“I’m sure.”

“Most are too pissed at Greg for giving Alex an opening to prove herself to think much about me.”

“She did that well, eh? Lucky for you, then.”

Hope tried to smile. “She stole the show. Also, I mentioned to her that I was coming to see you, and she asked me to give you your broom.” Hope held it up and rested it against the nightstand.

“By which you mean, you knew Alex would want to return it, so you positioned yourself to be the one to do it. Boom, instant points with Jennifer!”

“I told her you might think that, but she insisted, even though she’ll be along with the rest of the team after they finish dinner.”

“Dinner?”

“I wanted to be first to tell you the news, so I left right after the announcement.”

“Why?”

“Out of hope that you'd accept me as sincere.” Hope's own sigh surprised her. “In vain, apparently.”

“Yeah, that was never gonna happen. Nice try, Slytherin.”

Hope felt…a lot of things. Frustration, but also anger and resentment, bitterness, sadness, fear. She
clenched her jaw to keep it from shaking.

“Oh, shit, trying to work up some tears now that you’re out of answers? Whatever you're after, you must be desperate for it.”

Hope left as fast as she could.

“Mind if we hang here for a while?” Kelley asked Alex through her window.

“Please! ‘Mi casa’ and all that.” Alex waved her and Hope inside. “How are you?”

“Pretty good,” Kelley answered, “but--“

“I'm not.” Hope spoke as level as possible.

Alex hid her surprise at the raw emotion under Hope’s voice. “What’s wrong?”

Hope took a ragged breath. “Is Ashlyn around?”

“She and Ali are in the common room, I think. Do you want me to get her?”

“Thank you, yes. Both of them.”

Ali took one look at Hope and asked if she should fetch the New Kids. “I don't think so,” Kelley spoke up, “That seems like a big audience.”

“No, I think that'd be good,” Hope said. “Might as well get it all over with. Would you mind going back for Amy?”

Kelley gave Squirrel into her care and left with Ali. “Hope,” Ashlyn said admiringly, “that was a beautiful show of sportsmanship. I'm so proud to call you my teammate.”

Alex nodded in agreement. “Two, three years from now, people here won't be telling stories about my debut game, but they'll still be talking about you.”

“Thanks,” Hope rasped, “but you’re wrong. They'll tell your story because it's an easy story to like.”

“So is yours,” Alex countered.

“In red, it would be, but not in green. In green, I'm a villain no matter what I do.”

“Not to us,” Ashlyn said.

“That’s why I came.”

When the full cohort assembled, they got comfortable on the floor: Hope with her back to a bed, Kelley adhered to Hope, squirrel lounging across their shoulders, and the others in an arc around them.

“We’ve got your back, Hope,” Tobin said, breaking the initial quiet, and everyone murmured support.

“I…” Hope stopped and restarted. “Thank you, all of you. Ok. First, I'm sorry for treating you all badly in October. I thought the way to deal with being overwhelmed was to curl up in a ball until everyone gave up and left me alone, but you were never the problem.” She sighed. “Look, guys, I'm
“Apology accepted, Hope,” Ali said, and moved to hug her. The others joined in and then, by unspoken understanding, each embraced and forgave her individually. Tear-stains adorned every face.

“Holy fuck,” Hope finally gasped, “you all are amazing. Thank you. I’ll never be able to thank you enough.”

“We love you, too,” Lauren smiled. “We’re family.”

Hope basked in the feeling of acceptance, taking in the caring eyes and happy smiles that were all for her. “I love you all. There’s another thing bothering me. After McGonagall finished the announcement, I went to visit Jen in the infirmary.”

“Oh,” slipped from Lauren's mouth.

“I wanted to be the one to tell her. I thought it would do good if she knew that I’d fixed what my team did to hers, but it didn’t.” She recounted their conversation. “No matter what I said, she kept trying to figure out what advantage I wanted from it. It was the same with Dani, except she wasn’t overtly offensive. Hell, even the team scouts didn’t know what to do with me.” Kelley clung closer for the thousandth time. “Why can’t I just be, ‘Hope Solo, Quidditch player’? Why does it always have to be, ‘Hope Solo, Slytherin bitch’?”

“I think it’s partly a case of ‘better late than never’,” Tobin answered. “Just speaking plainly, in the past, you haven't helped yourself any on this. It'll take time for people to see you differently and start treating you differently, and some never will. But you’re also right that the Slytherin thing is part of it, too.”

“A huge part.” Alex looked at Kelley. “I was disgusted with the way people reacted to you when you came to congratulate me.”

“Let me guess,” Hope said, bitterness evident; “you got booed.”

“Big time. I was scared, honestly,” Kelley admitted.

“It was so messed up!” Alex clenched and unclenched her fists. “I yelled that, if any of them treated my best friend badly again, I’d refuse to play, and a few people spoke up for Kelley, and it got better, but never okay. My point is, Hope, you could be the most agreeable person in the world and you’d still be treated no better than Kelley.”

“It’s like we’re tainted,” Amy sighed, prompting Lauren to pull her into a seated hug.

“Aww, You’re not tainted, Amy,” Lauren consoled her, “just blonde!” It broke the mood and let them laugh out their emotions.

“Ahhhh, so,” Alex vented the last of her tension, “what are we going to do?”

“I think it’d be good,” Tobin suggested, “if we all try to sit with someone from Slytherin, and you three with a Gryffindor, at least once a day in the Great Hall.”

“Feel free to avoid the extra-prickly ones,” Amy said. “Don’t burn yourself out trying to get through
“Same idea, don’t waste your time on Jen,” Ashlyn advised Hope. “If her friends come around, maybe she will, too, but don’t lose heart because of one bi-…difficult person.”

“And we should hang out more,” Kelley suggested to Alex. “If people get used to seeing us together everywhere, it won’t be a big deal at games. You’re almost caught up in tutoring, right? Oh!” She flashed to Ali. “Do you think we could sit with you at Gryffindor games?”

“I’d like that,” Ali smiled.

Hope did not. “I can’t see that going well.”

“If anyone gets nasty,” Ali grinned, “I’ll threaten to sic Ashlyn on ‘em.”

Kelley interrupted her own laugh. “Ohmigosh, Hope, do I have sic-ing privileges?!”

Hope couldn’t say ‘no’ to the loving, grinning face on her shoulder. “With great power comes great responsibility. Sic wisely.” She almost kept a straight face.

“If you stick close to Ali and Kelley, I think you might be alright,” Tobin said to Hope. “I mean, anyone with the nerve to sit in Gryffindor’s section deserves be an honorary member.”

“Ooh, that’s another idea!” Kelley was on a roll. “We could make – transfigure? – Gryffindor crest pins to wear! Who do you play next?”

Lauren cleared her throat emphatically.

“Aww, at least in the name of keeping Ali company?” Kelley and Ali aimed puppy pouts at Lauren.

“It is so not fair how cute you are! Fine, and we can all be there for Gryffindor-Ravenclaw.”

Chapter End Notes

I always love to hear what you’re thinking :) Comments encouraged!
Want

Chapter Notes

I'm finally updating! It's a long one. I hope you find it worth the wait.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ali wrung her hands at the pre-dawn twilight, which washed everything, even the rich red wallhangings, in a dim, fuzzy gray-blue. The first thing – person – she wanted to see each day was Ashlyn, but there wasn't enough light at 6 a.m. in November. There hadn't been enough since…well, since she stopped being self-conscious about looking, dammit! She rose silently and began her morning routine, making do with memories of Ash until she awoke. It's funny, how it still took me by surprise…

“Al?”

She looked up from her arithmancy problem set. “Hmm?”

Ashlyn set her drawing compass aside. “I heard there's a café-slash-tea place in Hogsmeade that's really good. How about we go there after practice Thursday evening?”

Questions rushed into her brain, including such gems as “Are you asking me out?” and “Why ask in the middle of our homework?” Feeling a little flustered, she bought some breathing room by going with, “Why Thursday?”

Ash had seemed a bit disappointed to not get an immediate 'yes'. “Anyone else who's planning to go is probably thinking Friday, too. It should be a lot quieter if we go Thursday.”

“Makes sense.” She decided to go for the big one. “Is this a date, Ash?”

Ashlyn smiled tentatively. “Yes, Alexandra Krieger, I'm asking you out on a date.”

With her most encouraging smile and her best British accent, she replied, “I'd be honored to accept.”

“Splendid!” Ashlyn tried to match it and failed utterly, to Ali’s amusement. “Whatever, I've got three and a half more years here to get it down.” She sighed. “We should get back to studying. Our homework for Friday needs to be done by Thursday afternoon, now.” She picked up her compass and adjusted it to draw another arc.

“I never thought I'd say this,” Ali said as she unrolled a new square of twenty-four-inch sketch parchment, “but I kinda miss Muggle math homework.”

“Why in Godric's name is that?!”

Ali let go of the edges of the parchment and watched it roll partway back up again. “However much I disliked it, at least my Muggle homework always lay flat.”
The fall evening was perfect for a date; cool enough to justify clinging to Ashlyn, but not cold enough to be uncomfortable. Hogsmeade reminded Ali of the sort of town in old movies: brick walls, brightly-painted eaves and window frames, and every business a proprietorship. She half-expected to run into James Stewart on a street corner.

Ashlyn echoed her thoughts. “I bet when it snows, it feels just like It's a Wonderful Life here, except British.”

“I was just thinking that! I keep looking around for Jimmy Stewart.”

“He did marry a witch in that one movie,” Ashlyn said, “so you never know.”

“What movie is that? I've never heard of it.”

“Bell, Book, and Candle. Stewart unknowingly falls for a witch, but if a witch falls in love, she loses her magic-“

“What?! That’s horrible!”

Ashlyn nodded. “Yeah, it's kinda messed up. In the scene where she realizes she loves him, her cat just up and leaves.”

“Awww, that’s so sad!”

“I know. It's well made, though. Thankfully, I figured out that it was fiction before I could get upset…or try to make myself fall in love.”

Ali froze. “What?” Since her arms were still clamped to one of Ashlyn's, the blonde stopped as well.

“Ali, for most of my life, I saw magic as a threat to my future in soccer. When I was fifteen, I would've given anything to not be a witch.”

“Thank God you didn’t,” Ali replied, her voice level and her eyes serious.

“I am very happy to be a witch now.”

Ali glowed with a broad, warm smile, then smirked. “Even in Astronomy class?”

“Ugh, I told you! I don’t have patience for this star-alignment crap.”

Ali started them walking again. “Come on, Ash! Keep an open mind!”

Shaking her head, Ashlyn replied, “Al, I grew up watching Space Shuttle launches from my house. The Muggles are exploring the solar system and we’re still studying astrology?! Gimmie a break.”

Sighing with resignation, Ali made a token defense and moved on. “It's not astrology, it's magic astronomy. Is that the place?” She pointed to a colorful storefront.

“Yes, ‘Madame Puddifoot's’.”

“Looks cheerful!”

Ashlyn nodded and led her across the street. The tea shop seemed so full of brightness that it might burst at any moment. As they approached, the cheery blaze of light resolved into a hundred hues of color – one white, two reds, three golds, and ninety-four different pinks.
“It’s like an industrial spill at the Hallmark company,” Ash blurted.

Ali laughed so hard she snorted.

To Ashlyn’s manifest relief, Ali agreed that the chairs and tables were too small – “I’ve been called girly, but I am not dainty,” she asserted – and they made a detour to The Three Broomsticks Inn. Ashlyn led her to the back corner booth, so familiar from tutoring, and they didn’t stop talking for the next three hours. Time, drinks, food, patrons; all came and went without disrupting their rapport. They only left when the innkeeper came to replace the burned-down candles at their table.

In the hall to Gryffindor Tower, just out of view of the Fat Lady, Ali stopped Ashlyn and faced her. The change in their relationship didn’t need discussion, for it was plain as day on their faces. She rested her arms on Ashlyn’s shoulders – oh, those shoulders – and her gorgeous, tattooed, gentle, strong, humble, badass best friend wrapped her up and kissed her.

Reliving the moment still gave Ali butterflies. Her lips, so soft…oh, it all just felt so right. Those wonderful eyes, right there in front of me. Melting into her, feeling her smile as she held me tighter. The lamplight shadowing her cheeks and sparkling in her hair…with a sigh, Ali came back to the present. Stupid dark winter-

“Morning.” Alex’s first word of the day came out twice as raspy.

“Morning.” They spoke in hushed tones to keep from waking Ashlyn, which gave Ali the perfect reason to look over her shoulder at her girlfriend again. When she turned back, Alex looked glum. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

The girl shook her head and blanked her face. “Sorry, it’s nothing. Forget about it.”

“Nope. What is it?”

“Ali…”

Alex’s protest only made Ali more determined. “What’s got you down, Alex?”

The girl caved and sighed. “I was jealous of how happy you are.” Ali did a double-take. “See, I told you it was better-“

Ali cut her off with a hug. “Hey, we all feel that at least once in our lives. I guess you’re feeling left out and lonely?”

Alex nodded, looking grim. “Out of the four of us, I’m the only one who’s still single. It sucks.”

“You really want someone, don’t you?” Over Ali’s shoulder, Alex let out a ragged sigh. Ali shifted to stand at her friend’s side, still with one arm around her, and guided her to the bath mirror. “Ash and I, and Kelley and Hope, are very lucky to meet each other so early. Your time will come, too. It might be tomorrow or – and this is common – years from now, and it might be the next person you date or the twentieth, but you will find someone.”

Alex wiped below her eyes. Words could only do so much against the ache in her heart. “It’s hard to remember and believe it, though.”

Ali cocked her head. “Maybe it would help if you spend more of your time with the New Kids? Like, you’re around couples almost all day.”
“Maybe. Yeah, I think I might try that. Chen is, like, the nicest person ever and Amy is hilarious.”

“Hey, Tobin’s awesome, too! She’s just more reserved, is all. Here’s the most important thing, though.” Ali turned her attention to the mirror. “You see that girl?” She pointed at Alex’s reflection. “That’s Alex Morgan and, let me tell you, she is a catch. You know why?”

Alex had no answer handy.

“You don't? Oh, you have to hear this! Alex is such a wonderful person! She's fun and she's funny and full of life. Like, I’m dating someone else and I still love that I’m sharing her room. She's so caring, too, and has a huge heart. I heard that, not once but twice, she helped a friend - who she was crushing on - pursue feelings for another girl. What an amazing person to be close to! She's inspiring in other ways, too. I mean, she is one hot Quidditch babe, but what’s way more attractive is her drive and dedication. She literally gave up everything she knew to pursue her dream. Can you just imagine what she'll be like as a lover and a partner? Believe me, someday, some sharp-eyed young woman will get completely wrapped up in Alex and they'll both love it that way.”

Alex watched herself in the mirror and wrestled with Ali’s pronouncements. She knew – her classmates in middle school made sure she knew – that she was good-looking, but thinking of herself as truly desirable felt weird. The things Ali said about her, though, Alex would value in a best friend. Was it really such a leap to imagine another girl wanting to be more than her own best friend?

Ali spoke again. “You know, if it weren’t for Hope, Kelley would’ve learned the hard way that you aren’t the right person for her.”

“I know, I realized that. Why does nobody believe that I’m over Kelley?”

Ashlyn joined in on Alex’s other side. “We just want to be sure you’re okay, because we’ve all lied to ourselves about our feelings before.”

“I promise, I’m past the denial phase. I’m happy with the way everything turned out…” Alex made a face, “just not with being single.”

Ashlyn smiled at her directly, not via the mirror. “Alex, there is no way you’ll stay single. It’s just a matter of who and when.”

As usual, Hope and Kelley were early for pre-breakfast fitness and Quidditch fundamentals, which allowed the younger girl to ask an aching question. “Remember last week, you wanted to keep our relationship on the down-low until after the game?”

“Tuesday.”

“Tuesday?” Non sequitur much?

“Sorry, I was already thinking about it and...” Hope shook her head and got back on track. “I want to set the tone for this week's practices before everyone finds out I’m dating a – well, you.” Hope meant to smirk but it came out a full smile. “Starting Tuesday morning, no rules.”

Kelley grinned. “It can’t get here soon enough.” Then, a new, sober thought took root in her eyes and her grin faded. “Does that include kissing?”

Hope matched her expression and looked at the ground by Kelley’s shoes.

“What is it?” Hope opened and closed her mouth, then her hands, then her eyes. “Please, say
something.” Hope’s face settled into a mask of guilt and distance, just like on that miserable night. “Hope, you’re scaring me.”

“I…” Before, she’d been worried that Kelley wouldn’t stay once she got to really know her, but that wasn’t it anymore. If anything, it was harder now.

“Why can’t you tell me?”

_Because if I do, there's no going back._ She sighed. “It's something I need to figure out for myself.”

“Honestly, Hope, waiting is bearable when I know why, but if you can’t even talk to me about it…”

Hope took Kelley’s hands in her own and memorized how they felt. “A week ago, I told you I wanted to let you into all of my life. I was so overjoyed,” she smiled wistfully, “that I…oh, Kell, I just want you to know that I’m staying. I’m with you, okay?”

“Are you really?”

Hope drew her into a hug and pressed her mouth into Kelley’s hair. It wasn't a genuine kiss and they both knew it, but it was something. “I want us.”

Kelley nuzzled the warm pocket where Hope’s neck met her shoulder but she couldn’t relax into it. “I’m worried that there's something you want more than us.”

She felt Hope make a face against her scalp. “You know me too well.” Hope’s chest pressed against her own as she breathed deeply. “There’s a couple things and I’m trying to get over them, but if I kissed you now I’d feel like I – like I was leading you too far.”

Kelley stiffened. She was right, Hope didn’t – no. No, this wasn’t news, was it? “Just that little bit about how you’re trying makes a huge difference, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Don’t shut down on me again.”

“I won’t. I’m an expert at learning from my mistakes.”

“Enough with the self-deprecation already!” Kelley pulled back to glare up at Hope, but she found Hope smiling down at her.

“I meant goalkeeping, actually.”

“Oh. Good.” Finally, she relaxed into Hope.

“Ahem.” “Speaking of…”

They turned to find Ali and Ashlyn loitering a few yards away. Behind them, the rest of their friends were already warming up. “I hate to spoil your moment,” Ashlyn said, “but while you can spend practice cuddling, you can’t spend breakfast practicing.”

“True,” Hope admitted. “Let’s get started.”

Secretly pleased that Hope didn’t apologize, Kelley blocked out Ali and Ashlyn’s parting kiss and went to join the other chasers.
On the way back inside, Hope held Kelley a few paces behind the group. “There’s a bit of team business that has to do with you.”

“Oh?”

“We need a new reserve seeker.”

Kelley’s flush of excitement left as fast as it came. “Oh, right, because I’m at the bottom of the list for subs.”

Hope grabbed her shoulders. “Dammit, Kelley, now who’s being self-deprecating?”

Kelsey was unfazed. “If I was wrong, you’d have said so.”

“Kelley! No, wait.” Hope relaxed her grip, smiled, and tucked a stray spray of auburn behind the girl’s ear. “Kell, do you realize that I’ve watched you practice every single day since tryouts?”

Kelley made no reply, but looked from one of Hope’s eyes to the other, as though they might offer different windows into her thoughts.

“You work your ass off at everything I ask of you, I know how you fly, and I see that soccer forward’s fierceness in your eyes every time you get near any kind of ball. If I didn’t think you could play a respectable game against Alex on Saturday, I wouldn’t be asking. Yeah, it’s true, you have the most to prove, but don’t you see yourself improving?”

Kelley sighed. “I do see myself improving. Thing is, I see everyone else improving, too. Like, I think A-Rod’s caught on to my goal. Whenever we scrimmage against each other, she gets this look in her eyes, like ‘over my dead body’. Objectively, I’m better than I was, but relatively…” she held out her palms, “and that’s what counts.”

Hope shook her head. “Relatively, you’re a hell of a lot closer than you were when we started. From a coach’s view, I see the trends, Kelley, and you work harder and burn brighter than anyone else on our team. All that stuff you feel like you have to prove? You’re proving it.”

Kelley wrinkled her brows. “But now you want me to split my time between two positions?”

Hope chuckled and Kelley frowned at her. “Sorry. Look at it this way: who’s the best flier at Hogwarts?”

Kelley answered immediately. “Alex.”

“So buck up and go pick her brain!” She grinned and Kelley went.

“So, what are you up to for the rest of the day?”

It was a perfectly innocent question, but the look Lauren and Tobin exchanged seemed anything but innocent to Alex. “You ever see the old poster, ‘Loose Lips Sink Ships’?” Tobin asked in reply.

“I’ve heard my dad say that. Why?”

“We’re trying to keep this quiet,” Lauren said. “Since the rematch has everyone’s attention, we’re doubling our House’s practices to get a leg up on Ravenclaw next week.”

Alex had to think for a moment. “Oh, I totally forgot that was coming up!”
“Exactly,” Tobin said. “We don't want them to notice and do the same.”

Alex hid her disappointment. “So you’ll be really busy this week, is that it?”

“Yeah, sorry. Why, is there something you need?”

“No, just trying to hang out with single people more.”

Lauren choked on a laugh. “Wow, Alex, I didn’t know you were such a player!”

Somehow, she didn’t redden. “Not like that, Cheney.”

“We know.” Was Tobin blushing a little?

“Know what?” Kelley joined in next to Alex.

“That Alex Morgan is one smooth operator,” Lauren teased.

“You’re really not helping.” Alex got it out before Kelley could join in, thankfully.

“I’m sorry.” Lauren sobered. “Is everything okay?”

Alex shrugged. “I’ve just been around couples way too much lately.”

Tobin looked like she understood. “Been there. I’m really sorry we won’t be around to hang out this week, but please, sit with us for meals.”

“If I promise not to talk about Hope, can we hang out?”

They all stopped and looked at Kelley. “Is that even possible?” Alex finally asked.

“If I have something else to focus on, yeah.” She looked back at the Hufflepuffs. “Can I borrow her for a minute?”

Tobin and Lauren looked at each other again. “Sure. Do you want us to save you seats at breakfast?”

Alex nodded, Kelley shook her head, and the two second-years continued towards the castle.

Alex put aside her social vexation. “What’s up, Kelley?”

“Our House team is down to one seeker. Hope wants me to learn the position so I can sub for it or chaser. I know it’s asking a lot,” she went on, “but would you train me this week? At least enough to not look like an idiot if I have to play on Saturday.”

Alex stared.

“Ok, ok, what is there? Catching, obviously, high-speed flight, legal vs illegal contact, the particular fitness stuff... Alex checked off the things she’d have to teach Kelley in six days. Oh god, what if she has to play? If I get sniped by a wasp again or something and people find out I coached her, I’ll be... I don’t even know what I’d do. Change schools? Again?”

“I was thinking we could practice on the other side of Hogsmeade,” Kelley said into the silence.

“That might work.” Alex thought aloud. “We’d be... alone together all week. She shook her head at herself. “No.”
Kelley deflated. “I was afraid of tha-“

“What? No, no, I meant ‘no’ to something I was worrying about. We can make this work. Meet me in the training room after breakfast and I'll give you a crash course in seeking. Afterwards, we'll fly way out and practice.”

“Thank. You.” Kelley was all earnest appreciation. “I have so much respect for Gryffindor courage right now.”

“That’ll be my defense if anyone finds out,” Alex said dryly. “Seriously, let's keep this a secret. Like, nobody besides Hope. Loose lips sink ships.”

Kelley grinned. “Took the words right out of my mouth.”

“Did not. Nobody talks like that.”

“Did too! My dad was in the Navy.”

“I thought you said your dad was a pilot.”

“Yeah, in the Navy.”

Alex shook her head.

“I was wondering all through breakfast, why the training room? Why not start with the sky and a snitch?”

“Because I'm not gonna do a half-job of coaching you,” The authority in Alex’s tone surprised both of them.

“Alright, Coach Morgan,” Kelley said with raised eyebrows. “Make me a star.” Alex smirked back. “I’m trusting you not to go all Ravenclaw and set me up to lose,” Kelley added.

Alex smirked even more. “The better you are, the more fun it’ll be to beat you.”

“That’s more like it,” Kelley grinned.

“So, first things first: if you fly twice as fast and turn in the same space as before, you'll feel four times as much force. You’ve probably noticed a little of that already.”

Kelley nodded. “Yeah, g-force. It feels like you weigh more.”

“Right. So, if you want to fly really fast, you need strength to control your broom even when your body feels like it’s made of lead.”

“And all this time I thought you were just working out to get swole.”

Alex looked down and shook her head. Kelley probably hadn’t noticed her blush. Probably.

Do I really have only one broken relationship left to fix? Hope pondered her new reality that evening while she waited for the Hogwarts Express’s return from London. Right on time, the train eased into Hogsmeade Station in all its Muggle majesty: high whistle, squealing brakes, chuffs of steam, gliding steel, polished brass, and gleaming red paint. The carriages discharged students and townsfolk returning from a weekend away, but Hope hadn’t come to meet a regular passenger. After a final
clunk of valves and whoosh of vapor, Jessica Landström hopped down from the locomotive’s cab. Shucking off her Railway-liveried jacket, she found a non-sooty patch to wipe her face, stuffed it, inside-out, into her satchel, and looked about tentatively.

“Did they let you drive it this time?” Hope called to her.

“No, and I don’t ask. They would see a veterinarian asking the jockey to let her ride the horse. Hope, you are looking well.”

“I am well, Jess,” Hope smiled.

“That explains why.” Jessica smiled, too, but her humor was guarded.

*Here goes.* “Jess, I’m sorry about those last weeks before you want back to work. I was in a bad place and I treated everybody like crap. I’m doing a lot better now. When we get back to the castle, I’ll tell you all about it, I promise.”

“Hope, this relieves me. I worried about you.” Jess embraced her. “Ah, but how about the match against Gryffindor? I was sorry to miss it!”

“That’s quite a story, too. I’ll give you the highlights.”

“*Ja,* please!”

“We were up by five when Cameron fouled Connelly and made it look like her fault. She fell off her broom and knocked Bardsley out-”

“Bardsley?! But where were you?”

“On the bench. I put her in because I knew some pro scouts would be in the stands.”

Jess stopped, put her hands on Hope’s cheeks and peered into her eyes, checked her forehead, and felt the glands under her jaw. “You do not seem ill. You were charmed, maybe?”

Hope drifted away on a dreamy smile. “You could say that.”

Jess gasped. “You fell for the O’Hara girl?!”

“We’ve been together since the Saturday after you left.” Hope knew she was preening like a schoolgirl, but she felt far too good to care. The beaming smile on Jess’s face showed she wasn’t about to judge, either.

“Ah, and time! Hope, I am beyond happy for you!”

“Time?” Hope gave her a playful, doubting look. “If you saw this coming, you were a master at hiding it.”

Jess shrugged and grinned. “My thanks. I thought it best not to push you, but I hoped you would pursue her.”

“Well, I didn’t. Kelley got through to me, though with difficulty.”

“That speaks well of her. But, the Quidditch match? Karen Bardsley fell? She was hurt?”

“Yes.” Hope moved on quickly. “I went in for her. Hooch sent Jen off and gave us a penalty strike, which Fara put away.”
“As ever.”

“Gryffindor subbed their second seeker in for a beater, but she gave her robe to Alex Morgan, one of the American first years—”

“Such theatrics! Did she give Cameron a game?”

“No.” Hope played it deadpan. “She made him look like a child.” Jess laughed, and Hope grinned with her. “So everyone says, anyway. It’s not like I have time to watch.”

“How was the game for you?”

“On their first possession after the foul, one of our beaters left his zone to try and double-team a chaser, leaving me high and dry at the far ring. After that, three saves, including a one-on-one with Danielle Byrne. Highlight of the match for me,” Hope grinned.

“Brilliant as ever, I know. That gives Gryffindor the win but with five goals down.”

“That’s where it gets complicated. See, there’s good news and there’s bad news…”

“Ja?”

“The bad news is, yes, we lost, 250 to 150. The good news is that I got the call against Connelly overturned, so you’ll get to watch the rematch this Saturday.”

“Um, Alex,” Kelley looked uncomfortably at her, at Hope, and back at her. “You should probably face the other way.”

“Huh?”

“You got woozy the first time we travelled to England, remember? This is worse.”

“Oh.” Hope made a face. “Yeah, good call. Alex, I’m going to hold you from behind instead of you clinging to me.”

Alex searched their faces. “Why, what aren’t you telling me?”

Kelley and Hope looked at each other. “It’s good that we’re doing this before dinner,” Hope replied.

“Great,” Alex groaned. “At least the whole point of this is that nobody sees us.”

“Always look on the bright side of life,” Hope sang dryly and tunelessly. Kelley shot her a chiding glance before tucking herself under Hope’s arm. “Ready when you are, Alex.”

“So, you want me facing away?” She set her back against Hope’s other side.

“Yes, perfect.” Hope’s arm curled across her chest and tightened into a vise-grip. “Ready for your first apparition, Alex?”

Alex folded her arms over Hope’s and steeled herself. “Let’s go.”

“Sorry I wasn’t clearer, but I really need you to answer ‘ready’ or ‘not ready’.”

“I’m ready.”

“Thanks. Kelley, ready?”
“Ready.”
“OK, here goes.”

Zzzorch-BANG!

Alex's legs gave out immediately and Hope, arm still holding her, knelt to lower her to the ground. She was distantly aware that she was emptying her stomach onto green grass rather than the brown dirt behind The Three Broomsticks Inn.

“You’re alright, Alex,” Hope murmured behind her ear. “The first time is always bad, but you arrived with the same number of appendages you left with.”

One thought pierced Alex’s dizziness: Does she ever not smirk?

“It gets better as you get used to it and it’s way more pleasant when you’re doing it yourself.” She paused while Alex sat back and looked around. “All done?”

“I thin- ugh.” Her mouth was a nasty mess. “Yes,” she said simply.

Around her waist, Hope’s arm unwrapped and turned her around. “There’s a spell for that.” In a flash, Alex’s mouth was clean and her throat was full of cool, sweet, fresh-rain air.

“Thank you. So, where are we?” She got to her feet and looked around.

“We're about halfway between Hogsmeade and the middle of nowhere. I'll meet you here in exactly one hour and twenty minutes to bring you back.”

“We'll be here. Thank you again, Hope.”

“Anything for my team, Alex.” Zzzorch-BANG! She vanished.

“I know it's still new and unpleasant for you,” Kelley said with a growing smile, “but I absolutely love side-along apparating with her.”

“I can imagine. It's not often that someone orders you to cling to them like a koala bear.”

Kelley grinned. “Right?! And the magic, too! It feels like I'm dating a superhero.”

“At Quidditch, she basically is.” Kelley beamed, but also sensed that Alex had more to say. “You know, I’ve seen her be warm and sweet with you, and there was Saturday night when she made herself so vulnerable, but there's something about a person holding you while you vomit that really…” She trailed off, because Kelley was cackling so hard she wouldn’t hear.

“You have such a way with words sometimes,” Kelley finally said.

“I just mean,” Alex tried again, “that she’s a keeper.”

Kelley nearly choked.

Today’s the day. I bet Kelley's been up for at least ten minutes. Hope rose from her bed and looked for Kelley, who, sure enough, was dressed for practice and playing with her squirrel. When their eyes met, Hope's twinkled; Kelley's glowed like coals. She strode to Hope, reached up and pressed their foreheads together. “Are we good?” Her voice blended empathy and something husky which set Hope's heart racing.
“We’re good.” As she spoke, Kelley’s eyes dropped to her lips; longing damped their light. “I know,” Hope reminded her.

“Yeah. Thank you.” Kelley closed her eyes and focused on the feeling of breathing together. Being together. Her lips still tingled with want, but her heart felt content. She hoped she could stay that way.

“Any thoughts on how we tell the team?”

“Mmm, no,” Kelley answered. “Just keep it simple: you’re my girlfriend but still our impartial captain. That’s all that matters for them. Probably half of them know, anyway.”

“So, you do have thoughts,” Hope smirked.

“Always.”

“I think I’ve been over-thinking it”

“Just match the tone you set for this week. Which has been badass, by the way.”

Hope shook her head at herself. “Duh. Why didn’t I think of that?”

“You were too busy thinking about me.” Hope smiled and relaxed into her arms, and she caught an impulse to kiss Hope on the tip of her nose. *Hey, we made it here,* Kelley told herself. *We’ll get there.*

*If this were September, I’d be a wreck,* Alex thought. Thankfully, it’d been long enough that she could be Kelley’s personal trainer without losing her mind. For an hour a day, every day, she had to watch Kelley do presses, squats, lunges, planks, and every kind of leg exercise. She’d never, ever admit it, but she was kind of enjoying it; there was no denying that the girl was hot. Committed elsewhere and starting to get on Alex’s nerves, but still hot. “…fourteen, and fifteen! Good eff-“

“Sixteen,” Kelley grunted, and then shouldered the barbell back into the rack.

Alex rolled her eyes. “Sometimes I can’t tell if you’re stubbornly dedicated or just contrary.”

“Hey, I have barely a week…to your two months,” Kelley answered breathlessly. “I can’t give anything less than everything. No excuses.”

“Yeah, well, I’m trying to keep you balanced so you’re not too sore to fly.”

Kelley wiped her face and sat with her forearms on her knees. “Alex, you know that one week isn’t enough to make a difference. I’m treating this all as mental conditioning instead of physical.”

“And that’s why you’re always doing extra reps?”

She nodded. “I almost certainly won’t play on Saturday and I almost certainly won’t win if I do, so I have to get my sense of achievement from the preparation. I don’t care if I ache all week, just that I held nothing back.”

Alex sat down next to her. “You know, I don’t think I’ve really seen this side of you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like, I’ve seen you get competitive – I mean, I thought I had – but you put a way different spin on it
“I’m always competing against myself. With this, though, I’m competing against only myself. It gets extra personal because there’s nothing else for it to be.”

“I think I understand,” Alex said. “You need a challenge.”

Kelley was quiet. “Yes, but I’m actually just recognizing why it’s so personal. It’s like, if I know that it’s physically impossible for me to be good enough, soon enough, how hard will I try?”

“Really freaking hard, apparently,” Alex smiled.

Kelley didn’t smile back. “Which makes me think about how Hope is handling her side of our relationship.”

“Wait, how – you mean she thinks she’s not good enough?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“You’re doing this for her in more ways than one.” Kelley nodded and Alex slid close to hug her.

“Do you want me to train her next week?”

Kelley snorted. “Probably not, but thank you.”

At lunch, Alex snagged a seat with Lauren, but then Kelley and Ali joined them, and Ashlyn thumped down across from her. The blonde radiated disappointment. “What’s wrong, Ash?” Alex asked.

“More rivalry stuff.” Ashlyn leaned back and looked at the distant ceiling. “Dara pulled me aside to warn me that people on our team aren’t happy about me practicing with Hope.”

“Oh.” Alex caught Kelley’s eyes and gave the slightest shake of her head. Kelley returned a minute nod.

“Does he want you to stop?” Ali asked.

“He does, but just until after the rematch. The others who know - apparently they only just noticed - don’t like it at all.”

Lauren rolled her eyes and shook her head, Ali sighed, and Alex frowned and looked at the table, but Kelley showed surprise. “Seriously?”

“Of course, ‘seriously’. I’ll have to talk to everyone at practice today and persuade them I’m not hurting our House’s chances against yours.”

“But- but…but-”

“You sound like a mowhur woat.” Kelley reached out and covered Lauren’s mouth mid-joke.

“Why are you shocked?” Ali asked.

“Why aren’t you mad? If it were our team upset with Hope, I’d understand, but yours? She’s helping your chances, not hurting them!”

“They don’t see it that way,” Ashlyn countered. “Dara says they think Hope will learn too much
about our goalkeeping methods and pass it on to next year’s chasers.”

“Pff. scaredy-cats,” Kelley pish-poshed. “What you learn from Hope will more than make up for anything she can learn about Gryffindor.”

“I completely agree, Kelley, but Dara graduates this year. If I don’t have any friends on the team next fall, then where am I?”

“Uh, at try-outs for the nearest minor-league club?! You and Alex can go together, after your team shuns you for hanging out with Hope and me.”

“It’s not the hanging out – for most of them, probably – it’s-”

“I know what it is! It’s bull crap, that’s what!” Nearby heads swiveled to look at Kelley. “See, this is why I like my House.”

Alex didn’t like their conversation’s tone. “Aside from Hope being there?”

Kelley’s look stopped Alex’s smile the way a brick wall stops a water balloon. “There’s none of this crap in Slytherin. Way back in September, a third-year saw me practicing with Tobin and confronted me about it. I told him that I’ll do whatever I need to do to be the best, and you know what he said?” None of her friends hazarded a guess. “He said, ‘Oh, then keep it up’.”

Alex’s eyebrows lifted and she leaned forward. “Wait, for real?”

“Word for word.”

Lauren nodded. “I can see how ‘the ends justify the means’ would help ease this stuff.”

Kelley’s expression cooled. “I don’t appreciate that, Lauren.”

“She only meant some of your Housemates, not you,” Ali assured her.

“No, that’s still not cool.” Their surprised faces turned to Alex. “‘Ends justify the means’ is, like, incidental to Slytherin, not core. It’s the same as saying Gryffindors are full of themselves or Hufflepuffs have no backbone.”

Lauren held her ground. “All of which are true of about one in five Slytherins, Gryffindors, and Hufflepuffs. All I mean, Kelley, is that you benefit from their attitude.”

Kelley let her shoulders drop. “Yeah, I guess that’s true. There’s just so much more bitterness behind the Slytherin stereotype, though. I mean, Ashlyn, would your teammates stop you from practicing with Hufflepuff’s goalkeeper?”

“For the week of a rematch, yes, but you’re right, not for the year.”

“So, what are you going to do?” Ali asked.

Kelley jumped in with her own answer. “Tell Dani and whoever that you’re going to the top and they can be part of it or find a new goalkeeper.”

“Yeah, that won’t go over well in Gryffindor,” Alex said, shaking her head. “Too much like an ultimatum.”

“Counter-ultimatum,” Lauren pointed out.
“Still,” Ali said. “Ash, what are you going to do?”

“I’ll tell them that I want to turn pro when I graduate, so I just don’t have time to not practice with Hope.”

Kelley grinned at that. “Damn straight.”

Alex watched closely as Kelley settled onto her broom. “And remember, what’s the most impor-“

”For the third time, spine alignment. I got it, Alex. Keep my back muscles engaged, keep my body as much in line as possible, and keep all my movements smooth. I got it.”

“Just checking,” Alex said sweetly. “I bet that you’ll forget all that before the end of your first lap, though.”

“Oh?” Kelley raised an eyebrow. “Bet what?”

Alex hadn't been serious, but a slow, wicked grin spread across her face as she thought of something. “A chocolate frog.”

Kelley glared. “Never again.”

“I talked to Ash, and she wants to talk to all of you.”

After dinner, the whole team had been in the Gryffindor common room at the same time, so Dara and Ashlyn seized the moment. She took stock of her audience. “You’re concerned that I’ll give Hope clues about our game, right? I won’t.”

Thick silence hung in the air.

“Anything else?” Ashlyn asked.

Team captain Dani had something else. “Ashlyn, we all know that you U.S. girls are close-knit. Thing is, ye can’t guarantee that Solo won’t pick up on things you don’t realize you’re putting down.”

Ashlyn frowned. “I understand your point but I think it's shortsighted. Everyone, even if they don’t like her, agrees that Hope's the best keeper at Hogwarts – sorry, Dara. What could be better for our House than me learning from the best?”

Jen spoke up. “Solo having nothing to tell next year's starters about what to expect from you, perhaps?”

Ashlyn shook her head and made her stand. “I won't sacrifice my growth for the sake of a rivalry. My goal is to go from beginner to professional player by graduation, so I can’t spare even one week of progress.”

Dara’s eyebrows climbed up his forehead. “You never mentioned that.”

“I didn’t want to broadcast it, especially as the new girl. Guys, plain and simple, I'm not going to put school ahead of my actual career.”

Dani spoke again. “I can respect that.”
Alex looked up from making a note as Kelley circled back. “Not bad, but there's still plenty to work on. We can shave two seconds off your lap time for sure, probably three. The biggest thing right now is, when you roll into tight turns, you do it like you’re trying to feel fast. It doesn’t work like that; you’re flying really loose and wasting energy. Smooth, clean flight is the fastest.”

Kelley squinted at her. “I’m not sure what you mean by ‘loose’ or ‘clean’.”

“Sure, let me show you what mean. I'm gonna fly and make a fast turn in front of you. Watch how my broomstick moves.” She flew out, headed back towards Kelley, and made the smoothest, most fluid turn she could. As intended, her broom tracked through the curve as if on rails.

Kelley didn’t find anything noteworthy in the demonstration. “Your broom handle didn’t, I don't know, do much of anything.”

“Now watch me again.” Alex tried not to exaggerate it, but found it a challenge to fly only slightly sloppily. She did her best impression of Kelley's technique and returned.

“When you rolled in, the broom tilted up – at the sky, so I guess it tilted ‘right’ – and then corkscrewed back into the turn.”

“Right, and while it was angled up, the broom wasn't putting all its power into moving me where I wanted to go.”

Kelley nodded understanding. “Oh, yeah, you were only using, like, the cosine of the broom's push. Cool, I get what you mean by ‘clean’ now.”

Alex didn’t hear anything after the word ‘cosine’. “Did you just use trig in a magical sport?”

Kelley grinned. “Am I wrong?”

“I refuse to think about any of that.”

When the team dispersed, Ali’s dark eyes caught Ashlyn from across the room and reeled her in.

“Were you aware that you planted your feet at shoulder-width when you told them your decision?” Ali asked Ashlyn, once she was fully snared and seated beside her.

“Not really.” Ashlyn couldn’t but smile back. “Why?”

Those eyes flashed. “Because it was hot as hell.”

Ashlyn’s breath hitched. “Oh? Tell me more.”

“Um, it's passionate, strong, and confident? You want something and you won't let anything turn you aside. That's chapter one, page one, of ‘How to Make This Girlfriend Swoon’. I mean…” she broke out in that adorable blush again, “don’t laugh, but when we were playing Kelley and Hope the other week, I wanted to be the quaffle, so you'd fix your eyes on me and catch me.”

Ashlyn took a moment to breathe in Ali’s warm feelings, then called intensity into her face and locked eyes with her. She reached out and rested her fingers on Ali's neck and thumb along her jaw. Ali shivered ever so slightly. Ashlyn wrapped her other arm around Ali’s waist and drew her closer. “I’ll always be catching you.”

Ali’s eyelids fluttered and her head tilted into Ashlyn's hand. Ashlyn slid it higher to caress Ali’s cheek with her thumb. The rich warmth in so personal a place drew a heavenly sigh from Ali. Lips
parted, she gazed at Ashlyn through lowered lashes. “Get me out of the common room,” she commanded.

Ashlyn stood, helped her up, and ushered her upstairs. “The one downside of our room,” Ali said as she opened the trapdoor, “is that there’s absolutely nothing sexy about ladders.” Ashlyn, waiting below, could think of a few things. She turned a hand over and traced two fingernails down one stocking-sheathed calf, and Ali rewarded her with a cool, breathy sigh. “Our room is perfect.” Ashlyn grinned and followed her up.

“Hey g-” Alex saw and blinked. “Oh. Uh, I was just leaving.” She grabbed her books and vanished down the ladder.

Ali looked after her guiltily. “I feel kinda bad.”

“She had her books stacked and her school shoes on,” Ashlyn pointed out. “She was actually just leaving.”

“Oh. Well, then,” Ali turned sultry, “as you were.”

Ashlyn led her to her bed, sat, and pulled Ali to kneel astride her. She ran her hands up and down the brunette's firm back and smiled into her eyes. “You remember when we agreed to talk about any changes in our relationship?”

“Yeah…we never did.”

“No, we did. We just turned out to not need words.” Her arms took the weight as Ali melted in her hands. “Your eyes, though…I want to have this talk out loud. How far do you want to go?”

Ali's heat roared, making Ashlyn’s heart stop and her eyes go wide, before simmering down to a red glow. “One day, all the way. Right now, I want to wrap you up and kiss your face off.”

“Likewise,” Ashlyn smirked. She felt Ali's grip tighten.

“Well? Don’t keep a witch waiting.”

She wasn’t kidding. As Ashlyn brought her hands between them to cradle Ali's head and guide her in, Ali locked one arm around her back and buried her other hand in her hair. The leverage compounded Ali's strength and left Ashlyn breathless even before Ali crushed their lips together. The rush went straight to her head and, next thing she knew, she was on her back and gulping down air. Close above her, Ali poised like a lioness about to pounce.

“Wow, I have quite the effect on you, Ash.”

“You don’t even know.” Now that her brain was through buzzing, Ashlyn reached up and embraced Ali tight against her body, then lifted her head up for more, lips parted and inviting. The girl on top took her head in her hands and devoured her.

Neither knew how long it lasted or where one tongue ended and the other began. At the conclusion, all they could do was pant and stare at each other in naked awe. Ali was first to regain her voice. “Damn, Ash, it’s even better when you help.”

Ashlyn grinned up at her girlfriend. “You know, I’m getting an idea of who's in charge in this relationship.”

“Oh?” Ali didn’t know what to think but the grin told her not to worry. “I think we're equal, Stud.”
“Yes,” Ashlyn’s grin turned smirk-flavored, “but only one of us is a princess.”

“Princess?!” Ali propped up on her hands to glare down at Ashlyn, who burst into laughter.
“What?! Don’t laugh at me!”

“It’s not bad, I promise,” Ashlyn assured her. “That glare was just so exactly what I’m talking about! Like a cat with its dignity offended. Ali Krieger: Princess Alexandra the Warrior.”

Ali cocked her head as though considering. “‘Warrior’ makes it okay, I suppose. I’ll permit it.”

“Also, being wanted like this, so…forcefully, is fun. And incredibly sexy.”

“I know,” Ali purred. “What did I just tell you about determination?”

“I just wouldn’t have guessed you liked being on top so much, when I met you.”

“Come on, I get to be held tight by you and kiss you as hard as I can! What's not to love?”

“Fair point.”

Ali smirked, then flipped them over so she was underneath. “I also like the feeling of being yours, too, Ash.”

Ashlyn smiled back and teased her with one pulled-away kiss, then another, then dove in and made smooth, sweet magic in Ali’s mouth. When she came up for air, though, she put on a pout. “My hands miss your back.”

“Don’t get greedy, Stud.”

*That has to be a setup,* Ashlyn thought. “Says the Princess.”

Ali grinned, pushed, rolled them onto their sides, and guided Ashlyn’s free arm around her. “Here, we’ll share for a while. I have to admit, my back missed your hands, too.” She closed her eyes and smiled the sweetest smile while Ashlyn caressed along her spine. “I’m so glad I met you, Ash.”

“Me, too. You’re the best part of all of this.” Thinking about all of it, however, led Ashlyn to remember that Hogwarts was a school, that schools have classes, and that classes have schedules.

“By the way…we’re totally late for Astronomy.”

“How late?” Ali asked without opening her eyes.

Ashlyn chuckled and turned to read the clock for her. “We’ve missed almost half of it…Princess.”

Kelley felt the friction between her shoulder and Alex's. Despite flying the same model of broom, Alex was inching ahead and Kelley's sleeve, pinned between them, was trying to go with her. Kelley saw the possibilities: if the snitch darted towards her and away from Alex, she was still in the chase, but if it didn’t do that within maybe five seconds, or went any other way…and snitches were terribly capricious things…

She shoved her shoulder against Alex's, hoping to disrupt her for a few seconds. It worked; Alex looked surprised and Kelley gained a few inches of lead. The snitch zig-zagged towards Kelley, but then away again, and Kelley’s ‘disruption’ gave Alex a head start on the snitch's new direction. *Who the Sam Hill came up with these things?*

Alex expected contact now, Kelley knew, so she had to get clever, and fast. *Does drafting work at
this scale? It was worth a try; she made her profile as small as possible and flew exactly in Alex’s wake. Am I… no, I’m not catching up, but I’m nearly as fast now. That’s something. But each time the snitch went changed directions, Kelley, in her trailing position, had a little more space to turn a little bit faster. As Alex reeled in the snitch, Kelley reeled in Alex. Ok, this is working, but how do I get in front of her? I’m running out of time! The snitch, dancing just beyond Alex’s fingertips, cut a near right-angle turn to the right and zoomed away. Unable to follow in a level turn, Alex did a half-loop up and over into a corkscrew to get behind it again. Kelley, with an extra second to react, made a much longer, smoother version of the same arc, rolling up and right, then down again after her. She preserved more of her speed than Alex did; now she was really catching up. Thinking fast, she tilted down to avoid rear-ending Alex and to get a little extra boost from gravity. Now what, now what? She’s going to pull ahead again soon. Oh! Roll over and reach up for the snitch – no, that's just asking for us to get tangled. Can I force my way in from below?

Using the last of her speed advantage, Kelley angled up until she felt Alex's broom against her back, then rose sharply and pushed Alex upward. The snitch was right in front of her, now; all she had to do was grab it.

Alex, out of breath and with mixed emotions, led Kelley to land at their rendezvous point with Hope. Apparently, she was a better coach than a seeker. Today, she chided herself, a better coach than a seeker today. It didn’t help that you’ve thinking like a coach instead of a competitor all week. Consider it a free wake-up call.

Hope was already there. “Wow, the student has beaten the master,” she grinned, but Kelley held up a hand.

“Just beaten, not surpassed.” She looked at Alex. “I’m sure you’ve sworn up and down to never let that happen again.”

“That’s… not far from the truth,” Alex admitted. “But seriously, that was really good energy management.” A new thought struck Alex. “Uh, Hope, have you been coming back early all week?”

“Maybe.” The fourth-year turned soft, gray eyes on Kelley. “I wanted to see you when you didn’t think anyone was watching.”

“To get a better read on my progress?”

Hope smiled. “No.”

For the busy players, game day arrived in a flash. After a light jog out to Team Slytherin’s marquee tent, Hope and Kelley began their pregame rituals of dressing and focusing. When Kelley noticed Hope’s hands clutch the collar of her school uniform shirt, however, she took an intermission to watch. Hope’s fingers walked down the column of buttons and ushered it off her shoulders, then went for the hem of her undershirt. Kelley’s imagination spun. Last week, they arrived with the rest of the team and Hope made sure not to draw attention away from Karen. Now, though, they were early and Kelley could imagine those tan arms crossing, lifting the shirt up and peeling it over her head in one smooth, exquisite motion…

Hope tugged the undershirt up and off in stiff, bunching jerks, but Kelley’s letdown evaporated when Hope’s stomach came into view. Her abs weren’t sleek and smooth like Kelley's own, nor shrink-wrap defined like the models’ on those fitness magazines, but slab-like and hard-looking. They were strong and tough and didn’t give a damn what anyone thought of the form that followed their function. She’s Hope, through and through. Kelley loved it.
Hope heard her intake of breath and turned. Kelley smiled, bashful yet unrelenting, but when the smile Hope returned seemed taut, looks became the least important thing on her mind. “You seem more tense than last week.”

“Yeah.” Hope rolled her shoulders. “Having to do a match completely over again is new. I don’t like it. I know what you’re going to say: it’s not the same match, it’s a bonus opportunity to play my best game yet, but still…”

“Sit down.” Hope’s eyebrows lifted slightly at Kelley’s order, but she complied and straddled one of the benches. Kelley positioned herself behind her and gathered dark hair out of the way. “You, Hope Solo, are going to have a brilliant day.” She laid her hands on Hope’s shoulders and sank her thumbs into the tension. Hope let out air and allowed her head to hang. “How will the game go?”

Hope, head lolling as Kelley massaged her, pursed her lips. “Pretty well, I think.”

Kelley paused. “Really? That’s not what I heard at practice yesterday.” She pressed again into Hope’s traps through her sports bra and kneaded towards her neck, drawing an actual groan from the older girl. “What did you say then?”

Even though they were closed, she sensed Hope's eyes roll before she answered. “We’ve given everything we have this week to prepare for Gryffindor’s revenge. We have the skills to win, we have a solid plan, and we know we can break them down over the pitch. They’ll come out swinging, but once we weather the first ten or fifteen minutes, we can out-pressure them. We’ll win.”

“That’s what I thought. Either you have extremely high standards for ‘pretty well’ or you’re having trouble believing your own pep talk.”

“Both.” Hope sighed, half in frustration and half in enjoyment. “I’m nervous about Lindsay and the scouts coming back. The last match was just so insane…”

“Does that still bother you?”

“Yes. It – ahh, right there – got completely out of control and there was nothing I could do about it. That bothers me.”

Kelley's heart swelled each time Hope made a noise of pleasure. “But you still did your job – amazingly, in my objective opinion – and you’ll do it again today.” She finished with Hope's shoulders and ran her hands down her bare arms. “Close your eyes, if they aren’t already, see yourself in front of those rings, and feel how much you love playing there.”

Hope visualized the stadium, but the distractions came back. Lindsay glared at her from a front-row seat. She's not mad at you, she was just surprised and frustrated. Alex grinned around at everyone. Don’t make it her problem, Hope. She's the best, but so are you. Steve was watching birds. Not after this week, he won’t. She glanced back towards Lindsay, but found a row of empty seats instead. Come on, that's actually silly. From the bench, Kelley watched her with disappointment. Lies. She shifted on her broom and tested her gloves. Everything fit right, felt right, was right. Gryffindor rushed at her and she played the best Quidditch of her life.

“How will the game go, Hope?”

“Personal record, Kell.”

“Hell yeah, babe!”

Hope shifted to look back and pretended that she’d only raised one eyebrow. “Babe?”
“I've kinda been thinking that all week,” Kelley admitted. “Is it okay?”

“Yeah.” Kelley waited for Hope's real answer. “I don’t want to disappoint you,” Hope began, then hesitated.

“You won’t.”

“I don’t have any problems with it.”

“But?”

Hope twisted to face her. “Kelley…‘Hope’ is my name. It's who I've always been, through everything, and hearing you say it is…” Kelley wrapped her arms around Hope and hugged her sideways. “I totally get wanting some special, sweet name…”

“Like ‘Kell’.”

“Like ‘Kell’,” Hope smiled, “but with everything…Kell, after all the shit I've been through and all the people who've used my name, hearing you say it means everything to me.”

Kelley brushed Hope's ear with her nose and pressed herself into Hope's back. “Hope.”

Hope felt as if she was floating off the bench in Kelley’s arms. “How do other people manage without you as their girlfriend?”

Kelley grinned against her neck. “No idea.” She indulged in just breathing in Hope for a while. “If you’re truly okay with it, I might keep calling you ‘babe’ for small-talk stuff.”

“I might come to like that, Kell.”

“My pleasure, Hope.” Kelley pulled back from embracing her, shamelessly running her hand along Hope's midriff as she did, and reached for her shoes. “By the way, babe, your abs feel even better than they look.”

Before Hope could react, Amy’s voice came from the tent entrance. “Ew. Remind me not to be early for the rest of the year.”

“And risk my wrath for being late?” Hope grinned. “I don’t think so. Deal with it, A-Rod.”

Back on solid ground, Dani held out her hand. “Good game.” It sounded like she might even mean it this time.

Hope clasped the hand and allowed a hint of a smile. “Good game. Thank you, Dani.”

The Gryffindor captain shook her head. “This is all thanks to you. Go back to playing dirty, we did better against you then.” Dani stepped away to shake more Slytherin hands.

“Well, I wouldn’t have guessed that result.” Dara took her place, disappointment and dry humor mixing in his eyes.

“You did really well,” Hope reminded him. “That was your best performance yet.”

“Thanks,” he grimaced, “but there's no way to spin a minus-eleven goal difference into something pleasant, no matter how impressive my save percentage.” He changed the subject. “Steve sure improved a lot from last week.”
Hope smirked a particularly wicked smirk. “I went Medieval on his ass. We did scrimmages with him chained to the post until he learned to play within his zone.”

“We may have to try that with our defense. Ah, but I can’t complain. You earned it this time.” He turned to go, but stopped. “One thing: if you keep working with Harris, she’d better get so good that her Housemates don’t care who she learned from. I know it stings, but it’s reality.”

Hope knew it. “She’ll be so good, they’ll be forced to start her.” Dara nodded and they moved on.

“Solo! Er, Hope! Hope, wow, they only got four past you?!”

Hope stifled her reaction to Alex’s use of the word ‘only’. “Yeah, good but not my best. I hope I never face you in a match again.” She realized belatedly that she needed to soften it with a smile.

“Oh, thanks, Hope – wait, Kelley, don’t tell me you’re intimidated?!”

Kelley scoffed. “No. First, I did beat you once-“

“In practice. You wouldn’t have today.”

“And second,” Kelley replied with Hope's smirk, “nobody intimidates me anymore. I’m dating Hope Solo.” At her side, Hope grinned Kelley's grin.

Alex glanced between the pair. “Okay, that was eerie.” A shout from Dani saved her. “I’ll see you later. Good game, guys!” She jogged to rejoin her teammates.

“So, then,” Kelley clapped Hope on her rear, “150 to 190. I hate losing as much as you do, but you were unbelievable today! Amy and I lost count of your saves!”

“Yeah…” Hope vented her disappointments. “If I’d been one second quicker reading that second shot, I could’ve saved it. Third one was an unlucky deflection, but I could’ve been lighter on my broom and gotten a touch, at least. The new gloves will help with that, when they’re ready.”

“The last one was from fatigue in our field players,” Kelley noted.

“Which I’ll anticipate, next time, and expect giveaways in weird places. The first one was nerves.”

“Nerves?”

“I let it all get to me, even after your help,” Hope admitted. “The replay, House bullshit, everything. My head wasn’t in the game for those first minutes and I – and the whole team – paid for it.”

Kelley was determined to stay positive. “So, we just need more focus, fitness, practice, and experience, and we’ll be unbeatable!”

Hope shook her head. “If I’d held it 150-0, Alex would have to decide whether to settle for a scoreboard tie or give her team more time and risk losing outright. We could’ve made a draw with plus-fifteen goals or a win with plus-sixteen. I came within one of my record for saves per hour, but I know I can do better.”

“I love that about you.”
Hope looked at Kelley again and saw *that* light in her eyes. Not the sexy one, but the one that said, ‘my life means more with you in it’. Hope had seen it before, from her mother and too few, precious times from Dad, but Kelley…“You still scare me sometimes,” she confessed in a whisper.

Kelley held her eyes for a long, heart-clenching moment. Without a word, she rested a hand on Hope's collarbone and stretched herself up. Hope froze – it seemed the safest thing to do – and watched Kelley's head tilt, her eyes slip down, then close, and her lips purse. Softness brushed her cheek and pressed, warm and wet.

Hope thanked whatever gods may be that she didn’t flinch.

Kelley settled back and trailed her hand to Hope's shoulder and on down her sleeve. “You've got this, Hope. You're brave and good and I’m proud of you.”

Hope glanced down and blinked. “I'm not going to cry in the middle of the stadium.”

“We'll talk later, then,” Kelley winked, “in private.”

“Get what you wanted, Solo?” Hope clenched her jaw at the sound of Jen's voice away behind her.

“*Pick you battles,*” Kelley whispered.

Hope raised her voice to be heard without turning around. “Most of it.” They walked away.

Lindsay caught them outside the stadium. “The luck of the Irish must be rubbing off on you.”

Hope blushed redder than Kelley had ever seen. “I do my best, Tarp,” she grinned back.

“They liked what they saw, then?” Hope asked.

“Yes. After you…well, the scouts from the other teams weren’t itching to come back, so we didn’t invite them. Don’t tell anyone, but you’re at the top of Montrose’s wish list and the middle of everyone else’s.”

“That’s…” Hope didn’t know what to say.

Kelley did. “Perfect.”

“Like I said. You'll hear from our goalkeeping coach next month. Keep up the good work, Hope, and...please don’t mouth off again like you did last week. It makes it harder for me to help you.”

Hope nodded. “I’m sorry. Not for what I said, but because it reflected badly on you. I hope my performance today put a feather back in your cap.”

“At least one, but you need to make your best first impression on our coaching staff or it won't matter. Listen: are there things that no amount of money would make you willing to do?”

Hope didn’t like the sound of that. “Yes…”

“You don’t want people getting the idea that managing you is one of those things.” Hope was struck speechless. “Hope, I'm being blunt because that's how the pro world is sometimes. You need to be prepared for it.”

Kelley leveled cool eyes at Lindsay. “I think you need to start over. The last time you spoke to Hope as a friend was that first weekend in September. She’s seen you twice since then – these two
Saturdays – and you've been all ‘business drill sergeant’, all the time. You’re the one burning bridges here.”

They both looked at Kelley, Hope impressed and Lindsay chagrined. “Alright, I hereby swallow my pride. Hope, I admit that Kelley’s right. I over-did it. Can I buy you a drink in Montrose tomorrow? I’ll show you around town and maybe give you a tour of our team’s facilities.”

“…” Hope couldn’t resist making Lindsay squirm for a heartbeat before she smiled and continued. “Well, do you really have ‘facilities’ or is it just an unplottable clearing and a fancy tent?”

Lindsay scoffed and shook her head. “Oh, we have a real building. We’ve got offices, meeting and conference rooms, a fitness and weight room, and a portkey to an unplottable clearing with a fancy tent.”

After they’d showered and changed, Hope suggested a change of scenery from the familiar underwater view. She led Kelley up to the highest full floor, through a door which was unmistakably off-limits to students, along a cramped corridor, around spiraling, rickety wood stairs, and up a dusty ladder into the rafters of a tower. “Remember when we were first in the Gryffindor room, someone said it probably had the best view open to students?”

“This is the best view, period?” Kelley looked around; all she saw was the underside of the roof. No windows, no hatches, just stripes of light from the vents at the peak.

Hope traced a large rectangle with her fingertip on one sloping panel. Nothing happened. “So much for getting it on the first try. There’s a hatch here for the caretaker to get onto the roof. It’s meant to be student-proof, so there’s no marking to go by.” She tried again. This time, the section she’d outlined swung inward. Kelley moved to look through it, but Hope stopped her. “It’s precarious. Let me secure us so we can relax.” She drew her wand and summoned gossamer ribbons, shaped them into waist harnesses, and tied them off around a rafter.

“This'll hold me?” Kelley knew better than to question Hope's transfiguration skills, but the barely-visible tether didn’t inspire confidence. Her hand passed right through it when she tried to feel it.

“Easily. It acts solid when you pull on it.”

Kelley furrowed her brow. “How can you pull on it when it's not solid?”

“Magic, my dear Kelley, magic.” Hope crouched to fit through the opening and helped her follow. Kelley clambered out onto the narrow ledge of the highest roof in Hogwarts Castle.

“Oh, Hope…” ‘Precarious’ was right, but in that way that makes your blood hum and beckons you to dive in. Nothing about the view itself was a surprise – Kelley had seen it all from even higher – but, somehow, being on the edge, at the summit, made the panorama more impressive than the view from a broom.

“The word you’re looking for is ‘sublime’.” Hope smirked, but it was a warm and affectionate smirk. “Make yourself at home.”

Kelley mirrored Hope: feet dangling over the edge, body reclined against the steep tower roof, and an adoring look on her face. “You are full of the best kinds of surprises. This is absolutely the best view in Hogwarts.”

One corner of Hope's smile curled higher. “For me, it's a close second to Slytherin Dungeon under a full moon.”
“And vice versa.”

“You’re always the sunny one, aren’t you?” Hope’s blissful look turned teasing. “And by that, I mean ‘hot’.” Kelley flushed, a little embarrassed, and Hope giggled.

It had never occurred to Kelley that Hope could giggle. After a moment’s shock, she laughed – at Hope's giggle, at herself, at how small the week’s troubles seemed now, from atop the world with her girlfriend at her side. Her peals of laughter swept Hope away like a symphony; she joined in, pulled Kelley close, and they laughed until their eyes leaked and their sides wore out.

“Ahhh, Kell…Kell, you laugh like Beethoven’s Ninth.”

Kelley dug the reference out of her brain. “Gosh, I don't know whether to be flattered beyond comprehension or astonished that you made a classical music reference.”

Hope shrugged. “We sang it in elementary school.”

“Sang? I could never make out the words.”

Hope shrugged again. “Probably because it’s German. I’m sure we used a very loose, child-friendly translation…” She looked down at Kelley’s hopeful face. “I’m not getting out of this, am I?”

“Do you want to?”

Hope heard the sincerity in Kelley’s question and felt a weight lift from her spine. Surprised, she looked away at the forest and the loch. If there was ever a time and place for it, this was it. She put firm air behind soft words and trusted Kelley to not make fun.

Sing to joy and gladness now and evermore to freedom's song.
Open up our heart’s desire with love that's everlasting.
Let this magic bring together all who dwell upon the earth.
All man-kind shall be together and peace shall reign upon the earth.

Even in her peripheral vision, Hope couldn’t bear the look of love and peace on Kelley's face. She closed her eyes and focused on forming the words; maybe that would hold the tears back.

May this joy of brother-hood spread all through-out the universe.
Then the very air we breathe shall be pure, calm and gentle.
Blue the sky and green the forest, all our children can run free.
And through music bring together all who sing the Ode to Joy.

“That was beautiful, Hope.”

Hope wanted to protest, but she knew Kelley believed it. Looking into her girlfriend’s eyes, she tried to accept what Kelley saw in her. It was hard.

Kelley slipped out of Hope’s arm and put her own around Hope's shoulders. “You looked terrified when I went to kiss you.”

“I was,” Hope confessed. “I was scared of everything that might go wrong.”

“Go wrong with us or with just the kiss?”

“Everything. I could barely believe I didn’t flinch. It’s just…like, with parents…I mean, you’re choosing everything you do, with no sense of attachment. Obligation.”
“Hope, I can’t imagine that your parents loved you because they felt they had to. That’s not love.”

“I know, and they didn’t. There’s just a sort of responsibility there that isn’t here.”

“And that scares you?”

“Yes.” Tears menaced Hope again. “You’re with me solely because you want to be. That’s so…but it might…”

Kelley gave Hope a peck on her cheek. “You won’t let me down, Hope. Remember what you said to me when we started? I’ll never think that you aren’t good enough, either. Not ever.”

Hope tried to smile, but the teardrops kept growing. “It’s not that anymore.”

“Then what is it?”

“I…I don’t think I could handle losing you for any reason.” She looked away to hide free-flowing tears from Kelley’s eyes, but she couldn’t hide from Kelley’s touch. Fingertips found the streaks on her cheek and turned her face back around. Kelley was sitting up and her eyes were close and full of everything Hope feared to want. Those warm points on her skin in so sensitive a place, so close to her, pinned Hope helplessly. She couldn’t run, couldn’t hide, couldn’t fight. There was no escaping it.

“Hope…”

“I think I love you, Kelley.”

Chapter End Notes

There's more in the works. As always, I love to hear your thoughts.
“And then what?”

Kelley looked down and contemplated her fork. “I just held onto her really-“

Alex nearly fell off the bench in shock. “You mean you didn’t say anything?!?”

“I didn’t know what to say! We’ve been together for two weeks, Alex! All this time, she’s been all ‘be patient, be patient’, and then, bam! ‘I love you!’”

“I’m sorry, I get it now.” Alex calmed down. “Sounds like it was a huge shock for you.”

“Yeah, and it’s even harder if she only thinks she might love me. I had no idea how to respond, other than ‘comfort crying friend’.”

“Mmm.” Alex scrunched her lips. “I guess ‘I think I love you, too’ wouldn’t sound very comforting, would it?”

“Right. I felt like I had to answer with something certain, something she could hold onto, and I honestly could not be any more certain about love than she said she was. I didn’t consciously think any of this, but basically I said ‘I care about you’ through touch, because that’s my default and it would sound terrible as a reply to ‘I love you’.”

Alex cringed at the idea. “Yeah, that would be bad. You’ve talked since then, right?”

“Yes. I told her she'd surprised me and I was the one having to catch up now. Except I didn’t put it nice and clear like that. Honestly, it was super awkward and insecure for a while, but we were okay by the time we went to bed. This morning we were both almost ourselves again…” Kelley's features wrinkled and flexed as she dealt with something heavy. After a minute's quiet, she cautiously shared it with her friend: “It felt…for some of that time before we left the roof yesterday, I felt like I was comforting someone in mourning. I don’t get it, though. It's not like she's lost anything.”

After her own long pause, Alex floated an answer. “Something she doesn’t have any more is invulnerability. You can hurt her more than anyone else in her life-“

“Alex! I would never-”

Alex held up placating hands. “She knows that you'd never try to, but that doesn’t mean that you can’t or won’t hurt her. Kelley, how many couples have you seen break up? Not even that, how about just fight? None of those people thought they would hurt each other when they got together.”

Kelley scrunched her face against the implications. “You think she feels like she's losing control?”

“I don’t think Hope’s ever given anyone – other than, like, her mom – this much influence over her
heart, Kelley, and she wants to give you even more. The good and the potential bad go up each time she does. Yeah, she might feel like she’s being swept away.”

“So, the deeper in love she gets, the deeper she wants to go and the more scared she is about it? Where does it end?”

“I don’t know. I could take some guesses…?” Alex made it a question and Kelley nodded. “Maybe it’ll be a process of embracing the good and accepting the risk? Or maybe she needs to learn how to deal with pain she already has.”

“You mean like a confidence-builder?”

“It’s just a guess,” Alex reminded Kelley, “but yeah, if there’s stuff from her past that isn’t healed, getting past it might make her less afraid to put her heart out there.”

“Ale, you are the best!” Kelley bounced up from the bench but Alex caught her hand. “Kelley, please be careful. Hope may need to talk to someone else about this stuff. Like, almost definitely.”

Kelley looked down at her friend with sad eyes. “Why? Why can’t she ever just talk to me?”

“Kelley,” Alex loosened her hold and smiled sadly back, “Hope would be afraid to open up to you about why she's afraid to open up to you.”

Kelley sighed until she completely deflated, then filled back up again. “There’s got to be ways I can care for her.”

“Oh, definitely! I think…whenever you run into something she feels she can’t talk about with you, encourage her to find someone else to talk to. Yeah,” Alex smiled wide, “be caring and encouraging, like you’re so good at.”

“Ale, you really are the best.” Kelley gave her one last grateful smile before heading out. “Study together after lunch?”

“Same time, same place,” Alex confirmed.

“Sweet. See ya!”

“Oh, and Kelley! Remember to have fun with her!”

Kelley tossed a grin over her shoulder. “Oh, I will!”

Hope stuttered. “A-Ashlyn…” Goddamn this awkward shit. ”Can we talk?”

Ashlyn exchanged glances with Ali. “Sure, Hope. You want to go somewhere?”

Hope led her to an alcove off the hall and cast a soundproofing charm. They sat, she swallowed, and then hammered out, “How do you know when you’re in love?”

Ashlyn regarded Hope for a second before replying. “Are you wondering if what you and Kelley have will last?”

“N- yes, I am, but first I need to know if I love her or not.”

“Is there something keeping you from believing that you do?”
Hope looked as though invisible hands were wringing her heart out like a wet rag. “I’ve seen so many people… I just don't know what it's supposed to look or feel like when it's right.”

“Gosh, Hope, you’re really putting your heart in my hands.”

“My life.” Her voice was plain and naked.

“Well… I believe you’re in love with Kelley. To me, ‘in love’ is all the feelings and experience of romance and falling for someone, while ‘love’ is more about what you do and who you are with someone.”

“I'm either over the moon or a sobbing wreck when I'm with her.” Hope wrinkled her lips. “I don’t mean that she's making me upset.”

“Thank you for saving me from asking.” Ashlyn paused. “You know, I have a friend from back home who joined the Marines. He said that the drill instructors loved to say ‘pain is weakness leaving the body’. Facing your baggage sucks, Hope, but you'll be so much better off after you work through it.”

“This is me getting started. About love, though. How do I know if I love Kelley?”

Ashlyn cocked her head, then asked a question back. “Does Kelley bring out the best in you? I mean Kelley herself, not how you feel about her. How close would you be in a parallel universe where you were both straight?”

Hope’s thinking face cracked into a grin. “Bridesmaid. At least. I'd want her planning my bachelorette party. I'd want her on my Quidditch team, too – or soccer, maybe, in this other reality. Yeah, I could see us being BFF's.”

Ashlyn grinned back. “Awesome. Really examine that, though, as your relationship develops. How well you mesh with her as friends is going to be critical in whether or not you’re still together when you’re old and gray.”

Old and gray? I haven’t thought past the next few years since… I don't even know. “How do you do it? How do you… live so well?” Ashlyn raised her eyebrows but said nothing, so Hope went on: “There are some things about you which make me think you didn’t have the easiest childhood, either, but you… I see you and Ali and you make it look so easy.”

Ashlyn shook her head at something far in the distance. “I didn’t. And however it looks, Hope, I have a whole bag of demons that I deal with every single day, but I find a way to find a beauty in life. I find a way to continue my journey.”

She’d never say so, but Hope thought that sounded trite. “Is that really how you see it? A beautiful journey?”

“It's what I've found works for me. I have to see myself going somewhere and I have to enjoy things along the way. If I don't, I get depressed, real fast.”

Hope nodded. “Ok, that makes more sense to me.”

Ashlyn, however, shook her head. “Yeah, but I think you’re still missing it. You have goals that you work towards and you do things you enjoy, but I always have this sense that you don’t let it all the way in. It seems like you live on the fence between believing that the world is your oyster and believing that it’s your enemy.”
Hope cocked her head and asked herself if that was true.

“If you come at life like it’s all a fight,” Ashlyn continued, “you won’t be able to let your guard down and not just enjoy but embrace the good parts. I think you need to learn to let beautiful things sweep you away, Hope.”

Hope sighed through her whole body. “Can you believe that I gave Kelley the same advice on her first night in Slytherin? I really thought I believed it, too.”

“I’m sure you did believe it Hope, just not with all of you. Listen, don’t get down on yourself about this. You know this stuff on some level, so keep bringing it up to the next level.”

Eyes closed, Hope tried to walk through it. “You’re right, Ash. I knew that beauty and peace mattered, but I tended to forget that when shit…” She paused to shift in her chair. “It’s not like I was doing great before Kelley, but I was stable. I could deal with surface-level emotions and let ‘good on the surface’ be my normal. Now…now I can’t get away from the deep stuff, because my feelings for Kelley go deep, too.”

“Hope, you’re gonna be alright,” Ashlyn said with a smile. “No matter how things go with Kelley, you stand to learn and grow a whole lot from it.”

“Is that your advice, then,” Hope said, half-smirking, “since you never answered my question? Look at this like it's a win-win opportunity?”

Ashlyn turned her hands up. “Life's a journey to enjoy, remember?”

**Knock-knock. “Doctor Valence?”**

She opened the door. “Hope? Come in. What’s got you so nervous?”

“Nervous?” Hope chastised herself for her defensiveness, but the professor just smiled.

“Hope, you just haven’t called me ‘Doctor’ for months. How can I help you?”

Hope steeled herself for what she was about to say. “That night I ran into you, you offered to help or get me help with a lot of stuff. I need it.”

Dr. Couture nodded. “And then you had a busy week, then another, and now you’re back. I want you to know that I didn’t forget, Hope. I would’ve talked to you after class tomorrow.”

“Thanks. So…how do you want to do this?”

The professor moved to her desk and slipped a business card from under a photo frame. “One of my old school friends is a licensed therapist and owes me a favor. She lives in Montrose and has worked with elite athletes, among many other patients.”

“She’s worked with Montrose players?” Hope felt an odd mix of surprise and relief.

Valence raised an eyebrow. “Has she? I didn’t say that. It would be a stretch of client confidentiality for me to know even that much.” Hope smirked and she continued, “I didn’t give her your name, but she's expecting a referral. Tell her I sent you and she'll get you an appointment for this week.”

“Thank you. I'll write her an owl – no, I'm going to go use the phone in Hogsmeade right now.” She stood and her professor rose to see her out. “So,” Hope's face twisted in a wry smile, “I'm going to therapy.”
Valence shook her head. “Everyone could use some therapy at least once in their life, Hope.”

Hope found that hard to believe. “I…find that hard to believe.”

“That’s what I said, too.”

Hope stared, then relaxed, and then left to make a call.

Kelley sat down for dinner and announced, “I miss kicking.”

Lauren’s laden fork stopped in front of her mouth. “Um, random. What do you mean?”

“I miss the feeling of taking a shot and putting it on frame. With my hands, the power and physicality just isn’t the same. We’ve done a little volleying in Quidditch practice, but…it’s like something to keep in our back pocket, not a real tool to use every game.”

Lauren looked at Tobin. “Do you think…?”

“Definitely Hope,” Tobin said, nodding.

Kelley frowned defensively. “What about her?”

“Your team captain,” Lauren explained, “went directly from soccer forward to Quidditch keeper. So, you, Kelley, are learning to be a chaser under someone who never had cause to wonder what you’re wondering.”

“Fara and Joanne make decent use of their feet,” Tobin said. “You might ask them to add that to your practices. We can work on it in the mornings, too.”

Ali had been listening and now spoke up. “Making a soccer ball do what I want is a lifelong challenge already. Connecting my foot with a quaffle while I’m flying sounds…tricky to get right.”

“It is,” Tobin admitted, “so most players, even professional players, don’t put the effort into getting it down. It’s a huge learning curve, but the payoff is sweet.”

“So there is a niche for kicking,” Kelley said, perking up.

“You pretty much need the stars to align in order to one-touch a quaffle with your hands,” Tobin explained, “but you can with your feet. You risk losing possession, obviously, but the reward is more explosive play, same as in soccer. And with all that speed, if you nail it, you really nail it.”

Kelley pictured herself getting on the end of a fast pass and volleying a shot – ooh, a bending shot? – through a goal ring and grinned to herself. It wasn’t easy to put a soccer ball in the top corner under the best of conditions, but kicking a quaffle? Connecting just right to send it through one of those little rings, when she and the ball were both moving at highway speed in three dimensions? Hell yes.

Alex sought company among the Hufflepuffs. “Are you as busy this week?”

“Not quite,” Lauren answered. “We aren’t doing double practices, but there’s still a lot to do to prepare. Tobin and I are stripping our brooms today.”

“Stripping?”

Tobin explained. “Maintenance. We’ll take them apart and make sure everything’s in tune.”
“We’re doing it now so we have time to fix any problems,” Lauren added.

“Yeah, never open up a working broom the day of a match. You can come hang out and watch or bring homework if you like.”

Alex met them in the Potions lab – not the classroom, but an actual research lab. Dr. Couture, standing with Hope at a table of goalkeeper’s gloves, looked up as she entered. “Ms. Morgan, what brings you to my lair?”

Alex, surprised, took a second to reply. “I’m here to watch Tobin and Chen- er, Lauren work on their brooms – and do homework,” she felt compelled to add. “Hope, how’s it going?” Alex asked.

“Good – I think,” Hope glanced at Dr. Couture, who made an approving noise. “Yeah, good.”

“Preparation three is cured and ready. Try this out,” the professor said, and handed Hope one of the gloves. Hope put it on and retrieved a quaffle from a locked cabinet.

“Oh yeah, I can already tell this is better than number one. Pass me one of the plain left gloves?”

“‘Control’ gloves, Hope,” the professor said with a wry smile. Hope put the regular glove on her left hand and held the quaffle loosely out in front of her. Slowly, she slid her hands towards the top of the ball. As her hands neared each other, gravity overcame friction and the enchanted ball sank to the floor.

At least, that’s what Alex expected to see. What she actually saw was the ball roll under Hope’s left palm for a second before it fell. “All right,” Hope said, “now we’re getting somewhere!”

“Wait.” Lauren looked at her, confused. “Why did it do that?”

Alex realized what happened and spoke aloud. “The right glove blocked the quaffle’s magic grippiness, but the left glove didn’t, so the right side of the ball started falling before the left side did. That made it roll.”

Dr. Couture smiled approvingly. “Good thinking, Ms. Morgan.”

Kelley tapped on the door to the lab, though it felt wrong to call it that. To her, labs were pristine rooms with transparent glassware, cream-colored equipment, and people in long white coats and plastic safety goggles. This was – well, it was a castle dungeon. She wondered what magic kept it dry.

“Can I help you?” Dr. Couture, wearing a heavy leather apron, gauntlets, and plexiglass face shield, looked up from a cauldron. Its contents seemed ominous by their stillness.

“I’m looking for Hope and Jess, actually.” Kelley scanned the room’s ancient, well-scarred oak lab tables. Lauren, Tobin, and Alex huddled around one table while Hope and Jess studied at another. She joined the pair and dumped her book bag on the floor. “I-” A sharp bang! made her jump and spin around.

The professor stepped back from the cauldron, now cracked and wreathed with orange smoke, and sighed wistfully. “Well, I never liked that one anyway.” She turned and tugged off her protective gear. “Kelley, I’ll give you a pass this once, since you’re only in first-year potions, but you do not ever drop things in an advanced lab. Some potions are sensitive to shock.”

Kelley went red to the ears and ducked her head. “Sorry, Doctor.” She felt the others' eyes return to
their work and relaxed.

“What’s on your mind, Kell?” Hope smiled encouragingly.

“Ooh, yeah! I’ve got an idea for you two.” She tugged off one shoe as she spoke. “What I’m thinking is—”

“What’s on your mind, Kell?” The Potions Master’s voice sliced through the room. “No open-toed shoes in potions class’ should imply that no shoes at all is right out, should it not?”

“Miss O’Hara.” She stood still, unable to face the professor.

“Five points from Slytherin, and be glad of it. If you were anywhere near a potion, I’d take ten.”

Kelley shoved her foot back in the shoe, took a long breath, and grabbed pencil and parchment from Hope. “Hokay. What I have in mind is something like this.” She drew a profile outline of a lower leg and foot. “A boot,” she drew a shoe around the foot, “with a spine like in your keeper gloves back here.” She shaded in between the arch of the foot and the shoe, then extended the shading under and up behind the ankle. “I want it to keep my ankle from hyperextending.”

Jess cocked her head at the sketch. “Hmmmm…you want to kick something very hard?” The grad student looked up again and smiled conspiratorially. “A quaffle, maybe?”

Kelley grinned back. “Maybe.”

Hope spoke up. “This one you could do without magic at all, Jess. You’d just need to get the far forward and backward angles of the spines right…” She trailed off in thought.

“Ja, but it would need a perfect fit of the boot and the foot to distribute the load – maybe even a custom boot. I think…if we instead enchant the sock to harden under strain…and that would be easier to justify under the rules.”

“Strain?” Kelley looked blankly at Jess.

“Sorry, I should say rate of strain.” Kelley’s expression remained unchanged. “You wish not to break your ankle, ja? Consider a sock which is normal until the instant of sudden motion, and then becomes hard like a cast. It takes the force instead of your bones.”

Kelley nodded, but Dr. Couture interjected again. “Instead of your foot bones. If a bludger hit your braced foot hard enough, it might fracture a leg bone.”

Jess sighed and turned to Hope. “Did I ever tell you why I am not a biomedical engineer?”

“Noooo, never!” Hope said sarcastically and laughed. “You would never get to the cool stuff because you hate studying biochemistry.”

“With passion.” The flash in Jess’s eyes made Kelley want to laugh, but she stifled it for fear she might break something else. “But the gloves, now this…I need a biomechanics text for Yuletide! Ah, but Kelley, ja, I can work something for you. It won’t be a boot; a boot enchanted to kick better would be illegal. A sock which protects your foot from injury is much more likely to be admitted.”

“Awesome. You rock, Jess.”

“It’s my pleasure – actually, no, not for nothing. If I do this, you will let me see and hold the Cup after you win it.”
“Uh, sure,” Kelley replied, her brow furrowing, “but haven’t you won it before?”

Jess grinned. “World Cup.”

Her mission accomplished, Kelley tread warily across to Lauren, Tobin, and Alex. “What are you working on?” Alex stepped aside so she could see.

Parts, barely recognizable as belonging to a broom, were laid out across the table. In front of Lauren, a thin shaft of white and lavender fibers floated in the air. A wireframe gold cylinder, wider and unconnected to the shaft, surrounded one end of it. Lauren picked up a tuning fork from the table and held it behind the cylinder end of the shaft. The fork sang softly and glowed green. She moved the fork over the length of the gold frame, but stopped when the sound began to beat like an instrument out of tune with its neighbor. The glow shifted to a yellow-green and pulsed in time with the beats. Lauren frowned and prodded one band of gold with her wand. The glow became a little less yellow.

“Whoa,” Kelley whispered, “I had no idea there was so much going on inside.”

“I know! Apparently it’s a bit like a wand, except more specialized and complicated.” Alex whispered back.

Tobin looked up. “Yeah, it’s not just a Wal-Mart broomstick that’s been permanently wingardium leviosa’d. This long part is like a wand’s core and the gold part is a sort of focuser. High-performance brooms aren’t even mass-produced, really. All the parts might be shaped on machines but everything is enchanted, tuned, and fitted by hand.”

“They’re made in factories now,” Dr. Couture said without looking up, “and they’re held to strict tolerances, but no two are exactly alike. I could buy two Firebolt brooms with sequential serial numbers and the parts wouldn’t be interchangeable. Well, if I weren’t a teacher, I could buy two Firebolts…”

Hope scoffed. “If you didn’t spend your patent royalties on custom leather clothes, you mean.”

“Half of a point from Slytherin. Here, treatment two is ready. Try it with the quaffle.”

“Can she take half-points?” Alex whispered to Tobin.

“I’m pretty sure that was just a joke.”

“Oh, and speaking of House points,” they all looked up at the Potions Master, “five points returned to Slytherin. You lot are welcome to come work in here again after you pass the safety quiz from my N.E.W.T. course.” She looked at the repeat offender. “Mea culpa, Kelley. I shouldn’t have let you enter in the first place.”

Kelley wasn’t sure how to take that.

As they got comfortable – as comfortable as the wood bleachers allowed, anyway – in Slytherin's section of the Hogwarts stadium, Kelley turned to her two American teammates and asked, “Predictions?”

Amy didn’t miss a beat. “You and Hope make out before Yuletide break.”

“About the match, A-Rod.” Kelley kept from glancing at Hope, more for the other woman’s sake than her own.
“Fiiinne.” Amy rolled her eyes and made a dramatic sigh. “Chen-Chen brings the smack-down and then Tobin ties their chasers in a knot. Hufflepuff by 8 goals. I don’t really know about their seekers, though.”

“Ravenclaw’s is better, but not by enough to call it now,” Hope filled in.

Kelley held a hand up. “Alright, rewind,” she said. “‘Smack-down’? That’s not what I think of when I think of Lauren’s game. Infuriatingly good, or even devious, but…” Kelley trailed off at the sound of another Hope giggle.

“You’re in for a treat today, Kell,” Hope grinned.

“Yeah,” Amy agreed with a chuckle, “let’s just say that our dear Lauren doesn’t bring her claws out at our little USA scrimmages,”

“We’ll have to talk about that soon,” Hope said to herself. Kelley glanced at her, but then the fanfare began and the teams walked onto the field.

Hufflepuff keeper Geoff, team captain, smiled around his team’s huddle. “Normally, I’d call a cheer of ‘tireless’ or such, but I want to let Lauren take this one.” The captain looked across at her.

“You’ve made yourself the spark of the team this season, so it’s only right that you send us out at our biggest match.”

Lauren smiled, then steeled herself. “We can do this and we will do this if we hold on to our belief. Ravenclaw is sharp and they’ll capitalize on any opening we give them, so we focus, we stay determined, we believe in ourselves, and we win.” Then she grinned. “I want the whole stadium to hear us loud and clear. On three,” she enunciated the cheer slowly and distinctly. “Got it?”

Around the huddle, her friends grinned back. Lauren put her hand out and they joined her. “One! Two! Three!”

“BEAT RAVENCLAW!”

As the two teams took their positions, Kelley wondered aloud, “So, the diligent versus the clever…” Amy shook her head.

“Yes and no,” Hope said. “Hufflepuff gets fierce, for one thing.”

“Have you ever seen a badger?” Amy asked rhetorically.

“Also, Ravenclaw players have a bad habit of thinking up good plays which are too sophisticated for the amount of practice time they have. Their team learns, forgets, and relearns the right balance every few years.”

“Was last year a low point?” Amy didn’t take her eyes off the field.

“No.” Hope sounded smug as hell. “This year or next should be.”

The match started intense and stayed intense. Ravenclaw aimed for a sharp, surgical style of play, but Hufflepuff harried them on every possession. Ravenclaw tried to break through with a long punt into Hufflepuff’s scoring area. Lauren zipped in from the side, skidded sideways and knocked her hip into the receiving chaser’s own. He stayed upright but the collision bumped him out of the path of the quaffle. It took him only a second to recover his wits but, by then, Lauren had passed the ball
forward.


“Hufflepuff calls its style a ‘free five’,” Hope said, “because their beaters spend almost as much time playing the quaffle as the bludgers. Lauren is especially aggressive about it.”

“And by ‘aggressive’,” Amy added, “We mean ‘physical’.”

Lauren darted to get on the end of the pass before it entered the scoring area. The Ravenclaw defense saw and scrambled to reorient; they’d assumed the pass was intended for a chaser. At the last moment, Lauren bobbed up above the quaffle and swung her foot. Her volley sent the quaffle across the field toward Tobin, who’d lost her defender in the surprise. Though the ball wasn’t perfectly placed, she caught it and slung it through the far goal hoop before the keeper even saw her.

“Clinical,” Kelley observed admiringly.

“Strewth!” said a teammate further down the row, “that was so good, it looked planned!”

“’Cause it was planned,” Amy retorted.

“Ye can’t plan a play like that. Kicking is just too unpredictable. Don’t get me wrong, that was brilliant vision by Cheney an’ Heath, but there’s no way they planned it.”

Amy opened her mouth to argue, but Kelley put a hand on her arm. “Let them think that,” she said quietly.

On Kelley’s other side, Hope snaked an arm around her waist and tugged her close, then spoke over her head. “That was a rehearsed play and, not many months from now, you’ll defend against it.”

Along the row, pupils dilated and refocused with new concentration. Kelley, however, aimed a glare back at Hope.

“Way to ruin my secret plan.”

“Can’t keep the squirrel in the bag forever,” Hope offered with a smile and a shrug.

“I just wish we could not train our competition – our long-term competition.”

Hope lowered her voice so only Kelley could hear. “Between now and 2011, we’re going to practice alongside three more classes of Hogwarts students, make the rosters at premier professional teams, play international friendlies to build experience, and qualify for the World Cup. All these good ideas won’t stay secret through all that. Our focus needs to be on always aiming higher.”

Kelley’s features went soft and warm. “You’re really smart, you know that?”

“I’ve just been thinking a lot lately...” Hope fell silent when Tobin picked off an overly-clever pass and raced forward, then cut right, towards the Ravenclaw goals. Ravenclaw covered her as tight as they dared.

“Not happening,” Kelley muttered. “She’s got no-“

Tobin slowed abruptly, shoved the quaffle downward, and gave it a solid back-heel kick. Lauren met it in the seam between her marker and the three on Tobin. With a massive smack, her foot sent the ball rocketing towards the near goal. It hit the inside of the top of the hoop, pinged down into the lower rim and shot out the back of the goal. The stadium erupted in the loudest cheers yet.
“Lauren’s gonna’ want to show off that bruise latter,” Amy said, shaking her head.

Kelley laughed. “Whatever, she earned the attention with that goal. I mean, she freaking speared it!”

The game resumed. “14-9 Hufflepuff,” Hope announced. “If Ravenclaw doesn’t switch to zone, the field game is ov-.”

Lauren stripped the quaffle from a Ravenclaw chaser’s hands and tossed it to Tobin. The Ravenclaw player tumbled downward before regaining control of her broom and racing after them. Boos and cheers alike assailed them all. “Oh snap!” Kelley exclaimed. “Was that a foul?”

“We're fortunate to have a good ref,” Hope replied, “or she wouldn’t be able to push so hard.”

Kelley squinted at her girlfriend. “That didn’t sound sarcastic.”

“It wasn't, because that wasn't a foul. Lauren is so good at playing right to the edge of the rules. Without a quality ref, she’d get called a lot for things that aren’t illegal.”

Kelley wrinkled her nose. “I’m hardly a rules-prude, but when you’re fifty feet in the air…”

“She’s the least cynical athlete I’ve ever met, Kell. A barely clean challenge is still clean.”

“And that was clean? In our practices, that kind of tumble comes from a collision.”

Amy spoke up. “Yeah, but none of us have put as much practice into precise steals like that. Think about it, though: even with no contact, just trying to hang onto the quaffle can flip you around.”

“Oh. Yeah, true.” Kelley turned back to Hope. “Why aren't we practicing that?”

“Because it's easier to teach interceptions and soft fouls,” Hope answered in a matter-of-fact tone. “That Lauren is that good at steals when she's not a chaser is incredible.”

Amy grinned at Kelley. “I think Chen-Chen misses slide-tackling as much as you miss kicking.”

Ravenclaw tried to press harder and higher, moving the quaffle in a swirling flurry of short throws between their three chasers. Ashlyn watched and wondered how to set a defense against such a dynamic attack, until a resounding crack! jerked her attention away from the quaffle. She saw Lauren finishing her follow-through just as a collective gasp rose from the crowd. Ashlyn looked again for the quaffle and found it in Tobin's hands. Under her breath, Ali swore admiringly.

“What happened?”

Ali's voice was teasing. “You can't afford to be missing things, ‘keeper.”

“Really, Al, what-” the rest of her sentence had to wait; Ravenclaw's keeper threw herself halfway off her broom to save Tobin's throw. She couldn’t get control the quaffle, however, and Tobin headed the rebound home. When the cheers subsided, Ashlyn turned back to Ali.

“Cheney totally read where Ravenclaw’s next pass was going. She couldn’t get there first like the other time, so she set herself up to hit a bludger at the chaser. I can’t even – the pieces came together perfectly.” Ali shook her head. “She hit the bludger, the bludger knocked the quaffle out of the chaser's hands, and it flew right to Tobin. Cue fast break.”

“Damn,” Ashlyn agreed. “They must really be feelin’ it.”
“Ravenclaw can’t handle the pressure.” The scoreboard agreed: Hufflepuff 270, Ravenclaw 190.

“The only reason they’re still in it is the snitch seems to have left town,” Ashlyn observed.

Next to her, Alex sighed impatiently. “No, it’s caught in one of the Hufflepuff pennants.” She grimaced. “Would it be sporting to go untangle it? It’s been there for literally an hour.”

“Umm…” Ali and Ashlyn looked at each other and back at Alex.

Alex stood abruptly. “I’m gonna go ask.”

At the foot of the faculty box, Alex’s stomach clenched. Telling herself that there were no stupid questions, she propelled herself up the steps. “Exc-“ she stopped to swallow, then tried again. “Excuse me, please, uh, Headmistress and Professors.”

Headmistress McGonagall and several professors twisted in their seats to look at her. “Can we help you, young lady?” asked McGonagall.

“Um, I have a question. About the snitch.” More heads turned to look at her. “If, like, hypothetically-” the Headmistress’s nose twitched at the word ‘like’ and Alex winced. “Um, if the snitch got caught in some obstacle for a long time, do the rules allow someone to free it?”

The Headmistress gave her a long look. “That, my dear, is a centuries-old ambiguity. The Laws of the game permit it if the snitch becomes snared in a place where none of the players can possibly see it. However, if you can see it, then they should be able to as well.”

Alex's shoulders drooped. “Oh.”

Dr. Couture’s mouth quirked into a smile. “Hypothetically, how long has the snitch been stuck?”

“At least an hour.”

The Potions Master looked at the Headmistress. “Do you suppose that could be, like, empirical evidence that these particular players can’t possibly spot the snitch?”

“That would depend,” McGonagall replied coolly. “Does this hypothesis include you never abusing that word in my presence again?”

Dr. Couture flashed with the righteous indignation of a woman falsely accused. “Now, Minerva, that was a perfectly valid use of ‘empir-’”

“I meant ‘like’ and you know it,” the Headmistress shot back, smirking despite herself. She returned to Alex. “Where is the snitch?”

Alex pointed. “It’s caught in the lowest pennant on the second pole from the right behind the Hufflepuff section.”

Headmistress McGonagall raised what looked like opera glasses to her eyes. After several seconds, the venerable woman muttered, “Blasted thing,” and stood. “Very well. To consult Referee Hooch would, in my unsolicited judgement, unnecessarily halt play and negatively impact the remainder of the match.” She drew her wand, looked through the glasses, and wordlessly untangled the pennant from the snitch. It bobbed, made a beeline for the center of the pitch, and hovered there. Alex wondered if it felt as frustrated as she did.

The stadium filled with noise as the entire school saw the snitch. From above, the two seekers
dropped like stones. “Come on,” Alex heard McGonagall say, “don’t Wronski yourselves…” The seekers peeled away from each other and turned their vertical dives into spirals, each trying to take the fastest path to the snitch which didn’t also intersect the ground. After descending through one full circle, they rolled in and swooped down toward the obliging, stationary snitch. The Ravenclaw seeker was faster and closer. It looked in the bag. Then the snitch lurched three feet downward.

The school heard precisely what Ravenclaw’s seeker thought of the snitch as she zoomed over it, just out of her reach. One second later, the Hufflepuff seeker snagged it. The scoreboard ticked a final time: Hufflepuff 420, Ravenclaw 200.

As soon as they touched the ground, Tobin threw herself into Lauren's arms, followed by the rest of their team. They collapsed under their own weight into a whooping pile of yellow and black. The stands behind them boomed, “HUF-FLE-PUFF! HUF-FLE-PUFF! HUF-FLE-PUFF!”

Kelley and Amy leapt to their feet. Hope, in contrast, seemed disappointed. “The more I see of the play over the field, the more I can do to prepare us,” she explained when they asked why. “Besides, it’s kind of a letdown for the match to be decided by a seeker missing a catch.”

Amy threw out her hands. ‘Who cares? Chen-“

“No! Nuh-uh,” Kelley interrupted, “that wasn’t a missed catch; it was bad planning. She set herself up for that.”

Amy shrugged. “What’s the difference?”

“The difference,” Kelley persisted, “is that she pushed herself to the limit of what her broom could do and stayed there as she closed in on the snitch.”

“Isn’t that what seekers do?”

“Not when you get real close. The Ravenclaw was already using everything her broom could give her, so she had no options. You probably missed it, but her toes brushed the grass at the end of her swoop; that’s how close she cut it. At her speed, she couldn’t follow the snitch any lower without crashing. The Hufflepuff guy got there slower because he left himself some slack to work with.”

“Wait,” Amy said, looking stunned, “you’re saying she counted on the snitch not moving?”

“Yup.”

Amy looked at Hope, who took a moment before sharing her opinion. “It was probably an emotional mistake. You’d expect a Ravenclaw to anticipate a trick like that, but I think frustration was in control. Hufflepuff’s seeker kept cool at the critical moment and that was all it took.” She smirked. “I believe this is what they call a ‘teachable moment’.”

“KELLEY!”

Hope and Kelley exchanged a concerned look. If they, in the Slytherin common room, could hear Amy through the closed door of their dorm…they hurriedly disentangled themselves from the couch and each other, and made for their room. “What’s wrong?” Kelley asked.

Inside, Amy brandished a ragged scrap of vellum. “Your squirrel ate my term paper!”

Hope ducked her head and left quickly. She needed to laugh and she didn’t think they’d take it well.
Once through the door, she thought the common room might not be the best place for hysterics, either, so she kept going, fighting to keep under control until she was in the hall. She made it, more or less.

She'd never really liked the dungeon hall, so she walked on up to the next floor, where the potions rooms were. She felt she'd run out of snickering aftershocks when Alex Morgan left the main potions classroom. Seeing Kelley’s best friend set Hope laughing all over again.

“Um…hey, Hope?”

“Alex! Oh, so Amy just got back from studying with the New Kids. They have their Herbology exam tomorrow.” Hope told the story. “Amy’s face…the way she waved one of the chewed sheets when she said it…” she couldn’t finish.

Alex laughed along with her. “That is classic! Oh, wow.” She tried to compose herself. “Wow, did y- did you magic it back together?”

“No, but they probably have by now. I didn’t want them to see me laughing at them.”

“Oh.” Alex wouldn’t want a friend to walk out on a situation like that, but kept it to herself. “You know, since you and Kelley got together, you laugh and smile a lot more in public. People are noticing. Like, some of my teammates call you ‘Hope’ instead of ‘Solo’ when we talk about Slytherin. Not that they’re any less impressed by you as a goalkeeper,” she added.

Hope smiled. “Thanks. It’s true, I am happier than I’ve been in a long time, though I still reserve the right to not give a damn what anyone thinks. How about you? How’s your first term been?”

Alex half-smiled, then grinned. “Magical. December’s not been so great, though. No Quidditch matches until the end of February, plus all the end-of-term stuff on top of that, not to mention the weather.”

“Yeah, at least I get to stay still. Sometimes I even feel sorry for everyone at practices.”

Alex shrugged. “I’m ok with flying in the cold, really, but what gets me is the loss of urgency. I want to shake people and be like, ‘Don’t throw away this month!’ That’s what makes practicing in the cold suck. That and, if you’re above a snitch and it’s snowy, the flat white background kills your depth perception.” Alex paused and frowned. “Maybe I shouldn’t be talking about our practices.”

Hope shrugged back. “I won’t tell Hufflepuff – or maybe I should. It might make them complacent.”

Alex shook her head. “No, they’d just press their advantage and work twice as hard. Everything makes them work twice as hard. They put in double practices the week of your rematch, you know.”

“Yeah, Jess told me.”

“What?! Ravenclaw knew?” Alex could hardly believe it.

“No,” Hope answered, grinning. “I asked Jess if she’d told them and she said no, they were Ravenclaws, so if they couldn’t figure it out on their own, they didn’t deserve to know!”

“It’s crazy to think,” Alex said as her grin faded, “how fast it went. Like, if every term feels this fast and there’s three of them in a year, and only four years-“

“Treasure them.” Hope’s eyes, voice, and face came together in impassioned sincerity. “Even when it feels like it’s dragging, it’s flying by, and you don’t-“ she stopped suddenly and looked away for a
second, then returned her eyes to Alex. “You don't get to do any of it over again. Whatever you do with your time here, do it well.”

Kelley stopped Lauren on her way out of the training room. “Do you mind if I borrow this for break?” She held up the *Fighter Combat* book.

“One light reading while you're away from school?” Lauren smirked. “Sure, that’s fine.”

“Awesome, thanks, and I know, I tried reading it but it's dense like a textbook. My dad was a fighter pilot, so I'm gonna ask him to walk me through it.”

“Oh, cool! Yeah, that'll be perfect. You can explain it all to the rest of us when you get back.”

“Wait, but…are you saying none of us have actually read it?”

Lauren laughed. “We all had the same reaction you did. Hope got Jess to study it and explain some of it to us, but even she said she didn’t have the background to get most of it.”

Kelley frowned. “Hope acted like she'd read it, back when I was new here.”

“Well,” Lauren grinned, “you were new here. She probably wanted to push you and see how far you'd go.”

“Or she was embarrassed about letting you down and wanted to impress you to make up for it.”

Hope joined their conversation. “You're taking it to read over the break?”

Kelley shook her head. “So my jet pilot dad can explain it to me.”

“Great idea!” Hope grinned wide. “Take notes and give us a big presentation when we get back!”

Kelley gave Hope a dirty look, but Lauren waved her off. “Seriously, that could be super helpful. Talk to him about broom flight, too. Maybe he'll think of things we haven’t.”

“Alright, I'll do that. I'll even take notes for you.” She gave Hope the stink-eye.

Hope smiled back. “We'll add them to our little library. Even better, see if you can find a private spot for your dad to watch you fly.” Her eyes lit up. “Have you flown two on a broom before?”

All of Kelley lit up. “No, but that'd be so perfect! Is it hard?”

“Not really, but your first attempt shouldn’t be alone in the country with a Muggle family member.”

“So you're saying we should practice before we leave,” Kelley said, as the smile on her face changed tone.

“How does 'right now' sound?” Hope asked, eyes sparkling.

Kelley beamed as though it were Christmas already. “To the wild blue yonder!”

Hope took Kelley's hand and let the girl pull her out of the room. “Goodbye, Chen,” she chuckled over her shoulder.

*Bye, Chen-Chen!* Kelley’s voice was already moving down the hall.

*Really, Kell? Wild blue yonder?*
“Isn't that what pilots say?”

“I just thought you'd be more of a ’to infinity and beyond’ girl.”

“To infinity...AND BEYOND!” Hope’s voice joined Kelley’s for the finish.

Lauren leaned against the doorframe and watched them go. Amy noticed and came to see what was so interesting. “I always respected Hope, and I came to like her,” Lauren explained, “but never did I ever think I'd find her adorable. Not even when she and Jess were doing their thing.”

Amy nodded and looked after the pair, who were grinning and swinging their clasped hands between them. “I kind of knew it, because I've seen her dorky side come out a few times when we're alone in Slytherin, but I wouldn't have believed I'd see this, either.”

“You know how you hear the question, ‘can people really change?’” Amy nodded. “I think I just found my answer.”

Kelley was glad to have the practice, because flying tandem took some getting used to. Hope holding onto her, though, felt as natural as breathing, running, and laughing. Below, the snow-blanketed moor shone white-gold in the evening sunlight. Above, clouds scattered flurries to catch in their mouths and adorn their hair. “I feel like I’m inside a snow globe,” Hope said over Kelley’s shoulder.

“Incredible...and I thought Stanford was beautiful...”

She felt Hope smile. “Take us out over the lake. There’s something I want to do.”

Kelley leaned and they curved towards the shore. “What is it?”

“I want to watch the sunset from the middle of the lake, just above the water.”

Kelley soon realized why. Far from land, everything changed. But for the measured, mellow slip of the lake’s gentle waves and their own breaths, the world was exquisitely quiet. Even the crisp breeze which caressed Kelley’s cheeks and teased her hair respected the silence. Sunlight, already turned fire-orange, glittered off the water all around them. “I feel like I'm in a Disney movie,” Kelley whispered. “It’s like a lake of a million diamonds.”

Hope chuckled. “I promise not to splash you under the guise of getting you one.”

“Good, ‘cause I'm actually not in a splashing mood.” To her pleasure, Hope didn’t seem surprised or ask ‘why not?’ but simply held her around her waist and shared the moment. “You keep bringing me to the most beautiful places.”

“They suit you.” She felt Hope smile against her neck, then felt the smile soften. “Kell, I hadn’t been to that tower in almost a year. I wondered what it’d be like to watch the sunset from here when I was a new student, but I never did it. You make me want to share these sorts of moments with you.” Hope's smile stretched again. “We're totally climbing a mountain after the break.”

“I would love that.” Kelley let it all wash over her before speaking again. “Hope, do you appreciate how much you appreciate peace and beauty?”

“You lost me with that sentence, Kell.”

Turning around on a broomstick was risky, but Kelley needed to look Hope in the eyes. She managed it, slowly but surely working her legs around to face the other way. “Look at it all: the
dorm at night, the rooftop, this amazing sunset, hiking to a mountaintop. You get all of that, Hope, more than most people I've met. It's personal to you, I mean, and important. That says so much about you, Hope." She paused to watch Hope, who blinked and looked away at the water. "Do you ever think about living like this all the time?"

Hope looked back at Kelley's eyes and the corners of her mouth curled upward. "Lately, yeah, I have. That's part of why I brought us here."

Kelley felt butterflies take flight at Hope's casual use of 'us'. "What's the other part?"

"There's something else I wanted to do out here." She tugged off a glove and tucked it inside her robe. The smile spreading out on her face would've set Kelley's heart pounding, if the look in Hope's eyes hadn't already stopped it dead.

It was the look of a woman who knew what she wanted.

Kelley couldn't breathe as she watched Hope reach out and felt her palm, burning hot after the winter air, rest against her neck. Her other hand settled on Kelley's hip. "Don't close your eyes right away. I want you to see me do this." Hope leaned closer – or drew her in, or both, it didn't matter – while Kelley stared into those gray eyes. When they slipped closed, Hope's face, so lovely and peaceful with her lashes fanned out, bathed in shimmering red and sparkling white by the reflected sunset, melted Kelley's heart. She only got one good look at Hope's lips, right as she wet them. Kelley did the same just before they brushed each other's for the first time, and then Hope's lips locked with her own. Her eyes fell closed in an instant.

On the southbound train the next morning, with Kelley asleep in her arms, Hope felt tensions she'd never noticed relaxing throughout her body. The warmth from Kelley, the citrus scent of her hair, and the quiet sway of the coach unwrapped her remaining defenses, mile by mile, bit by bit. Kelley was hers. She was Kelley's. This was real. She drifted off to sleep with a smile on her lips. This is real.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Kelley takes a PK, Alex wears a jersey, and Hope talks to a reporter.
(Read in Jeremy Clarkson's voice).
Winter

Chapter Notes

It's been a while and I want to share something, so this impromptu update is shorter than usual. There's so much storytelling I want to do in the coming chapters that it's taking a long time to craft it all. I'm writing and editing more romance, drama, action, new characters, new relationships, and an eventual rating change to 'M'. For now, I hope you enjoy this :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

While going through the closet in her old room in Diamond Bar, Alex uncovered her favorite shirt from middle school. She remembered how she'd loved it, but it didn't just not fit anymore – it didn't fit her. She wasn't that girl anymore. She had the same feeling about staying with her family in her childhood home, which made her deeply uncomfortable. One trimester in a castle and now she didn't fit in with her family? What kind of terrible person would feel that way? A Pure-blood, she thought, and shuddered.

Four days into the winter break, Kelley offered to put her in touch with Christen Press. Though she didn't think a girl born into wizardry would understand, Alex needed an in-person heart-to-heart with a witch. Calling Kelley twice a day – well, if that were helping, she wouldn't feel compelled to call twice a day.

Alex met Christen at Diamond Bar's primary floo outlet – except this was America, so it was spelled 'flue', and it was a yuppie suburb, so it was inside a Panera – and they walked to the neighborhood's least popular soccer field. Alex wasn't feeling it, though, and they soon abandoned the ball and sat inside the goal. Christen picked up on Alex's dilemma at once. "Every time I make a new Muggle friend," she related, "I have this moment of letdown, like, 'Crap, that's right, I'll never be able to share this huge piece of my life with them'. It sucks. I know that's not the same thing as you have, though. Family is bigger."

Alex stared at the ball she'd spent so many hours with. "They want to hear all about it. They think it's the coolest thing ever." She turned to Christen. "Like, my sisters aren't even a little jealous, they're so happy for me. But…no matter how many times they all say they support me and are proud of me and nothing's going to change, I still feel it pulling me away."

Christen's green eyes seemed impossibly wide and sympathetic. "Honestly, Alex, it is. I think what you're going through has to be the hardest way to transition to life as a witch. Literally overnight, you went from living as a suburban Muggle girl to being an international student in wizardry school. Plus, a Quidditch career locks you out of living among Muggles, since you won't have time to do everything it takes to blend in. It's more than anyone should have to face at once. These struggles come easier when you have years to grow into them and learn how to relate to Muggle friends and family. That's why we're supposed to grow up with magic, at least from youth like Kelley did."

Alex leaned forward to let her arms rest on her crossed legs. "I was so sure I knew who I was." She told Christen how she rejected the news that she was a witch.

Christen put a hand on her back. "You were right about what you value. Everything you believed then is true for you in Quidditch now, right?"
“Yeah.”

“And aren't your parents always talking about how character and values are what counts in a
person?”

“Yes.” For an instant, Alex smiled. “But they also talk about how important our relationships are.
You know, ‘make new friends, but keep the old’. Every new step I take as a witch takes me away
from them. Already, I don’t know what to do with my high school friends.”

Christen stifled a chuckle. “That part is actually kinda normal. But I get you, you worry it'll be your
family next. All I can say to that is what I've heard from a few others: it can be tough to manage, but
you can stay close with them.”

“What do you mean by 'manage’?”

“Like, if one or both of your sisters marries a Muggle, you and her will have to decide what to tell
them.”

“And their kids…” Alex realized.

“And anyone else they know who sees you with them. You'll pretty much be undercover any time
you visit family or witches living among Muggles. Truth is, you should establish their answers for
‘What does your sister Alex do?’ and all the follow-up questions before you go back to school.”

Alex closed her eyes.

Somewhere west of Phoenix…

In the movies, spies always wore sunglasses and stood out from the background. Black suits, big
black cars, black helicopters – everything sinister and high-contrast.

Therefore, whoever the dark-haired woman in the dark glasses and dark leather jacket loitering by
the other end of the soccer field was, she was not a spy. She wasn’t from a college, either, because
they didn’t creep on people practicing in public parks. What she was didn’t matter; she was a
distraction, that’s what, and distracted players didn’t keep their scholarships to Santa Clara. Time to
focus and bend it like-

“Miss Johnston?”

Julie jumped and whirled about. The woman stood behind her.

“Sorry. I can’t be too careful.” She reached for her sunglasses. “Especially around soccer fields. My
name’s Mia Hamm. I'd like to discuss your letter of intent.”

Julie gawked at her.

Mia smirked. “I'd say something about making an offer you can't refuse, but I've pushed the
melodrama too far already, don't you think?”

Chapter End Notes
Your comments are welcome, as always! I'm also interested in suggestions of UK and Ireland players to fill out the House teams. I'd like to get away from my randomly-named OC’s, and Ravenclaw doesn't even have those.
Chapter Summary

This is the chapter with the penalty kick, the jersey, and the reporter.

Chapter Notes

When you're procrastinating editing, by drafting an introduction for Allie Long, after the 2011 Quidditch World Cup, you know it's time to publish and move on.

I'm interested in soccer players from both Hogwarts territory and continental Europe for appearances in future chapters, so please comment!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

January 6, 2008.

After three weeks with her family, the Hogwarts Express still seemed weird, entering the castle gates still felt weird, and the constantly-rearranging stairs were definitely still weird, but the Gryffindor common room felt like home to Alex the moment she stepped inside. It disturbed her, if she was honest, to feel more at home than she had ‘at home'. Mercifully, a note tacked to the bottom of her room's trapdoor commanded her attention: Alex, Ashlyn, & Ali – Team practice after supper.

They arrived to find a larger gathering than expected. Besides Ali, there were several others who had not made the team in the fall. “Let me give you the lay of the land,” their captain said. “Two of the six inter-House matches are over. We have one point for the snitch we caught, Slytherin has two points for winning on the field, Hufflepuff has three, and Ravenclaw has nil. If we tie for most points at the end of the season, the tie-breaker is goal difference, and we have minus-eleven. To secure the top of the table, we have to catch our snitches and outscore Slytherin against Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw by a combined twenty-two goals. Obviously, we need to light a fire under ourselves. That’s why I asked the rest of you here today. Starting now, you are all competing for spots in the starting lineup and on the bench. If you prove in practice that you’re the player to beat, I’ll put you in. If you need extra work to catch up, I will stay as late as you want after the usual end of practices. We have two more matches and everything to gain. Get fired up!”

Ali turned to Ashlyn, eyes blazing. “I’m going for it.”

Meanwhile, on another field, an owl post found Hope Solo at Slytherin’s first practice of the new year. It came from Lindsay Tarpley, as expected, and it carried the good news. She looked up from the letter and found Kelley waiting eagerly. Hope's face said it all. Kelley jumped for joy, whirled away, and shouted to the rest of the team, “Slytherins, bring it in! Team announcement!”

Ginevra Potter
Quidditch Correspondent
The annual conference of the United Association of Quidditch Coaches culminated yesterday afternoon with the 2008 England-Ireland League Draft. This year’s edition of the draft looked to be calmer than average, with fewer trades in the off-season and wide agreement among commentators on the likely picks of each club. That calm burst in the final minute before the start of the draft, when the Montrose and Holyhead clubs submitted a trade of Montrose’s reserve goal-minder, Marcos Tejada, and their first-round draft pick, seventh overall, for Holyhead’s second overall pick (Holyhead retained the third pick in the order, which they previously traded for). Other teams’ staff appeared at a loss, because Caerphilly were expected to select the presumptive cream of the 2008 goalkeeping crop, California-born Brit Karen Bardsley, with their draft-opening first pick. Caerphilly used nearly all of their allotted deliberation time in nervous discussion and hurried telephoning, clearly anxious that Montrose knew something they did not, but decided to stick to their plan and drafted Bardsley.

Montrose may well have put one over on the entire league, as they chose American goalie Hope Solo immediately when called upon. This paper, in its preview of the draft, reported that scouts from multiple clubs held lukewarm opinions of the American. A native of the dry eastern reaches of Washington State, Solo transitioned from a forward in Muggle football to a keeper in Quidditch after winning an exchange scholarship to Hogwarts S.W.W. She is currently team captain for House Slytherin and has started every match after her first year save one, this past November. Who took the field in her place? Karen Bardsley, first choice in the League but seemingly second choice in Slytherin. Observing that match were representatives from Appleby, Caerphilly, and – wait for it – Montrose. Did the Scots pull the wool over the other teams’ eyes? It is sure to be a topic of lively speculation this spring.

That evening, Kelley shooed Amy out of their room and lay in wait for Hope. The outpouring of congratulations surprised Kelley and blew Hope away completely. The woman had been walking on a cloud all day and oh, did Kelley love watching! Hope's eyes when keepers Dara and Geoff came over to congratulate her at lunch – priceless.

When the door opened, she was there before Hope was even through it. “Congratulations, again, Hope.” Kelley wrapped one hand in Hope's necktie and pushed the door closed with the other. “You deserve every bit of this.” Pulling, she seared her truth into Hope's lips.

“Kell...Kell...” Hope broke the kiss to bathe in Kelley’s eyes. “I'm going to hate moving away from you.”

Kelley drew Hope back in by her tie and kissed her again. “Absence makes the heart grow hotter.”

“So I see.”

“Stop talking so I can French you.”

Now that Montrose FC held the right to sign Hope Solo, they were not about to let her botch another interview. Thus, Lindsay Tarpley met Hope inside The Three Broomsticks a quarter-hour before the correspondent from the paper arrived. “I'm here to get you started on talking to the press,” she explained.

Hope smiled wryly. “You mean, 'make sure I don’t make the team look bad'.”

“Tomato, tomahto. Hey, remember, you’re part of the team now. We’ve got your back, too.”

A short redhead wearing a cool, confident expression on a sweet round face, joined the draftee and
the ad-hoc PR advisor at their booth. “Misses Solo and Tarpley? Ginny Potter, *Daily Prophet*. Thank you for allowing me this informal press conference.”

“I have to admit, I wasn’t expecting to be a headline.” Hope was surprised to find herself blushing and tried to shake it off. “I mean, I’ve been reading your articles ever since I started at Hogwarts and now…here you are.”

Ginny smiled politely. “Your surprise draft selection is certainly a story.” She noticed Hope’s lip twitch and waited.

“It…didn’t surprise anyone who knows me.” Hope started tentatively, but picked up the tempo as her smirk grew. “I have the best goals-against of any Hogwarts keeper in thirty years.”

“I should expect the scouts from the various teams to know that, yet nobody had you at the top of their list. Why do you think that was?”

Hope looked past her. “It’s because Montrose took a second chance to watch me play.”

“Was that the match that had to be replayed?”

“Yes. The first game…” She grimaced. “Nobody left happy.”

“And something about that match left the other teams with a poor first impression of you?”

“Not the match itself…” Hope looked awkwardly at Lindsay, who tagged in for her.

“I was with the team reps for the match and the interview after. Hope’s focus wasn’t on herself that day. She showed admirable humility, actually, but the pros didn’t like her backburner-ing them. They thought it showed lack of commitment. They pushed her on it, asking why she started Karen Bardsley, why she postponed meeting them, questioning her character, all while Karen is in intensive care from injury. Hope blew up at them.”

“I didn’t ‘blow up’,” Hope said defensively.

“By English business standards, you did,” Lindsay replied. “The point is everybody left with a sour taste in their mouths, but I persuaded my team to give Hope a second look.”

Ginny flicked her eyes back to Hope and carried on taking notes. “That does raise another question. Why didn’t you start the match?”

Hope sighed. “To let Karen have the spotlight, for once. But you know what they say; no good deed goes unpunished.”

“I heard something about a seeker causing a crash and getting banned?”

“The call initially went in his favor. I got Madame Hooch to go back with a time-turner and review it. She reversed her ruling and McGonagall banned him from flying.”

“Banned your seeker?”

Hope’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t call him *my* seeker, but yes.”

“The ruling on the field had been in Slytherin’s favor?”

“Yes.”
“And that’s why the match was replayed?”

“Yes.”

Ginny gave her a long look. “Hope, let me be frank. I'm sitting here, seeing you and hearing you, and I don’t doubt what you say. Think about people just picking up the paper, though. Do you think our readers will believe that you made these decisions out of the goodness of your heart? That Slytherin's star player was too altruistic for the teams’ representatives?”

“I wouldn’t believe that one if it hadn’t happened,” Hope muttered.

“A lot of people would see a Slytherin conspiring to rig the League draft. The more cynical among them might even say you got your seeker to take the fall and force a replay.”

Lindsay put a hand on Hope's arm before she could respond. “If networking is conspiracy, then they’re right. Montrose paid more attention to Hope because I vouched for her. That’s all there is to it.”

Hope nodded, both to agree and to reassure Lindsay. “I knew Montrose would pay more attention, like she said, and I wanted to be on the team closest to my friends at Hogwarts. I had all that in mind when I put Karen in, too. I didn’t expect to play a match in front of scouts at all, just that they’d give me a chance to try out.”

Ginny nodded and flipped through her notes. “Tell me if I have this right: you weren’t even thinking about how the other teams rated you?”

“Right. I preferred Montrose, first, for its location and, second, for its success. Any other team in the league would be my second choice.”

Ginny raised an eyebrow. “Any other team?”

Hope felt Lindsay tap her foot and smirked. “No comment.”

The reporter smirked back. “None needed. Still, you weren’t concerned that only Montrose saw you play, and then not even in a match?”

“No, I really wasn’t.”

Ginny fixed her a shrewd eye. “You felt you could be charitable with the scouts’ attention?”

Hope eyed her back and took her time replying. “I’m confident in my game.”

Ginny threw back her head and laughed. “God’s holy trousers, you are! Ah, I think I'm gonna like you, and not solely because your arrogance is my job security.” She flipped to a fresh page in her notebook. “Another unexpected aspect of this story is your background. You’re from the United States, which isn't known for having a strong Quidditch culture, and you didn’t even play goalkeeper in Muggle football. Did those hinder your growth…no, clearly not.” she smiled apologetically. “Did you find that your football experience and skills translate to Quidditch?”

“Some of them. The competitive mindset is the same. I was already good on a broom, too, which helped a lot.”

“Did any particular football techniques help you become a better Quidditch player?”

“Already knowing how to punt was a nice-to-have for a keeper,” Hope answered mildly.
“But no soccer-inspired surprises in store for the League?”

Hope shrugged. “I haven’t discovered any.”

Ginny eyed her for a half-second more before letting it go. “The other big matter for curiosity is what inspired you to apply for Hogwarts. Would you tell our readers about that?”

“Mm, should’ve come prepared for that one.” Hope leaned back and folded her arms. “I guess the short answer is I wanted something completely different from my life in Washington. That starts to get personal…would it be enough to say that I needed a change and, teenager that I was, applied for the furthest school from home I’d heard of?”

After a moment’s mental editing, Ginny returned a suggestion. “You were young and itching to get out from under your parents’ roof, especially since you – I presume – didn’t go to a boarding school.”

Hope nodded. “I went to the local Muggle public schools. My magic education was patchy and informal until I came here.”

“So, you wanted a proper magical education and a change from the world of your youth. Were you Muggle-born?”

“Muggle on my mother’s side. My father’s magic, but he was…in and out of my life.”

“You said you’d heard of Hogwarts? Enough that it appealed more than the North American institution?”

“Mmm, I hadn’t heard much about either — well, except for about Slytherin. It took me a little while to make peace with my Sorting, ‘cause I was one of those Hat-barely-touched-you sorts.”

As she listened, Ginny’s expression sharpened into keen interest. “That is a story I’d like to hear, even if you won’t let me print it.”

“No, I think you should, actually. My friends and I have to put up with the stigma that we’re, what, power-hungry devil worshippers? I’d love to get my perspective in front of everyone who reads your column.”

Lindsay leaned forward. “Hold up a moment. I’m not from here, but isn’t that a touchy subject, Ginny? Do we really want to make an association in Quidditch fans’ minds between Montrose, Hope, and Slytherin?”

To their surprise, Ginny glanced down and sucked in her cheek. “Maybe that isn’t a good line for a first profile, no. Sorry, Hope,” she continued, looking back up, “but that story needs to wait.”

“You got me all excited.” Hope smiled. “Do you still want to hear it, off the record?”

“By all means.” The reporter flipped her notepad closed. “Coming into the Sorting, what had you heard about Slytherin?”

“That it was where all the evil people went. Hell, I even overheard one person back in Washington say they were cannibals – a garbled version of the Death Eaters, I guess. Then, on the train, you hear the gossip and speculation. They made it sound like all Slytherins were callous, heartless narcissists with no friends. I very nearly became that, after all the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs started treating me like I was one.”

“Do you think the other Houses foster the problems in Slytherin?” Ginny’s tone made it clear that it
was not a neutral question.

“I’m not prepared to say ‘foster’, but they don’t help, either. Ostracizing Slytherin means that we don’t have the…moderating influence of students from other Houses.”

“Do you think Slytherin can’t be a healthy place on its own?

Hope held out her hands. “I really don’t think Hogwarts would work at all if the Houses weren’t paired for classes. Gryffindor students learn things from Hufflepuffs that they might not get from their roommates, and vice versa, right? If you cut Slytherins off from that exchange – well, we’re fucked.”

“And Ravenclaw? I recall they got on better with Slytherin than the others.”

“Oh, absolutely. My first close friend at Hogwarts was a Ravenclaw. We’ve talked about this, actually, and we think it’s because Slytherin and Ravenclaw put more emphasis on the individual, whereas Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tend to frame things in terms of some ‘greater good’.” She held up a hand. “Before you react, remember that I play a team sport.”

“Okay, and I see your point about the other Houses being good for Slytherin, but it still sounds…” Ginny seemed stuck searching for a tactful way to say something.

“Like Slytherins need remedial character-building?” Lindsay suggested.

Hope chuckled. “Ginny, have you ever talked to a Ravenclaw about making sacrifices for the greater good? They always have an argument that the individual shouldn’t need to make sacrifices if they or others had been wiser in the past, right? They think Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs are crazy for making heroes of people who hurt themselves while doing things the hard way. And I know,” she continued, seeing Ginny’s face flush, “what your husband did in the battle, and he is truly a hero. At the same time, Isn't it terrible that things ever got that far? How many people are dead because nobody went after Voldemort while he was weak? Ravenclaws and Slytherins tend to look at that and see the long failure more than the ultimate victory.”

Ginny’s nostrils flared. “It’s easy to say that now. Where were you-” she bit it off and shut her eyes.

“When a Slytherin alum killed your brother,” Hope said, speaking gently to deescalate the debate, “I was in middle school in Richland, wondering if it were my fault that my father was in jail and my brother beat me. Ginny, there’s another valuable difference between our Houses here. I offended your sense of honor by questioning what happened. For me, though, ambition demands twenty-twenty hindsight. Why should there be shame in that, if those who don’t learn from history…”

“Oh, and one other piece of life advice,” Ginny said, as they stood to leave. “Don’t ever read or listen to anything by Rita Skeeter,” a name which she pronounced with palpable distaste. “Sooner or later, she will flame you. When she does, don’t listen, don’t acknowledge it, don’t respond, and let your team or your agent handle everything.”

“The worse the slander,” Lindsay added, “the bigger the settlement, if you stay quiet and leave it to our legal department.”

“Thank you.” Hope cocked her head. “If you’re giving me advice, does that mean you’re not mad?”

“Mad?” Ginny shook her head. “No, I’ve simply never been inside a Slytherin’s head before.” For a split second, the woman seemed very far away, but she came back. “Obviously…we hold some conflicting views, but you’re a thoughtful one, Hope, so I can respect yours. You’re a decent human
being, I’d say, which is nice to know, because the Slytherins I remember from school were…not.”

“That does seem to be one of our House’s perennial failings: a memorable, distasteful minority”

“It means a great deal to hear a Slytherin admit that. Thank you.” Ginny shook their hands again. “When the time is right, maybe we’ll run a feature on you.”

When Ginny and the people of Hogsmeade were well out of earshot, Lindsay asked Hope a question. “I can’t help wondering something. Are your younger schoolmates really the first people to think up these new ideas? I can’t quite believe that nobody in all the history of Quidditch tried grip-shielding gloves or one-touch kicking before now.”

Hope nodded. “It does feel weird, but Lauren and Tobin came up with an explanation. Basically, it’s because we practiced motor skills with our feet and legs from an early age. Without that foundation, it wouldn’t occur to a chaser to try kicking a ball while flying. If you’re already good with your hands and nobody else is doing it…” Hope ended with a shrug.

“That actually makes a lot of sense; by the time players get a few years of professional experience, the best years for learning that are over. But the gloves, though?”

“I bet that’s just a culture thing. If everybody in Europe is taught not to try tipping the quaffle,” Hope shrugged again. “Hey, I even grew up watching goalkeepers save my shots and I still didn’t think of it. Ashlyn did on day one.”

“How much do you think it will shake things up, once all the girls go pro?”

Hope tried to imagine. “It’ll have an impact, but if we’re all scattered around the league…I think it won’t get much attention until we start competing as one team.”

“Because then all the players will have those skills.”

“Right. Right now, it doesn’t matter how good Krieger is with her feet, because the other two chasers wouldn’t know what to do with her. Tobin and Lauren, on the other hand, are deadly together. If we can get a whole team playing like that, people will sit up and notice.”

“And pay to watch,” Lindsay pointed out.

“That especially.”

Jess greeted Kelley with a bundled object and a sly grin. “I have a gift for you.” She handed the bundle to Kelley, who unrolled it on a desk. Inside were three pairs of tall cotton socks, black with green accents. “Allow me to demonstrate.” Jess balled up five of the socks and stuffed them inside the sixth. Then, she pulled a rubber mallet from her satchel and swung it down at the filled-out sock. The mallet bounced back up.

“Whoa! That’s cool!” Kelley poked the sock and it dimpled inward, exactly the way cotton should. “Let me try the hammer,” she said.

Behind her, Hope chuckled. “Famous last words. Why do you even have a hammer, Jess?”

“For the Railway. Universal maintenance tool. Grip it tight,” Jess advised Kelley, “and be reasonable with the force.”

Kelley gave it a solid whack and got the same result. “I’m really, really impressed, Jess. Thank you!”
“You are very welcome! Never try that with a regular hammer. Only use a mallet with a large face; I made them quaffle-proof but not bullet-proof.”

“What about bludgers?”

“You may get hurt: dislocated knee, fractured tibia, perhaps an ACL—”

Kelley winced at that. “Don’t get hit, got it.”

Hope caught her eye. “How about we go try out our new gear?”

Outside, they conjured up a soccer goal to disguise their purpose. Kelley stamped down the snow where the penalty spot would be, set the quaffle, and tested her run-up. When she looked to see if Hope was ready, she found the goalkeeper crouched, like a leopard about to pounce, and wearing her deadliest face. It took Kelley’s frost-chilled breath away.

“Right at me.”

Kelley obliged. As her foot pushed the quaffle, the new sock turned solid. It felt like wearing a tight and grippy plaster cast from shin to toes. As she followed through, it relaxed and became sock-like once more.

On the other end of her shot, Hope caught the ball with no drama. “Yep, I can still catch. Try and put the next one just below the crossbar.” She tossed the quaffle back. Kelley reset and kicked; the ball flew high and to Hope’s left, struck the crossbar and landed behind the net. Her next shot was just under the crossbar. “So far so good,” she reported after retrieving the quaffle. “I got my whole palm and fingers on that one and it didn’t hesitate to bounce off. How are the socks?”

“They’re….interesting.” Kelley looked down and wiggled her toes, only to feel silly because she couldn’t see them through her shoes. “When your foot connects, it feels like it’s being shrink-wrapped in something solid. The most important part might be making sure I don’t react to it.”

“Cool. Try a low corner this time.” Hope readied herself, tense and powerful as before.

Kelley looked at the left post, set the ball, tried her steps, backed up again, glanced at the left post again. She ran in, right foot drawing back, toes pointed, ankle set for a laser-like low shot. Mid-swing, she relaxed her foot and turned her hips wide open, striking the quaffle with the inside of her boot. The ball sailed into the right side netting as Hope dove left.

Hope gave Kelley a dirty look as she pushed herself off the frosty earth. “Oh, so that's how it is?”

“Couldn’t resist, babe.”

Ali, Kelley, Lauren, and Tobin stood around a scrawny, wooden, scarecrow-like dummy, in the center of the farthest practice pitch from the castle. The two first-years got right to the central issue: “This is the thing you told us about?” “What even is it?”

“It’s a jousting dummy, believe it or not,” Lauren answered.

Ali’s eyes grew wide. “Jousting? Like, knights?”

“Yeah. We found it half-buried in a cellar. It’s perfect for practicing steals.”

Kelley shook her head. “Just when you think you're used to living in a castle.” She took a second
look at the dummy, which seemed little more than a wooden column with a horizontal pole, at shoulder height, mounted on a pivot. A basket on top suggested a head. One end of the solid arms held a wooden ball on the top of a short stick. “So, what do you do with it?”

“You try steal the quaffle from it without touching the dummy or getting hit by the mace.” Tobin kicked a quaffle up from the ground, caught it, and started bending the free end of the dummy’s arm. “We made some improvements; it has joints, now, like an action figure, so it can hold the ball different ways.” She got the quaffle secure under the dummy’s bent arm.

“So, you come in and try to snag the ball, but if you don’t get it away cleanly, this happens:” Lauren smacked the dummy’s arm and it spun on the center pole. She ducked out of the way as the opposite arm swung towards her. “It teaches you to be fast and accurate.”

Kelley and Ali nodded slowly. “Um, is that a real mace?”

“No, it’s all pine. Not that it doesn’t hurt.”

“So,” Kelley said, “I come charging at this thing, grab the ball without knocking my arm, and fly past without getting smacked in the back by the mace thing?”

“Simple, right? We put it up in the air so we can practice spotting how he's holding the ball and getting away with it safely, from all different angles.”

“That was my next question,” Ali said dryly.

Kelley grinned. “Is this another original idea of ours?”

“We thought so,” Lauren said, “but, actually, all the pro teams use something like it.”

“We actually planned on buying one to replace this for you guys,” Tobin added, “but…”

Kelley pursed her lips at them all, while Ali nodded. “Yeah, next year.”

Hope took slow steps as their team left the practice field, which, Kelley knew, meant she wanted to talk. Kelley matched stride, let their teammates draw ahead, and waited.

“Would it work for you to come back from spring break early, so we can have some time to ourselves here?”

“You’re not going home?” Kelley asked without thinking. “No, you told me; you’re spending the week in Montrose’s preseason camp.” She bit her lip. “That Sunday is Easter, right? I already missed Thanksgiving with my family. I just can't, Hope.” She caught Hope's disappointment before the woman could hide it. “What about the first weekend?”

Hope stuttered in her stride. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

But Kelley knew why. “Because I can’t apparate. I have to take the train to London.”

“What about this: the morning you want to leave, you come with me when I apparate to Montrose, and then you take the floo to Glasgow. I know you can get transport to New York and D.C. from there. I don’t know where else, though.”

“Atlanta, hopefully, but D.C. would be fine. My dad works for Delta, so we get like a million frequent flier miles.” She smiled up at Hope. “What are you thinking about doing together?”
“Going out on an actual date! Anything but The Three Broomsticks again.” Kelley burst into laughter. “I want to talk a lot, too,” Hope went on. “Get some real peace and quiet and just talk.”

“I’d like that.” As the moment passed, Kelley’s smile softened into something Hope couldn’t read. “Anything else?”

There was, but Hope wanted to talk about it then, not now. “We’ll see, Kell.” A few paces later, she asked, “Are you having a yard sale, too?”

Kelley did a double take. “Uh, what?”

“I overheard a bunch of the others talking about selling old possessions while they’re home.”

“Oh. Um…actually, that doesn’t sound like a bad idea.”

“Yeah, maybe you’ll all get a little spending money in your pockets for when we go to Hogsmeade.”

“Yeah.” Somehow, Kelley didn’t sound like she meant it.

Lauren and Hope stood on opposite ends of a ghostly projection of a Quidditch pitch. Green and purple arrows, each labeled with ‘C’, ‘B’, ‘K’ or ‘S’, floated above it. “Ravenclaw ought to use their same starting lineup,” Hope said. Under each purple letter, three or four pips indicated that player’s experience.

“You sure?”

“I have a good idea of how they think. Fara's leaving tonight for a family emergency and our seeker is sick, so A-Rod and Kelley will start.” One green field player showed two pips and the rest, three or four. The green seeker had only one. “What was your impression of their brooms when you played them?”

“Painstakingly tuned,” Lauren said, “but nothing surprising.”

“That’s how it looked to me. We should be in good shape, especially once Amy replaces her cracked flux ring.”

“Actually, she’s going to fly mine.” Something about Lauren's tone implied she didn’t want to explain why.

It’s not money, is it? Amy's never had trouble making ends meet before. Hope didn’t pry. “Okay, but that’ll hurt – no, that’s right, you fly a chaser broom. Kelley, though, will be at a disadvantage on hers. Can you and Tobin squeeze any more performance out of it?”

Lauren shook her head. “What we did in November already cut its lifespan from twenty years to just four. If we push it further, it’ll burn out by next winter.”

“Mia probably wouldn’t appreciate that. Well, then. My biggest concerns are that and Amy’s inexperience. She's there technically, but the connection with our other chasers isn’t as good. Wherever I put her is gonna be a weak point.”

“Not the center, then.”

“I’m thinking we’ll drop her in for Fara on the right wing.”

“Unless,” Lauren thought aloud, “you want to push her higher than the others. Then, she'd have a
“A two-two-one?” Hope chastised herself for not thinking of that. “She might do well as a soccer-style striker.”

“Would that be new to your team?”

“Yeah. Is that realistic, to adopt a new formation one week out? It sounds too risky.”

“You'd be putting all your eggs in one basket,” Lauren agreed. “It'd take all week to learn, so if it doesn't work out, you're stuck.”

“On the other hand,” Hope said slowly, “Amy was a forward in soccer, and Ravenclaw definitely won’t see this coming.” She rearranged her simulated team with Amy pressing high, the other chasers out wide at midfield, and her beaters in a familiar fullback pairing.

“Heaven help you if they get the ball at center-mid,” Lauren warned. “It's wide open.” Indeed, there was an alarming volume of empty space inside Hope's formation. Lauren moved the purple player markers so that one chaser sat in the gap and the other two threatened to slip outside Hope's beaters. “And if they draw your defense apart with the wingers, that center chaser has a clear path up the middle.”

“But what if my midfielders are free to cut in and out? They could swoop in to defend, intercept passes, follow-up on rebounds from Amy's shots…” Hope traced paths with her wand, and then the two green arrows on the wings flew inward and then curved forward, switching sides in the process. “They might circulate ahead and behind of Amy, too.”

“That, at least, puts the biggest burden on your most experienced players. Amy wouldn’t be the weak link – no weaker than the others, anyway. It's gonna demand a lot of awareness from all three, and that’s always the slowest part to learn.”

“Let’s game this out. Come at me like you’re Ravenclaw and expecting Slytherin's usual two-one-two tactics. After we beat that to death, play like you know my strategy.” Hope waved the seekers away and added a little glowing quaffle. Lauren readied her wand. The miniature match began.

Clipboard in hand and quaffle under her arm, Hope was all business. “Fara's going home for the week and Taylor is knocked flat with mono. Kelley, you're starting as seeker. A-Rod, you're in for Fara. I have a new strategy for us to learn, which will rebalance our strengths and eliminate the seam between A-Rod and our center.” She looked pointedly at each of her players. “We have six days to practice. It's time to step up.”

Alex seemed to know even before Kelley told her the news. “Your game face is on,” she explained. “Let's go.” That week, Kelley spent as much time in the air as on the ground. Amy, too, spent every spare moment with her fellow New Kids. She ran every drill and play she knew, then ran them again. After dinner, they did it all over. When the sun set, they practiced by spell-light until curfew.

“You've come a long way since November,” Alex told Kelley after their final chase on Friday evening. She sounded winded.

“Yeah, but you leave fewer openings,” Kelley replied. She paused for breath. “I'm almost caught up to you in fitness, though.”

“More, in some ways. You have actual abs now.”
“Hope’s a fan,” Kelley said with a grin, then cocked her head at her friend. “It’s not like you don’t have ab muscles, Alex.”

Alex’s smile faded. “I guess…I mean, I’m just so skinny and not even in an impressive way.”

“Hey.” Alex looked up at Kelley again. “What matters about your body is that it’s yours. You can like particular things about it, but the only reason for you or anyone else to love your body is because it’s yours.”

Alex blinked as though she had something in her eye. “What did I do to deserve such awesome friends?”

“Aww, c’mere.” Kelley gathered Alex by her shoulders and kissed her hair. “Being Alex Morgan was all you ever needed to do.”

February 26, 2008

“Don’t foul,” Hope warned Kelley. “After that first game, people will be watching for misconduct. Whatever happens today will follow you ‘til you graduate.”

Kelley shook her head. “I won’t do anything my opponent wouldn’t do. Whatever she gives, she’ll get right back.”

Hope shook her head back. “No, not today, Kell. Ravenclaw knows this crowd won’t judge a Slytherin seeker fairly, so don’t let her provoke you.”

“Is this you looking out for me?” Kelley smiled with one side of her mouth. “I’m not new here anymore, Hope. I can handle what comes, on and off the field.”

Hope’s smile bore traces of embarrassment. “You’re right, Kell. Just…make Alex proud, okay?”

“Oh, of course!” Her brow creased as her brain changed gears. “I gotta ask: how did you shut out Ravenclaw last year, when they had Jess?”

Hope smirked. “Easy. She was in camp with Sweden’s World Cup team.”

Alex did what any sports fan might; she wore her favorite player’s jersey. Getting one without Kelley’s knowledge was tricky, especially since there only was one, but Hope’s transfiguration skills had come through. She kept her cloak drawn over it on her way into the stands, though; she wanted to find a good seat before she lost all her Gryffindor friends. Only when the House’s section filled did she reveal the black and green tunic with O’HARA and 6 in silver on the back. The gasps began.

Ali grinned, though with a hint of nerves. “Rock it, girl! I wish we had Amy and Hope's.”

“It’s a good thing everybody likes us,” Ashlyn said dryly.

Across the field, Amy was first to spot her. “No. Way. No, she did not!”

Kelley smelled mischief. “Ooh, who didn’t do what?” Amy pointed. Kelley’s jaw dropped. Alex waved and turned around to show the back. “Alex! Where did she get my jersey?! This is the only one!” Kelley twisted to look over her shoulder and made sure she wore the right tunic.

“Not anymore, apparently,” Hope said. She tried not to grin – this was Alex’s moment, not hers – but she couldn’t contain enough of her signature smirk for Kelley to miss it.
“Hope, you are the best ever!” She kissed Hope right there, then turned and tossed a kiss to Alex.

“Make her look good,” Hope murmured.

Kelley slowly twisted to look back at Hope. “So that’s what that talk was about, you sly devil.”

“Now we find out what Slytherin’s new strategy is,” Tobin said to nobody in particular, but mostly to Lauren.

“Wait,” Lauren turned to face her friend. “How do you know but not know what it is?”

“I asked A-Rod if they were changing anything to fit her into their strategy and she said, ‘not really’.”

Lauren snorted. “Classic A-Rod; never betrays a secret but can’t lie to save her life. I guess Hope didn’t tell them that we developed their new game plan together. Instead of having two wingers and a central playmaker, Amy’s basically a target- look!” She gasped, then pointed at a green-black figure amid Gryffindor’s red crowd. “Look!”

“That’s our Alex,” Tobin said with warmth.

“They’re gonna hate that,” Lauren said. “Ironic, because she’s just proved she's got Godric’s own nerve.”

“Totally. How many of them will think of that?”

Lauren shrugged. “I don’t know, but ohmigosh, look at Kelley! She's adorable!”

“Can you imagine if she catches the snitch?”

“I’m not sure I can handle that much cuteness.”

Tobin leaned back against the next row of the bleachers. “So, Amy's their target forward?”

“Yep.”

Tobin considered it. “Since you helped with the strategy, you must've found a way to keep it unpredictable. One target and two players feeding her against five on defense sounds…Sisyphean.

“Is that, like, Greek for…”

“Doomed to fail over and over for eternity.”

“Yeah. No, not if you can keep them guessing. Amy and the two wingers will swirl between positions and make it hard to see the underlying strategy.”

“And Hope trained them in this in one week?”

“That, I don’t know. I guess we’ll see.”

“We play strong, we play smart, and we blunt those ‘Claws! Who are we?!”

“Slytherin!”

“Who are we?!”
“SLYTHERIN!”

“‘Win’ on three! ‘Win’ on three! One, two, three!”

“WIN!”

Kelley trotted alongside Hope as they took the field. “Told you they’d like it.”

“I’m glad I’ve got you writing for me,” Hope replied, grinning. “You’re so much better at ‘undignified’.”

“Oh, babe, there is plenty more where that came from.”

“Keep it coming, Kell.” She winked and headed for her goals.

Hope looked across the backs of her teammates at the fronts of Ravenclaw, for her third and last time. You never could tell quite where the real threat was with them. If you tried to man-mark, they’d make you overextend and tear you apart. If you tried to bunker down, they’d find a seam and it would be all over in a flash. On defense, they had an uncanny way of being in precisely the right place to intercept your throw or draw a foul.

Either that or they'd randomly turn the quaffle over, leave you open, or clumsily foul you as if they’d never imagined a defender could be in that particular piece of sky. Ravenclaw games were always exciting. They were nursing a bruised ego from finishing in fourth place last year and their trampling at the hands of Hufflepuff in the fall. They should overreach today and fall apart, then come back calmer and wiser against Gryffindor in May. Then again, saying a Ravenclaw ‘should’ do something was just asking to be outsmarted. Hope allowed herself one look to check on her seeker. They really needed the snitch today – as always.

Ashlyn wore the expression of one expecting bad news. “Alex, how much of an underdog is Kelley here?”

Alex pressed her lips into a thin line. “I know I won my first game, but I'd been training with a snitch every day and working with Tarp most Sundays. Kelley, before this week, spent most of her time practicing as a chaser. I mean, she's good for how new she is, but against someone with years of experience, she's a huge underdog.”

“How do you think she'll handle it?” Ali asked.

“Kelley? She'll do her best. That’s what she told me; ‘no regrets’.”

“Tactically, I mean.”

“Oh. Um…she’ll be about on par in speed and agility, so her best strategy would be to stick tight to the other seeker and wait for them to spot the snitch. Problem is – actually, two problems: she won’t be able to stop the bleeding if her team falls behind in goals, and the Ravenclaw seeker will see what she's doing and come up with some clever way to exploit that weakness.”

“Like a Wronski feint?” Ali said.

“Yeah. We worked a lot on staying aware and how to see ahead of the other seeker when you’re following. She won’t fool easily.”

“But you still say she's a huge underdog,” Ashlyn observed.
Alex frowned. “When I was talking to Hope yesterday, getting the jersey and all, she said Jess has a rule: performance equals strategy times skill times experience, plus luck squared. Whoever has the most, wins.”

“I’m impressed that you remembered that,” Ali said. “You say Kelley’s about even in skill?”

“Hope made me promise not to tell Kelley, so, obviously, I couldn’t help remembering.” Alex said and shrugged. “Skill, I can’t be sure, but she’s at least in the neighborhood.”


“Pressure?” Ashlyn suggested.

“Yeah, Hope figures she's under enough as-is. She doesn’t want to give her negative thoughts.”

“Ah.” Ali smiled. “That’s kind of sweet, actually.”

Kelley wanted to find out just how good the Ravenclaw seeker was before they dueled for real. A few more than fifteen minutes in, she pretended to spot the snitch and dove for the Hufflepuff section, hoping the yellow clutter would make her opponent doubt her eyes. When she glanced backwards, her heart leapt into her throat. Instead of following her, the Ravenclaw seeker dove in another direction. *If she’s calling my bluff and I break off, she'll have my number, mentally. If I don’t break off and it’s not a bluff, we lose!* Kelley clamped down against her panic. *Ravenclaw needs to make up their seven goal loss to Huff-puff! She wouldn’t end it now.*

Kelley made a show of wrenching her broom around to pursue her opponent, but only turned at two-thirds of her best performance. *Maybe she’ll underestimate me.* When she judged she was not quite close enough to be sure the Ravenclaw was bluffing, she turned back towards the stadium. *And let's make her overestimate my eyes.* Kelley thanked her brother for making her play poker.

“Oh man,” Alex said to her companions, “this just became a massive mind game.”

“Were they both faking it?” Ali asked.

“Mm-hmm.”

Ashlyn frowned. “But Kelley went after the Ravenclaw seeker?”

Alex shook her head. “She just pretended to.”


“Ravenclaw’s got them pretty much figured out,” Tobin observed.

Lauren nodded. “A week might’ve been enough time against Gryffindor or us, but against a whole team of puzzle solvers and pattern finders…”

“Not so much,” Tobin finished.

“Even when the chasers are in different positions, they're starting their attacks from the same areas. Ravenclaw’s figured out exactly where to cover.” Lauren cocked her head. “Do you see potential, though?”

“Hmm…what if you just dumped the winger idea and played two strikers and a central midfielder?
Let the beaters stay wide to close down the flanks. It’d be real two-one-two instead of a two-three with a bend in the middle.”

Lauren shook her head. “That midfielder would be the world's busiest! She'd be a number ten, a holding mid, and a center-back.”

Tobin grinned at her teammate. “And a beater, too.”

Lauren rolled her eyes. “I’m not Superwoman, you know.”

“But you wouldn’t have twenty-one other players to track, just eleven. With five passing options, instead of ten, it might be manageable.”

“Or the other side might just quintuple-team me.”

“Mmmm…” Tobin thought about that. “There’s got to be some old account in the library of teams trying something like this. I still can’t really believe nobody's tried this stuff before.”

“ Seriously! But no, it's all ‘hawkshead attacking formation’ and Harlem Globetrotters plays.”

Tobin groaned. “Oh, the ‘Hawk's head’! Because ‘delta’ is too easy to say and ‘arrowhead’ is too obvious.”

“In all seriousness, I think the single biggest thing is that most Quidditch players learn it as a ‘carrying’ game, but we come from more of a ‘passing’ game.”

“So, we’re trying to make soccer out of rugby, basically?”

“If we are, then thank goodness the quaffle is a sphere.”

This one's for you, Alex, Kelley thought. She'd spotted the snitch above the groundskeeper’s hut. It was more luck than skill that she found it first, but she’d take luck. The noise of the crowd, which seemed so loud when she took the field, vanished behind as she raced away.

After another goal from Amy, Joanne Love had a quick word with Hope. “This isn't working,” the Scot said.

Hope frowned. “You say that like we aren't winning by three.”

“Yes, but we're losing our lead. Trying to get clear passes and dealing with all these breakaways is wearing us down. We're working three times as hard as they are.”

“Spread more vertically. It'll open up more windows-”

Joanne interrupted her “We tried. Amy just doesn't know her role well enough to think in three dimensions. Maybe with two more months, but we need to change before we fall behind.”

“Damn. Go to the old two-three, with her on the right, in Fara's spot. Let’s at least keep our lead until Kelley gets the snitch.” Hope spared a glance up at the sky, but didn’t see either seeker.

A bludger smashed into the snitch from nearly head-on and hurtled past her shoulder. The momentum exchange from the massive cannonball to the little orb was immense; in the time it took Kelley to turn her head, the snitch had flown one hundred yards behind her. Snarling, Kelley
whipped herself around to chase it. The Ravenclaw seeker was in front of her, now, and pulling away. *What?! How – because you lost your cool and pulled a lot of drag just now, dumbass.* Kelley lay flat forward across the broom handle like a skeleton racer, arms back and chin over the edge, which would never work for catching but might help her close the gap.

Alex watched with one hand covering her mouth. “Oh my god, what are you doing?”

“What?! How – because you lost your cool and pulled a lot of drag just now, dumbass.” Kelley lay flat forward across the broom handle like a skeleton racer, arms back and chin over the edge, which would never work for catching but might help her close the gap.

“Have you ever done that before?” Ashlyn asked her.

“I’ve never felt desperate enough to think of it.”

Between her legs, the broom felt warm. Kelley remembered something in the owner's manual about that being bad, but she was gaining on the other seeker. Beyond, the snitch curved back towards the stadium. It looked wobbly. *The bludger must’ve damaged one of the wings. Wow, if it can’t dodge and weave, this is in the bag!* She was fast, the snitch was unsteady, but if she kept her eye on it… kept her eye on it, sat back and readied to snag it as she passed…kept her eyes on it, without clipping the other seeker, and coiled the muscles from her shoulder to her fingertips…kept her eyes on it and-

She caught something, but it was too soft and too soon. She looked down just in time to guide the Ravenclaw seeker's hand onto the snitch, and then it was over.

“Oh, no.” Alex covered her mouth again.

“That girl flung herself off her broom to get her hand in before Kelley's!” Everyone stared up the Ravenclaw seeker, who hung from her broom by one hand. She dropped the snitch from the other and struggled back on.

Ali heaved an enormous sigh. “I so wanted Kelley to win,” she said, “but I have to admit that was impressive.”

Alex shrugged. “I mean, sure, it was clever.”

Ashlyn did a double-take. “She leaps out like a spider monkey and the word that comes to mind is ‘clever?’”

“Yeah.” Alex stuffed her hands in her pockets. “Did you notice, when she lunged out, she was watching Kelley, not the snitch?”

“Dude, you’re right,” Ashlyn realized.

“She knew she was beat and used Kelley to basically catch it for her. She didn't get to the snitch before Kelley so much as she got to Kelley before the snitch. There's no way you could make that catch from where she was. Like, you'd almost definitely miss.”

Ali frowned as the victorious seeker returned to her ecstatic teammates. “I can’t fault her for doing anything wrong, but…”

“What a shitty way to win.” Hope felt the sore loser inside boiling over. “Didn’t even try to catch it, the coward.”

Amy grabbed her arm. “First, nobody who lays out like that while two hundred feet up is a coward. Second, she had nothing to do with us giving up a six-goal lead. Hope, *get a fucking grip* before Kelley gets back.” She let go and sighed. “You know, the only time I use the F-word is when I’m talking to you.”
“I’ll do better for her.” She pretended not to hear Amy's quiet, ‘Why not for you?’

Kelley landed and walked to her teammates, but all she could do was stare, dazed, at team Ravenclaw. That was supposed to be them, wasn't it? All that effort, all that time she spent training with Alex, time she could've spent working to earn-

“You look like you've never lost before, Kell.”

Kelley turned, then turned away again. She didn’t want to cry here and knew she would if she looked into Hope's eyes. Hope seemed to understand; she put an arm around Kelley's shoulders with an attitude of simple friendship, rather than sympathy. “My dad used to say, ‘Some days you get the bear’,”

“’And some days the bear gets you,’” Kelley finished, “which is B.S., but it's nice B.S. No, of course I’ve lost before, but this might be the most humiliated I’ve felt.”

“Because she got her hand inside yours? That's basically an admission that you had her beat.”

Kelley mustered a semblance of a smirk. “Yeah. Augh, but I totally forgot about the field game, too! I shouldn’t have gone for it when we were behind.”

“I heard the snitch was damaged?” Hope asked. Kelley nodded. “Then you had to go for the catch or else she would've had it easy. Kell, I'm pretty damn frustrated, too, but nobody can say we didn’t give it our best.”

Kelley scoffed. “Um, I can. I keep thinking of all these things I didn’t do right. I should’ve won it for us when we were still ahead.”

Hope nodded and squeezed Kelley’s shoulder. “I didn’t say you played your best, I said you gave your best. Today, that wasn’t enough to get the result, but you’re still new to this. Each match, your best is going to get better, until your best effort brings world-class play, consistently.”

When Slytherin's post-defeat huddle dispersed, Alex stood waiting, still in her O'Hara jersey. The image of her hugging Kelley ran under the student newspaper’s match report. Hope cut it out and mailed it to Ginny at The Daily Prophet.

March 8, 2008

Ali sat on the bench, which was a huge step forward. Not only was she within striking range of starting in the next match, she was also sitting next to Ashlyn. The team jersey was pretty sweet, too. A big improvement, all around.

Her girlfriend’s voice broke in on her musings. “Hufflepuff's seeker couldn’t look more nonchalant if he were in jeans and tie-dye.”

“More mind games? He’s probably terrified.” Ali looked back at Alex. “She just looks purposeful, like she does this for a living.”

Alex didn’t make eye contact with any of the Hufflepuff players. She wanted the seeker to think she wasn't concerned in the slightest about him and his teammates. That wasn't true, of course, since Tobin and Lauren were on the field. It would be a battle down there. Her job was to close it out on their terms: if they were ahead, only catch the snitch to prevent her opponent from getting it. If they went down more than two goals, end it if Hufflepuff scored twice in a row. Today, she was as much a defender as an offensive threat.
She caught herself before she made a face. ‘Game Manager-in-Chief’ wasn’t her cup of tea.

Still, she was in good spirits. How could she not be, when Kelley wore her jersey? Alex glanced again at the red dot in the sea of green. Hope looked both proud and protective, with one arm holding her close. The stuff we get away with because of her...

A dead heat. Damn. Alex glanced at Hufflepuff's seeker. They both knew exactly where the snitch was – amid the scaffolding beneath Slytherin's section of the stadium – but as long as their teams clung within a goal of each other, neither wanted to end the match. If we keep trading goals, how long do I let this run?

In the seventy-second minute, fatigue betrayed Gryffindor's captain; her attempted pass flew much too close to Tobin. The break began. We're already down one. This'll be two and we look tired. Now seems like the time to close it out. Alex lunged forward and landed toward the snitch. It looked bored.

Alex knew better. She held enough performance in reserve so that, when the snitch flitted into the scaffolding, she corkscrewed up and over the back of the stadium without slowing down. She didn’t see gold, but she saw red – Kelley pointed a finger and yelled. Alex couldn’t hear over the crowd, but it looked like two syllables and the word “you”. She shot a glance over her shoulder. Hufflepuff's seeker was ten yards behind her. The snitch was ten yards behind him. Alex hauled down with her heels and held tight to the end of her broom. The resulting sixty-mile-per-hour backflip offered a brief, but priceless, view of her opponent’s surprised face. Rather than let go of her broom, she aimed with her knees at the snitch and sandwiched it between her thighs.

Kelley jumped and pumped a fist. “Yeah! Hot damn, that was good!”

“Effective,” Amy said, in an admiring tone which belied her understatement.

“I don’t know,” one of Kelley's first-year friends said, “I’d worry about it slipping away.”

Kelley smirked. “You haven't seen that girl's legs. I mean, she doesn’t even fit on jeans, they're so strong.”

“There's a resizing charm, you know.” Hope's eyes sparkled down at Kelley.

“Add it to our spring break bucket list.”

After Alex took the snitch in hand and got her bearings, she saw the score: Hufflepuff 180 – Gryffindor 340 (S).

Ali leapt from the Gryffindor bench. “Yes! That was perfect timing!”

Ashlyn grinned and hugged her. “A win by one is a win! Lady Luck wore pink pre-wrap today.”

That evening was the last before spring break, and it showed; everyone seemed more relaxed than they had in months. Everyone, that is, except a clump of students in the Gryffindor common room. Alex, passing through, wondered what made them so agitated.

“Oh, hey, you! You have to see this!” An older student yanked something out of the middle of the group. Ignoring the protests, he handed a magazine-like thing to Alex.

SLYTHERIN SUBVERTS SELECTION!
THE SHOCKING TRUTH: How the top goalkeeper and the top club RIGGED the draft! It's not just the other teams that were hurt along the way. Inside: what REALLY happened to the two best seekers at Hogwarts!

Alex wanted to stop reading, but somehow the pages turned themselves and shouted their words straight into her ears. She couldn’t look away.

“Rita Skeeter can really tell it, can’t she?” The student said, when it was over.

“Yeah,” someone else said, “tell stories.”

“She's been right before.”

That drew snorts of derision. “According to who? Herself?”

“Hey, if even half of this is true-”

“That's optimistic.”

“Come on, tell me this isn't more believable than Solo appealing a call in her favor.”

The popcorn of voices ceased.

“Why don't we ask someone who actually knows her? Alex?” One of the fourth-year girls turned. “What...”

The look on Alex's face stopped the speaker cold. “There are. No. Words.” She turned on her heel and stormed out, face hot and vision blurry. She wanted to slide-tackle something. Violently.

Chapter End Notes

(No relation to today's news intended)

Your comments are always appreciated :) For player suggestions, feel free to include what position they'd play in Quidditch and what House they'd sort into.
Chapter Notes

Returning readers, note that this chapter elevates the work to "M".

Everything having to do with Hope and the media, I wrote before the 2016 Olympics.
Don't read into it.

While their friends packed for Spring Break, Hope and Kelley wandered to a private spot in the castle. “Kelley.”

“Hmm?”

“I want to talk about sex.”

Kelley swallowed against her suddenly dry throat. “Good idea,” she said.

Hope nodded, her nervousness manifest. “I…I want you, Kell. Like, all of you. With all of me.”


“I just want to make sure I respect your boundaries.”

“I know, and I appreciate it,” Kelley assured her, “but that’s not why you’re so nervous that you started talking like Alex. You don’t trust your own your sense of good, Hope.”

“I just…I want to be conservative with you, because I'm…well, older and bigger.”

Kelley wrinkled her nose. “Maybe that was good when we were getting started, but now I really need you to really be you. If you try and treat me with gloves on, I'll just feel separated from you.”

“I understand, but-“

“You don't trust yourself.” Kelley lit up with a new idea. “I'm assigning you homework! Every day until I go, you’re going to wrestle me to the ground and then make out with me while I'm pinned under you.”

Hope's eyebrows skyrocketed. She struggled to make anything but a stupid grin. “I'm…what?”

“You're gonna get over yourself and get physical with me,” Kelley said, still bright and brash, but anxiousness started seeping through her smile.

“This is one of those moments, isn't it?” Hope said. “Challenge accepted, Kell.”

Kelley reached out and gripped Hope's upper arm. “Please, remember that your best self is still yourself, not someone else.”

Hope shivered. “I needed to hear you say that.”
"I trust you, even sometimes when you don't trust yourself.” Kelley held her girlfriend’s eyes until it became uncomfortable, and then said it again. And again. Then she leaned in, kissed her, and pressed herself cheek-to-cheek. “So,” she murmured in Hope's ear, “you want to talk about sex?”

“Yeah. I’m for it.”

“Me, too.” Kelley grinned and, at the same time, became hyper-conscious of every point of contact between her body and Hope's. “What do you want our first time to be like?”

“Fun and passionate. I want to enjoy us.”

Kelley felt warm all over. She enjoyed the feeling and it showed, and she enjoyed that, too. “Sounds perfect.” Every one of her senses seemed more alive: the colors of Hope's hair, her scent, the sound of her breathing, the fabric of her own shirt, the press of Hope's breasts in their embrace – all familiar, yet all new again. She wondered if Hope tasted new, too. She did.

“Um,” Hope finally interrupted, “will this be your first?”

“Yeah. Um…you?”

“I've experimented some. Is there anything you definitely do or don't want to do?”

“I want to do down there what I just did in your mouth,” Kelley purred. She felt Hope shudder, and this really was new; a husky, sexual, vulnerable shudder. “Were you thinking tomorrow night?’”

Hope could only nod.

“Second-best thing about Hogwarts between terms,” Hope agreed, in a playful tone which just begged Kelley to pursue.

“Alright, babe, what’s better than the privacy?”

Hope’s eyes suggested everything that’s warm, smoky, and delicious. “The staff don’t enforce curfew.” Kelley felt blood rising to her cheeks, her chest, and a few other choice places. “So, I was thinking, we could apparate to a city and have a day out, then come back and watch the stars from your favorite spot. See, all the charms that hide the castle also keep out light pollution. The night sky here is like nothing you've ever seen.”

“I'll bet it's still not as good as your eyes.” She reached for Hope’s hand before the woman melted out of her seat.

While changing into Muggle clothes for their afternoon and evening, Hope saw her girlfriend’s eyes flick to her blouse, laid out on her bed, and knew what it meant. It meant she was already looking for a way to make Hope chase her down and tackle her, because most of the day was gone and Hope hadn’t done her homework yet. It meant she’d failed. Dammit, why did she fail so much, off the field? Kelley deserved the best. *Then bring it, Solo!* She clawed her uniform undershirt over her head and flung it at Kelley. “*Run.*”
Kelley caught it and gawked for a second, until Hope moved for her, and then took off running. They skidded around their bedroom, grinning giddily, until Kelley, running out of options, yanked open the door and burst into the common room. For a moment, Hope balked, but the room was empty, so she charged on, shirt be damned. The additional furniture made her task more difficult – oh, but she had an answer for that. “Wingardium leviosa!” The couch between them lunged toward Kelley, seats first, and swept her legs out from under her. She flopped against the cushions; Hope vaulted the back and shoved Kelley so she lay sideways. Kelley tried to kick and wriggle away, but Hope straddled her and grabbed at her arms. The girl had strength and spirit in spades, but Hope had a better position and a challenge to meet. She pinned Kelley’s thighs between her own and her wrists over her head. Panting, she locked eyes with her girlfriend: flushed, perspiring, stray hairs amongst her freckles, eyes wide – and all hers. Hope kissed her without another thought.

“Hope.”

“Mmm?”

“Look at me.” Hope realized Kelley hadn’t room to pull back from their kiss and broke it for her. Kelley’s eyes were damp-rimmed and earnest. “Hope, I love you.”

Somehow, after all the fear, the running, and the self-doubt, it was the most natural thing in the world for Hope to say, “I love you, Kelley,” and mean it.

They toured the town of Montrose, saw the old church, walked the beach, stock their toes in the ocean, and laughed as much as they could. They found a cute old restaurant for their first ‘real’ dinner date. Their conversation wound through treasured memories, secret hopes and dreams, meeting each other’s families, and, inevitably, back to Quidditch. “What’s most different about a professional team versus a school or youth team?” Kelley wanted to know.

“Actually, the first thing I noticed is the sense of purpose everyone has. Here, we’re proud and excited to represent our Houses, but it’s still something everyone does on the side. At Montrose, every player and staff has made winning their full-time job. There's an atmosphere of 'this is who we are' about everything.” Hope smiled wide and hard. “I love it.”

Back at Hogwarts, Kelley climbed the last ladder into the highest tower and lost her voice. The whole structure, from the floor up, was gone; she saw nothing but the grand dome of the heavens. And what a grand sight it was! The night sky was filled with points of light, some clustered into a long band and others scattered from horizon to horizon.

She felt a poke at her ankle. “Let me up.”

“Sorry.” Kelley moved so she no longer blocked the ladder. “Hope! This is- this is…”

“Sublime?”

Kelley looked back and grinned. “Yeah, that’s exactly what it is. No wonder they came up with so
many constellations. Wow…I never actually noticed the ‘twinkle’ before…” She looked around again. “What did you do with the roof? And- awww, you brought candles and blankets!”

“I sprayed the inside of the roof with chameleon ink. It’s still there, but you’re seeing what’s behind it.”

“Whoa.” Kelley knelt and shuffled toward the edge of the floor, with one arm held out in front. She felt wood, rubbed at it, and revealed a little of a rafter. She looked at her hand and saw through her thumb. “I admit I didn’t think about that.”

Hope laughed. “I did.” She retrieved a glass and pitcher from among the things she’d staged, poured herself some water, and rinsed the ink away.

“Thanks. So,” she took stock of Hope’s preparations: “water, candles, mattress, sheets, blankets… hand towels, bath towels, our House bathrobes… massage oil….a bowl of apples, and… tampons?”

“Better over-prepared than disappointed.”

Kelley smiled and stepped closer. “That makes two of us who’re a bit apprehensive,” she said gently. “What say we head that way?”

“Sounds good,” Hope replied, and drew her into an embrace. Kelley pressed herself into it and kissed her.

It was their first kiss again: a release of emotion, an unlocking of potential, and a promise of a future. “Have I mentioned that you take me to the best places?” Kelley whispered.

Hope’s breath on her ear made her shiver. “I think we’ll outdo them all tonight.” Her knees went week and Hope held her tight. “If… if anything, just say ’stop’.”

Kelley reasserted control of her legs, took Hope’s hands, put them on her shirt collar, and looked into her eyes. “Go.”

Thankfulness washed the trepidation from Hope’s face. She slid her hands down Kelley’s sides, bra, ribs, waist, and all, to her hips and the hem of her shirt. There, they slipped under. Kelley gasped at the brush of skin against skin – and went for Hope’s shirt. Hope laughed at her enthusiasm and worked her shirt off, slowly, as she caressed up her torso. Kelley let go and put her arms up. “Is there something you want me to do?” Hope asked innocently. In reply, Kelley took Hope’s lower lip between her teeth and pulled back, looking at her through lowered lashes as she let it slip through. Hope took in a warm breath and slipped the shirt the rest of the way up. Kelley flung it aside and returned her hands to Hope’s shirt, bunched up around her bra, and brooked no argument in removing it. Her hands gripped Hope’s bare waist like she was hungry and her mouth kissed like she was thirsty for her. She didn’t let go as Hope stripped their pants away, not until Hope broke the kiss. “Now, relax,” Hope said, and with hands on her back and shoulders, guided Kelley to sit on the mattress.

Kelley smirked. “Oh? You just assume you’ll be on top?”

Hope made a low rumble in her chest, put a hand between Kelley’s breasts, and pressed her down. “I do.” She rumbled again as her lips captured Kelley’s.

“Oh, babe, I like that.”

“The push?”
“No- I mean, yes, that, too, but the growl!”

Hope’s lips curled in fond amusement “Wrestling and growling? You like it primal, don’t you?”

“Fuck, yes.”

“God, I love you.” She held Kelley’s eyes for a moment, then returned to business. Kelley’s hand against her neck stopped her immediately.

“Look at me again.” Hope met her eyes, feeling a little anxious. She didn’t know why Kelley stopped her, but she hoped it would be quick. She wanted – needed – to get started on making love to her. The girl deserved so, so much… “Hope, look at me.” Hope refocused her eyes. “You seem like you’re here to perform for me.”

“Huh?”

“Like I deserve to enjoy this more than you do.” Kelley sat up. “Not true. I won’t let you spend our first time thinking that. You come first.”

“Kelley…”

She shook her head. “Nonnegotiable. Don’t make me go primal on you.” She shifted around so she was straddling Hope's hips, helped her get comfortable on the mattress, and then cradled Hope’s head in her hands. “I know this isn't what you planned, but I want this to be all about you for a little while. Just give me the reins and trust me, okay?”

“Okay,” Hope agreed, feeling shy.

“I love you.” Kelley kissed her before she could match words. She reached beneath Hope to undo her bra and disposed of it. Her own joined it a moment later.

“Kell…” Hope stared at her bare breasts with wonder.

Kelley leaned forward and pressed their bodies together. Hope sighed and caressed her back while Kelley planted kisses on her jaw, trailing down to her neck. She felt Kelley’s teeth against her pounding pulse and groaned. Kelley sucked on it and continued downward, deliciously downward, leaving occasional marks to remember her by. “Babe, your breasts are perfect,” she said, after passing Hope’s collarbone.

Hope thought a lot of things about that. “Perfect?”

“Mm-hmm.” Kelley traced her fingertips downward and inward from Hope’s shoulders. “The way they flow out of your pecs is so beautiful. Don’t argue with me,” she added, when she noticed Hope’s brow contracting. "Let me convince you.” She kissed at the top of one breast, kissed again a little lower and further in, and a little more, circling around and under. Her kisses spiraled inward, around but ever closer to the peak. Hope’s breathing was coming faster and her hands on Kelley’s back sought to impress urgency upon her. She groaned again, as Kelley neared the point, and Kelley grinned. An idea struck her and the grin turned wicked. She kissed the base of Hope’s other breast.

“Kell!” Hope looked down at her, with wide eyes and flushed cheeks.

Kelley aimed the grin at her. “Is there something you want me to do?”

Hope groaned and dropped her head back. “That came back to haunt me fast.”
“Just enjoy the ride, babe.” Kelley started the same build-up as before, taking her time, making love to every inch of flesh. Hope tensed and shifted as she closed in on the summit. When she arrived, she contemplated what to do, and settled on a lick up the slope of Hope’s nipple with the point of her tongue. Hope gasped at the contact and arched her back, pressing herself up into Kelley’s mouth. She obliged with a full kiss.

“Kell,” Hope moaned.

“That was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen,” Kelley whispered. She kissed again, sucking and flicking the sensitive peak, then trailed her teeth off of it and returned to the other breast. “How do you feel, Hope?” She asked when she’d given it its due.

“Amazing,” Hope answered.

Kelley smiled, feeling thankful and proud. “Good, ‘cause you are.” She started down again, kissing her way across Hope’s chest to her abdomen. She sucked in a breath as she came face-to-face with those ab muscles she’d admired all year, but had never touched, and placed a soft kiss at the top. They went taut and relaxed again. “Oh, wow,” she thought aloud, and kissed again, lower, alternating either side of their dividing line. The muscles rippled with every kiss, every exhale against Hope’s skin, and every shivery breath Hope drew. “Your abs, Hope. Jesus, your abs…”

“I knew you were gonna do that. I love how you love them,” Hope said.

“Ugh,” Kelley sighed, “I need to move on or we’ll be here all night.”

“Would that be so bad?”

Kelley giggled. “I love you.” Her hands found Hope’s thighs and pushed them gently apart. Hope’s eyes widened a shade. Kelley grinned. “Yeah, we’re really doing this.” She kissed further, curving towards where one strong, goalkeeper’s thigh met her core, then arcing above the damp center of Hope’s panties to her other leg. “Ready?” Hope nodded. Kelley held her eyes, kissed until she was directly between her legs, took the fabric in her teeth, and slid backwards onto her knees.

“Oh my god, Kell.”

“I’ve always wanted to do that,” Kelley admitted, grinning, as she slipped her own panties off. “I’ve wanted to do this for a couple months.” She licked the full length of Hope’s opening. Hope made a strangled gasp and gripped her hair. “That good, eh?”

“Wasn’t expecting it,” Hope muttered.

“You want some more?” Kelley purred. Hope pressed her head down. She slipped her arms under Hope’s legs, so they rested on her shoulders, and held Hope’s hands. “Let me know how I’m doing,” she said, and dove in.

“Haaa-oooo…” Kelley felt subtle nudges on her head as she explored Hope’s folds. Lighter over here, dwell deeper over there, now up to her hood – and then subtly went out the window. The moment Kelley’s tongue brushed her clit, Hope pushed down and thrust up; Kelley sucked with a smile on her lips.

More than the taste, more than the texture, more than the ever-growing need between her own legs, the power she possessed to please Hope impressed Kelley. Every sound, every twitch, was something she gave her. The gift grew and grew until it spilled over, like a wave breaking and rolling through Hope’s body. Kelley gave Hope’s sex one last kiss and crawled back up to face her. “Do you feel loved, Hope?”
“I feel loved. Really, thoroughly loved,” Hope added, grinning.

“Mission accomplished,” Kelley grinned back.

“Does that mean it’s my turn?”

Kelley smiled softly. “Only if you want it to be.”

“Oh, I do.” Kelley started to roll off of her, but Hope gripped the girl's waist with both hands and dragged her forward, until her face was framed by Kelley’s thighs

“Um, babe…?”

“I wanna watch you,” Hope explained. “This should be the best view.”

“Oka-...ohhhhhhh...” Hope's tongue settled everything. It and her hips found a rhythm, with Hope's hands playing accompaniments. She caressed Kelley's thighs, trailed light fingers along her sensitive stomach and sides, kneaded her glutes and her breasts. Kelley seemed unable to find a resting place for her hands. She tried setting them her hips.

“'Sup, supergirl,” Hope teased.

“Crap, now I feel like I’m judging you.” She found a comfortable position with one hand under Hope’s head and the other gripping her heel. As her tide rose, she bucked and rolled and bore down on Hope’s mouth, and worried she might be hurting her. “I – hahhhh – you okay? Should I…?”

Hope smiled up at – and into – Kelley. “Don’t worry ‘bout a thing. I’ll take care of both of us,” she assured her, and twined the fingers of one hand with Kelley’s. She stared up along her torso, drinking the waves of pleasure which made Kelley’s hips roll, her stomach undulate, her breasts shake, her shoulders arch, her eyes flutter wide and shut and wide again. It was the most beautiful, most awe-inspiring sight she'd ever laid eyes on, and it was the woman who loved her. Hope focused all her love into her mouth, tried to kiss, tease, and stoke Kelley’s clit until it felt as near to bursting as her own heart…

Kelley yelped and lurched forward, shuddering and gasping, and braced her hands against her thighs. They found each other’s eyes, with Kelley’s slipping closed and open, focused and vacant, as Hope coaxed the last spasms and blushes of pleasure from her body. Hope helped her slide back along her torso, leaving a wet trail as she went. “Is that…me?” Kelley asked, feeling a little self-conscious.

Hope chuckled gently. “No, I licked all of ‘you’ up.”

“So, that’s spit.” Hope shrugged and wrapped her up, with both legs around Kelley's, one arm around her back, and the other hand pulling her into a kiss. Kelley deepened it immediately, moaning, but broke it just as quickly. “Is that me?”

Eyes bright, Hope’s tongue made a wanton circuit of her lips. “That’s you.”

“Um…” Kelley smiled guiltily. “I taste really good.”

Hope laughed her best, pealing laugh. “I love you, Kelley O’Hara.”

On the morning of Kelley’s trip home, she returned from their early run and found a premium rush falcon waiting for her, with a mailing tube held under one foot and an air of impatience about it.
“Sorry, I wasn’t expecting anything. Do I need to sign for it?” The falcon cocked its head scornfully and kicked the tube toward Kelley's hand. When the tube touched her, the end popped open of its own accord. Satisfied, the raptor departed. From the tube, Kelley drew out a rolled sheet of newsprint. Curled around it was a note, handwritten, from the Quidditch correspondent of The Daily Prophet. As she read, her brow furrowed. She turned her attention to the newsprint, which was the day's sports page, and what she found made her throat tighten and her eyes mist over. She ran back to her dorm, where Hope was getting ready for breakfast. “Hope.” She couldn’t say everything she wanted to say. “Alex asked her to send you this before the normal delivery,” she could handle, and she simply held the paper out to Hope. Hope took it and recognized Ginny Potter's byline.

Ginevra Potter
Quidditch Correspondent


In what is assuredly a shock to none, the focus of Quidditch conversation this weekend was the opening broadside of Rita Skeeter’s 2008 campaign against sense and decency in sports. Fortunately, several prescient owl posts from followers of this column spared me the brain-stewing trudge of composing a counterpoint to Skeeter’s fantastic allegations. The range of the readers' backgrounds should be conclusive in itself. Without further ado:

To Ginevra Potter and The Daily Prophet,

My name is Lindsay Tarpley. I am a professional seeker for the Montrose Flying Club, aka “The Magpies.” As a fellow American in Scotland, I struck up a relationship with Hope Solo. When, this past September, she expressed interest in playing for my team, I passed my recommendation along to our coaching staff. They sportingly invited representatives of other teams to accompany them on their scouting trip to the Gryffindor-Slytherin fixture. Following the injury of Karen Bardsley due to flagrant misconduct by another of their team, Hope was testy with the scouts. After we left, I urged our staff to give her a second look. Upon observing that Hope had alienated the other teams, our staff did not bother to invite them for the second trip. Based on this second appraisal, Montrose decided to trade for an early first-round pick and draft Hope. This is all that took place. I trust this will help set the record straight.

Sincerely,

Lindsay Tarpley
Montrose, Scotland, UK

The truth is, alas, more boring than fiction – which explains Skeeter’s commercial success. As I, on the other hand, have presented many facts with but little excitement, here are a pair of letters selected with an eye toward entertainment:

Dear Ginny,

Please inform your audience that Ms. (I assume she’s never married) Skeeter is full of sh*t [sic]. Hope Solo did not arrange, collude, or do anything underhanded regarding her draft selection. Frankly, Holyhead should be kicking themselves for overlooking the goalkeeper of the decade. I say that as a friend and teammate of the excellent Karen Bardsley, who fully deserved to be the second overall pick.

Stick it to that harpy,
Amy Rodriguez

Hogwarts Class of 2010. Slytherin and proud of it!

There's more where that came from:

To: Mrs. Ginevra Potter, Quidditch Correspondent, The Daily Prophet.


Greetings,

I have known Hope Solo almost since she arrived at Hogwarts in 2004. I tell you, she does not have capacity for the magnitude of scheming which Rita Skeeter accuses her of executing. I know this for fact, by many years’ experience. Furthermore, I assess that it is incompatible with her ego. She would instead expect to be drafted early, based solely on her merit. Hope thinks that she is the best. She is correct.

Why yes, astute reader, that is the same Jessica Landström who turned down a spot as an alternate to last summer’s World Cup! What’s that? Indeed, I do have letters from each House in Hogwarts! Stop – it’s badger time!

Dear Ginevra,

We would like to remind you that, unlike other voices in the media, you have interviewed Hope Solo at length about her draft selection by Montrose, her background, and her character. Hope is a stranger here in Britain, was arbitrarily assigned to a widely resented House within Hogwarts, and pays little attention to what others think of her. She isn't prepared to advocate for herself in this atmosphere. We implore you to call out the lies and insinuations published this week. The truth needs a voice.

Yours,

Lauren and Tobin

Hogwarts, Hufflepuff 2010.

Lauren and Tobin refer to my interview of Solo in the aftermath of the League draft. Readers desiring all the facts should refer to my column from the 9th of this January past, but I will summarize: Ms. Solo may be a flawed human being, but surely less so than noted fiction writer Rita Skeeter. Do I really need to spell that out for our readers?

There is one more. It deserves to have the last word, so I'll say now that the author is a seeker to keep an eye on.

Dear Ginny Weasley,

I’m an exchange student and new to Quidditch, so I first heard of you while looking at all the trophies, relics, and treasures on the walls of the Gryffindor common room. The photo of the team after you won them the Cup is still there, and the frame is engraved with your unmarried name. Since then, I’ve heard so many stories about you, your husband, Hermione, and the rest of the Weasley family. It seems like I can’t go a week without someone mentioning Dumbledore’s Army, even though that was ten years ago. I’m honored to be part of that legacy and play seeker for Gryffindor, like you did. I know I felt like you look in that photo when I made my first catch.
So, you may be surprised to hear how deeply hurt I felt when a Housemate showed me what Rita Skeeter wrote about Slytherin's goalkeeper, Hope Solo. That woman took every nasty thing people think about Slytherin and made Hope guilty of it all. Every word in it is a mean, horrible lie. What kind of person writes such things about a woman who's not even twenty-two yet?

My best friend here is in Slytherin and I knew immediately when I saw her, that afternoon, that she'd seen it, too. She's very close to Hope and she cried on my shoulder in the main hallway, she was so upset. I want Rita Skeeter to know that she made a Muggle-born cry. She should be ashamed of herself.

Ginny, thank you for standing up for what's right in the fight against Voldemort. I know this isn't remotely like that, but please do the same now for Hope Solo.

Alex Morgan

Hogwarts Class of 2011.

“They got together and all wrote in,” Hope said, not yet believing what she'd just read.

“No, they didn’t.” Kelley swallowed against all the feeling welling up from her heart. “Not together. It's in the note, here; Alex found out they'd all written letters and asked Ginny to rush us a copy, if she printed them. They all just read Skeeter’s article and responded, Hope. Hope, you-” Kelley sniffed and held her girlfriend’s hands. “You are so loved.”

“Fourth-years meeting after we pack up,” Hope reminded them, when Slytherin's practice came to a close.

“What’s that about?” Kelley asked Amy, as they walked away.

“Us.”

“Oh.” Kelley didn’t know what to say. One thing about being her high school's soccer star was never having to fight a friend for a roster spot. She’d always been secure at the top of the list. This felt…adversarial.

“It's one game,” Amy said, reading her silence.

Kelley wrinkled her nose. “Life is a series of ‘one games’.”

“Yeah…” Amy sighed. “Look, you know I want to play, but I did already play in one, so I won't be upset if you get this one.”

“You won't?” Kelley tried not to sound surprised.

“No, why would I?”

Kelley shrugged. “Just asking.”

Hope waited until the rest of the team was well on their way back to the castle. "Okay, this is the part where we decide on the last starting lineup.” They all knew that there was only one issue: the third chaser.

Jo and Fara looked at each other. “We’ve been talking about it, quietly, but we're split,” Joanne answered.
Hope felt a wash of dismay. “Split?”

“We disagree on the value of Amy’s one match of experience,” Fara explained. Hope noted that they left out who held which opinion.

“Well? It’s your responsibility to decide.”

The two chasers glanced at each other and around the group. “We think we should vote.”

Hope took a heavy breath. “Fine. Um...here, we'll do a wand ballot. Cast who you want and send it to me. They all drew their wands. Intoning “democracio”, the rest of the team swish-flicked their wands towards Hope. Little orbs of blue light flew forth and vanished into the tip of Hope’s wand. A blue fog replaced them, so that only Hope saw the results, displayed in floating script. She swallowed. “Kelley starts.” She ended the spell. It wouldn’t do them any good to know that the vote was a tie.

“War!”
“What is it good for?”
“Absolutely”
“Nothin’!”
“Say it again, y'all!”

“What happened to rap, Stud?”

Ashlyn finished a bench press and racked the barbell. “Think of this as pre-hip-hop. You’re not disappointed, are you, Princess?”

“I can’t feel disappointed when I’ve got a view like that,” Ali smiled, gaze roving over Ashlyn on the weight bench.

“How do you manage to sound sexy and sweet at the same time?”

Ali’s eyes glittered. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

“Innocent bystanders coming through,” Alex announced, as she, Lauren, and Tobin entered the training room.

“What are you implying? There’s nothing going on in here,” Ashlyn said as she sat up. Ali’s eyes snapped down to watch her bare core tense and curl.

“I don’t have to imply anything when Ali’s staring at your abs like that,” Alex said. Ali and Ashlyn just laughed; they were long past blushing.

“...made him disabled, bitter, and mean!”

“Tell me this isn’t your pump-up song, Ashlyn.”

Ali answered Alex. “No, that’s ‘Lose Yourself’. This is just her workout playlist.”

Ashlyn stepped to the turntable and shut if off. “You do know this is a protest song, right?”

“Um, either way.”

“So, Team U.S.A. meeting?” Tobin pushed the conversation onward.
“Yeah, we’re just waiting for our Slytherin friends.”

“Bets on whether they’ll be late?” Ali asked.

“Bets on whether they’ll admit to it if they are?” Lauren suggested instead.

“Two chocolate frogs, that they are and just brush it off,” Ashlyn said and winked at Ali.

Alex rolled her eyes. “Please, no one take that.”

“Something I should know about?” Hope led her teammates inside.

“You’re better off not.” Kelley gave Alex a questioning look. “Chocolate frogs,” Alex muttered. The memory made Kelley cringe.

“Oh, you are definitely telling me this story later,” Hope grinned to Kelley.

“Us. Telling us later,” Amy corrected.

“Ugh, fine. Hope, you called this meeting. Get it started and distract me.”

Hope moved so that they formed a loose circle. “This evening is the first match where we’ll be head-to-head between the goals, so I want to remind you all of something. Some of you have learned this already, but some of you might not have had to yet.” Hope paused for dramatic effect. “If we come at each other with anything less than our hardest play, we’re hurting our country.” She gave them a moment to process her words. “Today we’re friends in our provincial Inter-House Cup, but we’re all here for the day when we’re teammates in the World Cup. If we’re going to become the best Quidditch team in the world, we have to make the most of every opportunity to sharpen ourselves as individuals. So, when we step onto that field, I want to see each of you play like the rest of us are standing between you and the world championship, because, one day, someone else will be. The harder we push each other, the higher we’ll drive each other. Remember that. Even when we’re competing against our closest friends, we’re always collaborating when we kit up and bring it.”

She surveyed her friends’ faces. “Lauren, are you going to hit bludgers at me any less than as hard as you can?”

Lauren smiled. “I’m gonna swing at you like it’s a World Cup final.”

“You’d better. Tobin, are you going to relax your guard when you’re one-on-one with Kelley?”

“Are you kidding? No way,” she smirked at Kelley.

“Kelley, it’s your first match as a chaser. Are you going to get star-struck and lose that laser focus of yours?”

“No.”

“Ashlyn,” Hope turned to her, “are you going to be watching like a hawk for any and every way to defend better than I do?”

Ashlyn was deeply grateful that Hope was thinking of her, even though she wasn’t playing. “I am,” she said, and smiled.

“Never stop. I’m counting on you. Ali and A-Rod, same story with the chasers. Compare notes with Tobin and Kelley after the match. And you, Alex,” Hope let her smile show, “If you point out the snitch to Ali before either seeker spots it, the drinks are on me in Hogsmeade tonight.” Her smile
widened to take in the whole group. “Get fierce, have fun, and let’s give the Brits a taste of what’s coming for them in 2011.”

Hope had different words for her team's huddle. “This is a must-win match. I know Hufflepuff is impressive to watch, but Gryffindor beat them by one, and one is enough. Stay focused and don’t let your emotions run away with you, but do whatever you need to do to win. Remember what we said: possession and patience can beat power and pressure. You want the House Cup?”

“Yes.” “Yeah!” “Aye!”

“I said, do you want the House Cup?!”

“Yeah!”

“Then ‘fight’ on three! One, two, three!”

“FIGHT!”

Lauren looked around at her teammates. “This is a must-win match…”

Tobin looked across the half-field line at Kelley. She felt genuinely happy for the first-year, but Hope had it right. Today, Kelley was between her and a trophy. Madame Hooch blew her whistle and the teams leapt into action. Kelley raced for the ball, waiting above the center mark, while Slytherin’s other two chasers pushed forward. They're keeping their least experienced player deep, this time. Tobin made a note to press her hard.

Her tactic paid off quicker than she imagined; on only Kelley’s third possession, the girl passed the quaffle to Fara, who immediately sent it back for a give-and-go. Kelley wasn't expecting it and fumbled the catch. Tobin was right there to grab it and broke for Slytherin’s goals. Lauren saw and switched her bludger-shot towards Fara to a bunt, straight ahead. She chased the bludger and bunted it again, herding it toward Slytherin’s scoring area without actually hitting it at Hope. When Tobin reached the edge of the area, she'd cut the distance – and Hope's reaction time – in half. Now, she swung, aiming in front of the far goal. They had Hope blocked, but Tobin didn’t connect her foot with the quaffle the way she wanted and sent her shot between the far and center goal rings. Ahhh, darn! She retreated to midfield and waited for Hope to put the quaffle back in play. I can't blow chances like that!

“That was scary,” Ashlyn muttered.

“I’m impressed that it's taken – what, minutes? – for either team to get a good look. Usually it's 1-1 or 2-1 by now.”

“These are probably the two most organized teams. It’ll be close.”

Hope's long ball forward fell to Kelley, who managed to thread it through to Jo. Suddenly, it was Hufflepuff scrambling to defend. Jo rushed the scoring area, headed for the left goal, but dumped the quaffle back for Fara, who hurled it through the right one. Tobin smacked her leg. Seriously? All that and they score first?

“Nothing like the old counter-break,” Alex thought aloud.
“Any sign of the snitch?”

“Nada.”

Tobin bumped knees with her defender, again. Joanne Love was stuck to her like a stinking parasite. Even with her height advantage, she wasn’t winning enough fifty-fifty balls. Not on this one, though; Tobin was determined to catch this pass, despite Jo’s arms reaching over her. One of those arms bumped her head. She elbowed back.

_Feeep! The ref’s whistle. Dang it!_

Madame Hooch gave her a stern look. “Cool it, Heath.”

“Yeah, fine.” Tobin was already thinking about the restart. Yet another attacking opportunity, wasted. Her team needed more from her. She vowed not to disappoint them in their last match.

“Oh, come on,” Alex complained, “let ‘em play.”

“She could easily have elbowed Joanne in the face,” Ashlyn pointed out.

“But she didn’t.”

Kelley, in her own scoring area, watching a long ball coming at her, seemed to hesitate. A _miscommunication with Hope?_ Tobin saw the potential and rushed her. Kelley took her eye off the ball for a glance at Tobin, and it cost her. She bobbled her catch and the quaffle fell towards Hope, who came out for it. She got there first and Tobin smacked into her side, late, sending them both tumbling, though they stayed on their brooms.

_Feeeeeep! Too late, by Hooch's judgement. _

_Ugh, seriously?! “What do you want?”_ Tobin protested. “It was a fifty-fifty ball and I went for it!”

“I want you to roll out of the way instead of plowing into people. You had time and I know you know better. You need to calm down.”

“Okay, sure, whatever.”

“I'm not going to tell you again.”

On the Slytherin bench, Amy clenched her fists. “Oh, come on! Really, Tobin?”

“She's not having a good game,” Karen commented.

Amy sighed. “The only time I’ve seen her this frustrated was right after the first Divinations exam.”

Tobin looked back and saw Lauren look forward. Their eyes met and Tobin knew this would be a good one. She drew her defender wide. The other Hufflepuff chasers noticed and shifted toward the opposite side. She heard Hope’s warning shout just before Lauren kicked a beautiful, glorious, perfectly weighted pass into the opened space. Tobin roared after it. She'd just caught it when Kelley sideswiped her – hard. The ball came loose from her grip. _God dammit!_
“Finally,” Tobin said to herself. When she finished checking her ribs, she saw Fara Williams pat Kelley on her back. Madame Hooch, meanwhile, was writing in her notebook. Good, Tobin thought.

The next pass through pass for her was just out of reach. Oh, come on! Kelley was going after it, from the side, and they were going to cross paths just before they reached it. Oh, no you don’t. That ball is mine, Tobin thought, and raced to get in before they collided. She quickly saw that she wouldn’t get by, however, and put her foot up to push her opponent's broom handle aside. It worked; Kelley spun and she caught the quaffle. Finally, a break! She-

FEEEERP!

DAMMIT! Tobin spiked the ball at the ground just below.

FEEEERP!

Tobin leaned her hands on her knees. Her mind felt loud but the crowd seemed quieter than it had before.

Feep!

She looked for the ref and saw Madame Hooch on the ground, standing over the quaffle, and gesturing at her. That was bad. Quidditch refs didn’t normally make you land. Tobin went to her and dismounted her broom. She heard everything Hooch said as though through a fog – something about being disappointed – and couldn’t remember any of it later, except for, “You’re dismissed”. That part stuck.

“Whoa…” was the only sound Alex could muster.

Ali looked at her two friends. “Did that seem harsh to you?”

Alex spoke without turning. “No.”

Ali fell into an uncomfortable silence, which Ashlyn broke. “Tell us why you feel that way, Alex.”

The seeker looked at Ali. “I get the impulse to charge through to the ball. I do. But you don’t kick someone’s broom.”

“She didn’t kick it. She put her foot out and fended-”

“If you hit something almost square on, at flying speed, you’re kicking it.”

“I still say it was harsh. Kelley’s fine.”

“She'd been warned already,” Ashlyn reminded her.

“Ali, if you ever kick Kelley’s broom, I will…” Alex realized she was just digging her hole deeper. She and Ali didn’t speak to each other for the rest of the match.

Amy pounded her palm against the bench. “What was that, Tobin?!”

“Seems harsh for just a frustration foul, but I won’t say no to being up a player,” one of her
teammates opined.

Karen Bardsley scoffed. “Harsh? Serves her goddamn right for losing her temper and taking it out on someone.”

Amy sighed and wondered how Kelley would take it.

Kelley, turning from Tobin's retreating figure to the weakened Hufflepuff team, could practically hear her mother say, “You’ve made your bed, now lie in it.” Hufflepuff relied on pressure and fast passing. Could they keep it up without Tobin? She grinned. Not a chance.

Lauren played like a demon. She was everywhere in midfield, pressuring, blocking, batting, intercepting, and putting long balls forward for their remaining two chasers. If they could just keep it going and hang on until someone caught the snitch – but they were leaking goals. Not in a flood, but a steady drip-drip-drip, eroding their tenuous lead. She felt as though she were playing hard enough for two people, but how long could she keep-

Just like that, Kelley picked her pocket. She’d been carrying the quaffle loosely. That was fatigue – cutting corners, taking risks, neglecting the little things. She forced her broom back around and hurried back to defend yet again.

Kelley felt it. She and Fara had Hufflepuff’s keeper from each side, with her level with the near goal and Fara low on the right. She saw the keeper shift towards Fara. He’s assuming I’ll pass again. The reward for being a team player, Kelley thought, then changed the ball to her left hand and wound up for a big, cross-body throw. The keeper edged further right. Kelley let the ball slip out of her hand as she threw, so that it fell to her right foot. Her volley flew through the left goal ring. The keeper had no chance.

Hope hoped that nobody heard the noise she made when Kelley’s first shot went in. They were ahead now! They were back in the running for the Cup! She wanted to jump up and down. She wanted to hug – no, hug and kiss – her girlfriend. She forced herself to focus. There'd be plenty of time for that, later. Right now, she was still a goalkeeper.

“I know where the snitch is,” Alex said, but without enthusiasm.

“Where?”

“In the massive blind spot from the stadium.”

“You’re sure?” Ashlyn asked. She knew better, but the break between Alex and Ali had her on edge.

“Yes. It's not anywhere I can see – look, there they go.” She pointed at the two seekers, who dove past the stadium wall and out of view. Moments later, they heard sounds of a crash amongst trees. Madame Hooch’s whistle called the crowd's attention back. The scoreboard ticked over: Slytherin 50 – Hufflepuff 190 (S).

“That’s only three goals for Hufflepuff,” Ashlyn observed. “Two points for Slytherin.”

Alex did the math. “We only need two points against Ravenclaw! That’s just a snitch and a draw! We can win the Cup!”
Tobin sat, slouched, inside Hufflepuff’s team tent. Her tears came silently and without sobs. She’d surely lost the match for them. Maybe – by a miracle, for example – they could come away two points, but otherwise, they were out of contention for the Cup. At last, she heard footsteps outside. Walking footsteps, with no voices; there’d been no miracle. Lauren led the team inside, looking completely spent and empty. Tobin could barely meet their eyes; they’d given everything on the field and still lost, because she hadn’t. They were too drained to even speak, at first, when they surrounded her in a group hug. “I’m sorry,” Tobin choked out.

“It’s okay.” “We get it.” “We love you.”

Yet she still felt just as hollow.

“I don’t compromise on safety,” Alex said, with warning in her voice.

Ashlyn sighed. “So you and Ali are just going to not talk for the rest of the term? Neither of you are being mature about this.”

“I can’t go and say, ‘you know what, I am okay with players kicking each other’s brooms’, because I’m not.”

“People foul, Alex. That’s life.”

“And when you foul dangerously, you get booked. Why is that so hard for Ali to get?”

Ashlyn chose her ground and stood on it. “Why do you think she doesn’t get it?”

Alex tossed her head dismissively. “She thinks the foul wasn’t that bad.”

“Haven’t we seen other people knock into opponents’ brooms before?”

“Yeah, but not on purpose like that. Tobin was losing it. I mean, slamming the ball?!”

“If that’d been her first foul, and she hadn’t done that after, would you send her off?”

Alex sighed. “No, I’d give her a yellow.”

“Maybe Ali’s looking at it more that way, while you’re seeing more the emotional side?”

She took a long breath in and sighed it out. “Fine, I’ll go talk to her.”

Ashlyn caught her arm. “Thank you, Alex.”

Once all her tears were shed and dried, Tobin found Kelley. “Hey, look… I’m sorry.”

Kelley folded her arms. “Have you apologized to your team?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m not bothered by you fouling me, but I am concerned about playing on the same team one day. We can’t have you do in a U.S. jersey what you just did to Cheney.”

“I know.” And she had done it to Cheney, more than to Kelley. She closed her eyes and let her head slump against the wall. Again.
Since the snitch hid outside the stadium, Hope was off the hook for drinks. She wished she wasn't.

“If I knew you were all going to get water, I would've suggested Alex climb a flagpole. I mean, c'mon, A-Rod, you aren't even having a cherry soda? Are you okay?”

“I'm thirsty,” Amy countered.

“Says the girl who drinks Gatorade by the case. There's no way you're not hydrated…” Oh. Is this to do with not getting her broom fixed back to match shape? Are they all having what she's having to be…but surely Cheney and Tobin would just split the cost of her order! “Amy, you know you can talk to me about anything that's wrong.”

“What?” Amy looked baffled.

“Nothing.” Hope knew Amy couldn’t fake that look. A waiter arrived and she gave up wondering.

“You know what you want?” She asked the others.

“We're just going to split an appetizer,” Alex said on behalf of the group.

Hope sat calmly until the waiter left. “Did you all go on a crash diet or something?!”

“We're all not really hungry,” Ashlyn replied. “I ate too much at dinner, personally.”

“You said that two weeks ago, when you all split two appetizers, and now you're down to one?”

“Come on, Hope,” Lauren said, in a voice almost coaxing, “relax. It's Saturday night.”

Exactly, Hope wanted to retort, but she chose to let it go and enjoy the evening as-is.

Ashlyn and Kelley's cauldron bubbled.

Alex and Ali's cauldron frothed. “I don't think it's supposed to do that,” Alex muttered.

“Houston, we have a problem,” Ali agreed.

Kate, the Slytherin, at the table to Alex's left, overheard. “Houston? Who's Houston?”

Alex did a double take. “You've never heard that before?”

“No. Should I have?”

“Alex, hey!” Ali tugged her sleeve, “Forget the sheltered Pure-blood, this looks bad.” The froth had turned blue. Everyone else's potion was dark orange.

“Um…eye of newt?” Alex offered, feeling lame.

“That's not the answer to everything!” Ali fumbled back through the procedure in her textbook. “We did the seven jazbay grapes, the three grams crushed pomegranate seeds, the six drams of common spider blood,” she shuddered, “the four frostflower petals-“

“Wait, four petals? I thought you said four grams of petals!”

“Then how many petals did you put in?”

“Eleven!”

The froth was rising.
“Ok, ok, we got this.” Ali calmed and refocused. “The best counter-agent for frostflower is unicorn dandruff…” Ali grabbed Alex’s textbook and flipped to the chapter on neutralization. “Okay, here we go: ‘when reacting animal tissues with plant fibers, titrate at a proportion of two parts fiber to one part tissue, by mass.’”

“Eight grams of unicorn dandruff, got it!” Alex rushed to the ingredients wall and found a jar of it. Back at their desk, she weighed out eight grams of the fluffy white dust. Ali checked her measurement, then tipped it into their brew.

The cauldron belched foul smoke and burst into flame.

“Now you have two problems,” Dr. Couture’s voice sounded behind and above them, “both of which are on fire.” Alex and Ali stared at each other. “Well? You passed the lab safety quiz.”

They snapped out of their shock. Ali cast a spell to contain the smoke while Alex ran for the sand bucket. “How much?” She asked their professor.

“Does it matter, Ms. Morgan?” Alex upended the bucket over their cauldron, smothering the fire. “Correct. Now, dispose of the potion slag and clean up. Report to my office once there’s no trace of your miniature catastrophe. Don’t forget to refill the bucket.”

Alex and Ali blocked out the world and got busy. “What happened?” Alex whispered.

Ali looked helpless. “I have no idea!”

In her office, after class, Dr. Couture talked them through the problem. “What was the label on the jar?”

“Unicorn dandruff,” Alex answered.

“Are potions art or science, Ms. Morgan?”

“Science…”

“Then what, precisely, did the label say?”

Alex knit her brows and tried to picture the jar. “It said, ‘Preserved Unicorn Dandruff. Expires 31-10-2010. N. Longbottom, 01-11-1996’.”

“Ms. Krieger, do you know how alchemical preservation charms function?”

“I don’t, Dr. Couture.”

“The critical point is that preserved ingredients must be disenchanted before use, which I do before class for first-year labs. If you use them in their preserved state, they react improperly, including…” she made an explosion gesture with her hands.

“Oh…” Ali looked crestfallen. “Sorry, Alex.”

“It’s okay.”

“Now, there was also a secondary failure,” Dr. Couture resumed. “What method did you use to determine the amount of counter-agent?”

“I followed the book; two parts plant fiber to one part animal tissue,” Ali answered.
“You needed to neutralize four grams of plant fibers. How much dandruff did you use?”

“Eight gra-” They hung their heads.

“To review, what did you learn today?”

“Never rush,” Ali stated.

“Yes, and confirm the directions before doing the next step,” Alex answered.

“And, if a detail doesn't match, like with the label, stop and check it,” Ali added.

“Very good. One more lesson: as students, check with me before trying something original. If you'd told me the problem and your proposed solution, I would've helped you with the preserved ingredients and awarded a House point for good problem-solving. As for your write-ups, since you didn’t complete the experiment, your ‘Results’ and ‘Conclusions’ sections should discuss the reaction you created and those lessons learned. Do you have any questio-“

A knock on the door interrupted her. “Doc Valence?”

The professor raised her voice; “Come in, Hope!”

The door opened and Hope Solo stepped through. “Hey, guys. Valence, are you available to spend some time on the gloves project this evening?”

“I am. Let's compare notes after dinner and map out the next phase. Misses Morgan and Krieger, this concludes your scolding.”

“Thank god we still have your cauldron,” Ali said, when they were far away. “Those things aren’t cheap.” Alex cringed at the thought.

After months of feeling inexperienced, Alex was finally seeing hints of flair in her play. Lindsay Tarpley noticed, too, and laid out a syllabus of advanced techniques. Now, as Alex had trained Kelley, so Kelley helped Alex prepare for the final match. “This is insane,” the girl said, after flipping through another set of maneuver cards.

Alex took her opinion with a grain of salt. “More or less crazy than hanging your chin over the end of your broom handle?” Kelley handed her the ring-bound cards, each illustrating a step of an aerial move. ‘Snap Roll’, these said. “1. While flying at high speed, lean back abruptly to pitch up while maintaining direction of flight. 2. Rotate to an attitude of forty-five degrees handle-up.’” Alex looked up. “‘Attitude’ means what, again?”

“Orientation.”

“‘Cause that makes sense,” Alex muttered.

“Actually, it does, if you think about it.”

Alex didn’t. “3. Press smartly with your heel against the brush on the side toward which you wish to roll’. Okay…” Alex flipped to the fourth card. “‘4. This will destabilize the broom, causing it to spin violently about the direction of flight’. They might’ve put that on the previous card, don’t you think?”

“It gets better. Read the next one.”
“5. To end the maneuver, reduce pitch angle and apply opposite heel pressure. Notes: do not attempt more than two uninterrupted snap rolls, as some brooms are known to enter unrecoverable spins thereafter. Always adhere to your broom manufacturer’s instructions.’’ Alex flipped through the cards again. “Well, then. That’s not scary at all.”

“I remember, from when A-Rod made me read the manual, that ours are warranted controllable through three, though it's discouraged. Really, though, how many times would you ever want to flip around like that?”

'I'm leaning towards zero. What’s the point of this roll, anyway? We already roll the normal way.”

“I’m guessing it's more an exercise than a practical tool.”

“Probably. At least we won’t do it by accident now.”

“Yeah.” Kelley picked up her broom. “Well? Saddle up!”

Alex only vomited once.

“The math’s plain,” Gryffindor’s captain told them. “If we take two points, we claim the Cup. If we take just one point, we lose.”

Regardless of the pressure, Ali wished she was starting. She told herself that her performance in practice drove all the chasers to be better, so, even though she was on the bench again, she’d directly contributed to the match. Their captain told her the same, in front of everyone, which was nice. Ashlyn told her to never forget how badly she wanted to get off the bench. Ali really, really liked Ashlyn.

“Who do you think's going to win?” Lauren asked Tobin.

“I really don't know. They both came back from bad losses and pulled off narrow wins. Maybe Gryffindor, because Slytherin was missing two players when Ravenclaw beat them. All I know is that Alex will catch the snitch.”

“Mmm. If they draw on the field, they split the two points, right? So Gryffindor just needs to not lose and they’ll clinch the Cup.”

“And this’d be, what, the fourth year in a row for them?”

“Hope must be praying that they lose.”

“Hard to believe she hasn't won it all yet, isn't it?”

Lauren nodded. “Last year probably would've been her year, but the Triwizard stuff had everyone distracted.”

“I’m really looking forward to that again.”

“Oh, me to!”

“Alex is closing in,” Kelley proclaimed.

“It's still tied.”
"I know, I'd hear if someone scored."

"Sorry. I'm on edge. Unless Ravenclaw scores, we won't win."

"That's why I'm not watching the field game."

"Smart."

The snitch tucked its wings in and dove, twisted, and came out heading back the way they’d come. Alex knew the Ravenclaw would fly the smoothest and cleanest path she could, because it would be the fastest. Except the snitch was still so close, maybe the shortest and roughest path really would take less time. She reared back on the broom and kicked hard sideways with her heel. The broom spun like a top, halfway around, and then Alex straightened out, pointing down and facing the opposite direction. She leveled off and surged after the snitch.

Kelley whooped. "Yeah! Git it!"

"What was that?" Amy asked.

"I think she just improvised a combined vertical U-turn and snap roll. Which is impressive, 'cause the snap roll was like her least favorite thing."

Alex’s aerobatic reversal cost her most of her speed, but her opponent was still curving around to the right direction. *Nope, not happening. I've got the snatch to myself, for now.* She ran it down, but the snitch ducked below the level of her broom just before she got to it. Acting on her new instincts, she snap-rolled again and snatched it as she whirled around. She heard the cheers as she came upright again, holding the golden prize overhead. One point for a draw on the field, one point for the snitch, and the Inter-House Cup was Gryffindor's. She flew to join the celebration. It felt good, finishing with style.

Hope smiled wide, albeit briefly. "That was *clutch.* That’s the Cup for them, too, but that was clutch."

Kelley poked her. “Tell her that."

“I will, after Gryffindor finishes mobbing her...” but, instead of rushing the field, Gryffindor was in an uproar, and not a happy one.

“Did we miss something?” Kelley asked. They looked back down at the field and saw Madame Hooch, surrounded by gesticulating players. She had her notebook in her hand, her foot on the quaffle, and the quaffle on Gryffindor's penalty spot.

“Oh, shit,” Hope said.

“Oh there,” Amy said, pointing to a Ravenclaw chaser who'd left the field. Someone was checking him for concussion. “There must've been a big foul in the scoring area.”

From down the row, Karen caught them up. “One of Gryffindor's beaters was clearing the quaffle from the scoring area and hit that guy with her bat. Not maliciously, and it wasn't a solid hit, but she could see him coming for the ball and should’ve known she’d clip him.”

“Dangerous play in the box,” Amy translated.

“But isn't it over?” Kelley asked.
“Not if it happened before Alex caught the snitch.” Hope explained. “Just like in soccer, you can’t run out of time for a penalty kick.”

“So, Gryffindor's screwed,” Amy said.

“Either that or their keeper becomes a legend.”

They held their breath. The stadium was so quiet, you could’ve heard a thestral breathing. Gryffindor's keeper did everything right, but so did the Ravenclaw player. Just as quickly as it came, the Cup vanished from Gryffindor's grasp. With five points instead of six, they tied Slytherin and lost on goal difference.

Hope curled her lips in. “I actually don't know if I can…” she paused and gave Kelley a wry smile. “No, I can get excited about being inter-House champions. It's just not a rush this way.”

“Yeah. I really feel for them, you know? Especially Alex,” Kelley said.

“You know what I say about goalkeepers, that they can’t win games, but they can save games? It's the opposite for seekers.” Hope rose and offered Kelley a hand. “Time to go throw on our jerseys.”

Kelley took the hand and kept it. “What for?”

“The trophy presentation!”

Through all the noise, the music, Headmistress McGonagall’s congratulations, and the magic confetti cannons, two sights stuck out to Kelley. One was the look of pride and joy on Hope's face when she kissed the Cup, which had eluded her for so long, and held it aloft for her Housemates to cheer. The other was Alex Morgan, clapping and cheering, with tear streaks down her cheeks.

The sudden opening of the trap door made Alex jump and spin around. She froze, panic rising, as two Gryffindor fourth-years popped out of the floor. One shut the door behind them and then they plopped down on the edge of Alex's bed, mischievous grins plastered on their faces.

“Um, hi…Claire. Megan.” Alex fought her fear down.

It's not like they know Kelley's in the bathroom. Just keep cool until they go.

“How are you? Can I help you?”

“Oh, we're great, thanks.”

“Are you okay? You look as if you've just seen Salazar Slytherin's ghost.”

“I-I…” Alex didn't know what to do, and the half-stifled giggles coming from the two older girls weren’t making it easier.

“Oh, Megan, don't toy with the poor thing.” Claire turned back to Alex. “We just want to talk to you and Kelley.”

“Kelley? Sure, we can go find her, she should just be getting back from Quidditch practice...” Alex hoped it was convincing.

“Or the WC,” Megan grinned. “It’s cool, we know. We have a proposition for you two.”

“You might say it's our legacy. We want you and Kelley to have it.”

“And we've spent incommensurable time and effort to satisfy ourselves that Kelley is a kindred spirit and worthy of our trust.”
“Why?” Kelley stepped from behind the bath screen, curiosity winning, as usual.

“We come to make a bequest.”

“Think of it as our graduation gift to you.”

“It’s how we knew you were back there and that all of you Yanks hang out up here – no worries, we’re fans of flouting the rules, too – and that’s just the tip of the iceberg.”

“Thing is, it really needs to stay in Gryffindor. Those who bestowed it upon us said that Harry Potter’s father enchanted it himself.”

“So, we’re passing it on to you, Alex, with the understanding that you and Kelley will be joint custodians until your graduation.”

“At which time you will pass it on to young Gryffindors whom you find worthy.”

Kelley couldn’t wait any longer. “What is it?”

Megan drew her wand, Claire produced a weathered parchment from her robe, and the pair sat on the floor. Kelley and Alex joined them. The seniors shared a knowing glance, then Megan touched her wand to the paper and spoke.

“I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.”

As the possibilities unfolded, Kelley grinned wickedly.

On the last day of classes, Alex was called to the Headmistress’s office. She had no idea why. She’d never heard of anyone else receiving a summons. She didn’t even know where the office was. She got there, though, and stood staring at the door for a minute. Was she in trouble? Was it about her courses for next year? And how did she pass the obviously magical gargoyle? “Alex Morgan,” she tried announcing. A door opened. I’m starting to get the hang of this witch stuff.

“Ah, young Miss Morgan. Do come in.” Alex stepped into a microcosm of Hogwarts: a circular room with stone columns, a desk on a dais, paintings which moved, dusty books and devices. It all blurred together. She focused on the figure of Headmistress McGonagall. “You made quite the statement this year. Congratulations.”

”Thank you, ma’am,” seemed appropriate.

“A rumor has reached my ears that you had not flown a broom before you came to Hogwarts. Is that so?”

“It is, ma’am.”

“Do you have a means to practice during your summer away?”

“Um…I’m going to talk to some people when I get back.”

“But you don’t own a practice snitch?”

“No.”

“I’ll see to it that you get one, if you promise me you’ll use it.”
“Ma’am?”

 McGonagall’s wizened eyes twinkled. “You might mix in a ‘Headmistress’ or two, for variety’s sake.”

Alex swallowed and spoke. “Is this because you were in Gryffindor, Headmistress?”

“No. The Headmistress must be above the House rivalries. There’s something that’s also above House rivalries, happening next year, and I’d practice hard for it, if I were you.”

Alex knit her brows. “Are you speaking in riddles, ma’am?”

The head of Hogwarts laughed. “Of course not! I’m maintaining plausible deniability. If I provide you a snitch, will you use it?”

“Yes, absolutely.”

“I’ll mail one to your parents’ address – discreetly, of course. That’s all I asked you here about.”

“Thank you, ma’am. Um, may I ask a…li- I mean, sort of a personal question?”

“You may.”

“So…you were in Gryffindor and you played Quidditch, right? What did you think about the last game, against Ravenclaw?”

“Do you think it would be well for the Headmistress’s opinion about a contentious match to be shared among the students?”

Alex had to admit it, disappointing though it was. “No.”

“Good! You won’t tell anyone. I think it’s disgraceful that the only team not to have a player booked finished at the bottom of the table.”

Alex stared. “Only…you mean Ravenclaw?”

The Headmistress nodded. “Apparently, they’re the only ones who can play three clean games.”

“You mean it's always like that?!”

“No, no, I meant only this year's teams. It's different every year. Segueing back to your question, I've been with Hogwarts long enough that nothing surprises me. This wasn’t the first time Gryffindor has snatched ignominy from the jaws of glory, or the first time a Hufflepuff has had a tantrum, or the first time a Slytherin stood for fair play, and it'll all happen again.” The corner of her mouth curled upward. “This isn't even the first time a first-year seeker has gone three out of three, but that’s less common than the others.”

Hope's graduation party doubled as a housewarming for her new apartment with Lindsay Tarpley. Unbeknownst to her, Kelley had telephoned Tarp and interrogated her on how she'd handle living in close quarters with her sometimes-abrasive girlfriend. The seeker ultimately passed inspection. Now, Hope was a college graduate with a job and a place of her own. It made Kelley’s heart flutter.

The thought of the mysterious graduation present made her heart flutter even more. She still couldn’t believe how well the others kept the secret from her. It was almost four months since she agreed to help pay for it, yet not even Alex had dropped the slightest hint about the gift. How was that even
She was about to find out, though. Lauren told her to set aside the very end of the party for just Hope and a small group of friends. Now, the punch bowl was empty, the chocolate cake, devoured, and the rest of Hope's new teammates were out the door. Sure enough, Lauren caught her eye; it was time. “Hope, babe, we've got one more special thing for you!”

Hope, despite signs of tiredness, looked shrewdly at Kelley. “‘Special thing’?”

Lauren took charge. “She doesn’t know what it is.”

“Oh?! That’s a special thing itself.” Hope grinned and hugged Kelley close to her side.

“Um, babe, how much punch have you had?”

“I’m fine, Kell,” Hope assured her. “I won’t even need a ride home!”

“I think we found how much alcohol it takes to spoil your sense of humor,” Kelley murmured up at her.

“What?”

“I think we found how much alcohol it takes to spoil your sense of humor,” Kelley repeated.

“What?” This time, the teasing behind it was obvious. Kelley glared. Hope gave her a peck, then returned her attention to Lauren. “Is this your show, now, captain?”

“Basically. We have a present for you.”

“Other than the party?” Kelley armed her glare again, but saw that Hope looked genuinely surprised.

“Mm-hmm, an actual gift in a box,” Lauren replied, as she herded the group to sit on the living room floor.

“Oh, guys, you didn’t have to – I mean…” Hope shook her head. “Ugh, I’m gonna sound like a sap, but time with you is the best gift you could ever give.”

“NO!” Kelley stared at Lauren with gaping incredulity. Beyond, Alex and Amy collapsed in maniacal laughter.

“Yeah, I’d better not take any longer,” Lauren said with a chuckle. She produced a gift-wrapped box. “Hope, this is to you with love, from each of us.”

Hope received it with reverence and began unwrapping it, slowly. “Don’t worry about the box, it’s just to hold the bubble wrap,” Ali piped up.

“Spoiler alert,” Hope muttered. She had the paper off and was getting into the box.

“Do, actually, be careful…” said Karen, nervously.

Hope lifted out a hefty bundle of bubble wrap and set it in her lap. “There's definitely something in there.” She pulled back the layers. As the outline of the object within became clear, she stopped breathing. Beneath a final layer of waxed paper lay a brass mechanism of concentric rings, engraved with markings for hours, minutes, and seconds. She stilled, transfixed.

“No matter when you and Kelley are free,” Alex said in a voice both soft and rough, “you can be
together.”

“It’ll shift you up to twelve hours forwards or backwards,” added Amy.

Hope stared at the time-turner. “How…” Then, she remembered all the times her friends had seemed unusually industrious, the packed schedules and part-time jobs, the talk of yard sales, the nights out when her friends drank only water... A teardrop landed on a brass dial before Hope even realized she was crying. The rest of her tears flowed onto Kelley's hair, Lauren’s shirt, Jess's shoes, Karen's hands as she rescued the precious time-turner from the center of the moment. It felt too good to be true. “Pinch me, Kell.”

Kelley cupped her damp cheeks and gave Hope the kiss of a lifetime.

Chapter End Notes

Your comments are welcome, as always :)

The next chapter should be ready faster than this one was.
Crash

Chapter Notes

For several weeks after USSF sacked Hope Solo. I didn't have the heart to finish this chapter. I thought about skipping it entirely. Without it, though, Hope's story arc is too quick and simple; she's broken and Kelley heals her. Her character deserves a more complex treatment than that.

I say all this because this chapter "goes there". Please remember that this is fiction. While it is inspired by reports of real events, it is not intended to describe, explain, justify, or moralize them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The New Face of Slytherin

Ginevra Potter
Quidditch Correspondent

(1 June 2008) It's six in the morning at Hogwarts's Albus Dumbledore Memorial Stadium. The dew is barely off the grass, yet I am already late. A gaggle of students runs, exercises, and drills on the pitch. At the nearer goal posts, I recognize the familiar brunette ponytail of Montrose FC's newest goalkeeper. Another young woman, blonde with tattoos trailing down one shoulder, kicks a quaffle towards her as though playing football. The keeper dives right and blocks it with both palms, but there's so much power behind the kick that it cannons away like an unenchanted ball. She scrambles to her feet just as the blonde kicks a second quaffle towards her. She punches that away, then notices another student running toward the first rebound. She shifts to face the new threat. The quaffle skids low and fast over the wet ground, forcing her to drop awkwardly on top of it. She's saved three in the span of seven seconds. She stands up and tosses the quaffle back to the second kicker, grinning and brushing grass blades off her grey tank and black shorts. That's when I realize I can't tell which Houses they belong to.

I learn later that the blonde is in Gryffindor. Hope Solo is a Slytherin. I ask her how she views relationships with members of her House's arch-rival. “I don’t give a damn what people think.” She says it like it ought to be self-evident.

Maybe it should. The Hogwarts stadium, after all, owes its existence and even its name to Slytherins who forged their own paths – a student whose rebel army razed its predecessor and a teacher who murdered a Headmaster, by his own request. Nobody ever accused Slytherins of too readily bowing to popular opinion…

…It’s no secret when Hope Solo will make her professional debut: Sunday the thirteenth of July. Glossing over the political strife surrounding the following week's FIQA international break, the important fact is that Montrose FC's prime goalkeeper will be in unusually early training with Belgium’s national team while his clubmates take on Appleby. For Solo, it will be an early trial by fire – who can remember the last keeper to start a marquee match within one month of graduating? Naturally, she is bullish about it: “I’ll play my game and the rest of this championship team will play theirs, and we’ll claim the three points.”
“Do you have any concerns about your inexperience with Quidditch at this level?” I ask.

“None.” How about a personal goal for her first pro appearance? “A clean sheet.”

What more can I say? Mark your calendars.

Hope Lives Up To the Hype

Ginevra Potter
Quidditch Correspondent

(14 July 2008) While she did not achieve the shutout she aimed for, by anyone else's standards, Hope Solo (Montrose FC, 3-0-0) turned in an excellent first performance against the Appleby Arrows (2-1-0) last night. Her unfamiliarity with the pace of professional Quidditch was evident at times, but those moments were few and her saves, many. While no spectator would mistake her for a veteran, she was equal to the challenge of keeping Montrose in the game against one of the league’s better offenses. A series of spectacular parries during the final race for the snitch held Montrose’s lead against an Appleby side which looked unable to compose itself and increasingly desperate. The final score of twelve goals to eight is a testament to the quality of Montrose’s coaching and training staff – and a hint that Hope Solo possesses the substance to back up her bravado. Will she be content to remain the understudy of one of the international game's top goalkeepers, or will she seek a trade to a team where she could challenge for the starting lineup next season? I decline to guess, lest I join the burgeoning ranks of those she has proved wrong.

Elsewhere in the league...

It's Been a Tough Week in Quidditch

Ginevra Potter
Quidditch Correspondent

(21 July 2008) In the last seven days, one of the great seekers of the modern game announced his early retirement, the league's deputy commissioner was indicted on corruption charges, and one of the game's newest names suffered an injury. It's been a rough week.

I'll start at the end of the list and work upward. On Thursday, less than one week after setting a new record for save percentage by a first-year keeper in their first start, Hope Solo suffered an ACL tear in her right knee. Montrose FC have not released specifics of how the injury occurred. They estimate her recovery time at two months, which is typical of magic treatments for this injury. Solo underwent noninvasive, telekinetic ACL reconstruction on Thursday night and has returned, by Muggle airline, to the United States to recuperate with family and friends. She’ll return to Montrose for supervised physical therapy and conditioning, once the ligament has healed enough to endure magical travel. We at the Daily Prophet wish her a smooth and swift recovery.

In contrast, I have no sympathy for England-Ireland League Commissioner Bartholomew Rattlebiscut, who is accused of...

July 25, 2008

The first evening of Kelley’s long weekend at the Press residence flew by in stream of stories, laughs, and soccer tricks. Kelley didn’t notice until getting ready for bed that Hope hadn’t texted her
back since morning. Breakfast brought nothing new, nor did lunch, and Kelley felt driven to
distraction.

“Allright, girl, this is the part where you tell me what’s bothering you,” Christen finally said. “You
just aren’t here anymore.”

Kelley huffed and stared at her phone, which somehow kept finding its way into her hand. She
didn’t actually know Christen that well. Only a few weeks at Stanford, really. They’d been fast
friends, sure, but-

“Kelley!”

“Hope hasn’t texted me back in over a day.”

“That’s a long time for you guys?”

“Yeah. Damn it, I don’t know anymore. Her texts were getting shorter and dimmer all this week.”

“Dimmer?” asked Christen.

“Less bright. Like, it didn’t sound like she was smiling when she texted me. It was all in reply to my
texts, too. She gradually stopped texting me first between last week and this.”

“No wonder you’re torn up inside. So, you feel like she just kinda lost the spark of life? Have you
seen her do anything like this before?”

Kelley shuddered. “When she was trying to get rid of me last fall.”

“Oh, no.” Christen hugged her close. “Surely, it’s not about you. Something else has her down.”

“I guess it was something else last fall, too. But what could possibly shut Hope down like that?”

“You need to call her,” Christen said seriously.

“Yeah, I’ll try again…” Kelley opened up her phone and selected the number. One ring…two
rings…three rings….four rings…five rings…six rings…seven rings – “Hey, you’ve reached Hope
Solo’s cell. Leave yo’ digits and I might get back to ya’.” BEEP.

“Hey, babe…” Kelley realized how bleak she sounded and started over. “Hope, I’m worried about
you. You seem off in your texts and now you aren’t replying at all.” She sighed. “Look, whatever’s
got you down, let me in, okay? I want to be with you through the hard stuff, not just the sunny
days and championships. Call me back, please? I need to hear your voice, Hope.” Kelley blinked back

Kelley closed her phone and looked vacantly through it. “Now what?”

Christen smiled. “Chicken soup and Netflix?”

“Am I a sick person?”

“Heart-sick. We can have ice cream for dessert, too, if we need to.”

“What if she doesn’t call me?”

Christen put a firm hand on Kelley’s shoulder. “You know I’m here for you, sis, and I know you’re
feeling overwhelmed, but right now you’re flailing. If she doesn’t call, it doesn’t mean anything more
than her not texting you. If you mean, what should you do if you don’t hear from her tonight, I believe you already know what Hope needs from you.”

Kelley took a moment to clear her eyes. “What do you mean, I already know?”

“You’re her girlfriend! You know her and you saw her do this before.”

“Me.” Kelley nodded to herself resolutely. “I need to go see her. If she’s in another death spiral, then I need to go drag her out of it.”

Christen frowned. “Didn’t you say she’s with her family?”

Kelley twisted her lips while she considered how much to say. “If it’s really this bad, then whatever support she has up there isn’t working.”

“Then let's get you to Washington.”

“…I need to hear your voice, Hope. *sniff* Sorry. Yeah, call me. Bye.” *Click* “To delete this message, press seven. To save it in the archive…”

Hope stared at her phone. Listening to Kelley’s message had been a terrible idea. Coming back to Washington had been a terrible idea. What the fuck was she doing here?

The injury. That's why she was here. Rehab. Condemned to a month of tedious, mind-numbing exercises, the team physicians sent her home. What better place to recover than among family and friends? Except Hope no longer had friends in Richland. They’d all been Muggles and she couldn’t relate to them anymore – not because she refused, but because she lived a witch's life now. How could she keep her old friends if she couldn’t share anything with them?

But there was always family, right? Dad was passed but Mom would still drop everything and do anything for Hope. That’d been the bright spot in leaving Montrose. That and seeing Grandma again. Those first days were good, but they had to settle into a routine, and that left Hope frequently alone with her weakness and bored to tears. She didn’t blame them for having jobs and responsibilities, even though resenting them might’ve been easier than just feeling helpless all day. It was miserable.

That left her brother and her half-sister. Her brother…she didn’t want to be alone with him. Not when she’d fallen from professional athlete to weak little girl. Better safe than beaten. Her half-sister on the other hand, had been an angel. Had. This week, though, something felt off whenever Hope was around her and her son. In all the years of her life, Hope never experienced anything but love from the woman. She'd never resented Hope's athletic prowess, nor the attention it brought, and she never once begrudged Hope the magic which she hadn’t inherited from their father. Once, she'd even held Hope back from punching someone who dared call her a “squib”. Whatever was going on now, Hope wanted to give it space. She felt relieved when they went back to Seattle.

Altogether, Hope felt terrible. She had nothing to do and no one anywhere near her age to talk to. Kelley came the third day and buoyed her spirits, but the next day was Monday and Kelley had to go back to the commitments she'd planned around Hope's league calendar. They didn’t have the time-turner, either; it’d take all month to get an import license for it. Hope couldn’t apparate without risking her rehab progress, she couldn’t manage the walk to the library, and her family didn’t have the money for multiple cars. Day by day, a dark cloud crept into her mind. Why did she think coming back was a good idea?

You know what would be a good idea? A drink. She could borrow Mom's car this evening and bring back a good wine or something. A drink sounded like a very good idea.
“M’…’R’…’S’…’Smith’…’Strickland’ – ugh, too far. Ok, ‘Solomon’! Come on, come on, please let there be someone…”

Floo travel got Kelley and Christen most of the way to Richland, but not all of it. Something about security for the Hanford nuclear site – anyway, Kelley needed an hour-long bus ride to get to Hope's home town. In the yellow pages, inside a phone booth at the Greyhound station, Kelley found three numbers for people named ‘Solo’. None of them were Hope’s mom. Maybe she didn’t go by her legal first name? Someone had to know her. “Well, here goes…” She started dialing the first number, full of nervous energy. So full, in fact, that she jumped when her cell phone buzzed in her hand. She didn’t recognize the incoming number but answered anyway. “Kelley.”

“Hey.”

“Omigod.” She couldn’t help herself; Hope sounded flat and bitter. “Are you okay? Physically, I mean.”

“Yeah. I-” Kelley heard Hope swallow. “I’ll be fine.”

Not very comforting, Kelley thought. “Where are you?”

“Aren’t you in Georgia?”

“I’m at the bus station in R-Richland. Where are you?”

Kelley heard Hope groan through the telephone line. “I’m in…in Seattle. Kelley…I need-”

Kelley prompted Hope when she didn’t finish. “What do you need, Hope?”

Hope sighed like she existentially frustrated. “I can’t ask you-”

“You can. I am literally here for you.”

“Yeah.” Hope took a long breath. “Thank you, Kell-ey. I-”

“I heard that, Hope. Don’t you dare pull away from me.”

“Kell…” She heard another dry sigh, and then Hope spoke as though she couldn’t believe what she was saying. “Kell, I’m calling from a police station. I-…I’m in jail.”

Kelley clamped down on her tongue. She wanted to scream ‘Why?!’ at the world, but held it in. “What do you need me to do?”

“Get here.”

She stuffed the phonebook back under the payphone and headed for the ticket window. “I’ll be on the next bus. Tell me where.”

Hope gave her the address. “Also, get Mia. Tell her where I am and that I need a lawyer.”

“I will.”

“Do you have her number?”

“Umm…I know Alex and Ash do. I’ll get it. What else?”
“Every fucking thing!” Kelley heard a voice in the background. “That’s all for now. I have to go.”

“Hope.” The tears Kelley had kept back broke through. “Hope, whatever’s going on, I’m with you. You got that? I’m with you.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“I know what I’m saying, Hope. No matter who did what, I will be there for you.”

For a moment, silence, then a thick swallow reached Kelley’s ear. “See you soon, Kell.”

“See you soon, Hope.”

The connection ended. Kelley stared down at her phone until a jolt shook her mind loose. She looked up and realized she’d boarded her bus on autopilot. Pushing away the ache in her legs and her back and her heart, she called Alex and waited. A cheery, raspy answering machine greeted her.

“Hey. Call me – it’s Kelley.” She hung up and tried Ashlyn.

“Kelley! Hey, how are you?”

“I’m…” she didn’t know how she was. “Hope’s in trouble. I need Mia’s number.”

“I’ll text it to you. Call me right back, ok?”

“Ok.” She hung up, got the text, and dialed.

“This is Mia Hamm.”

“Hi, it’s Kelley.” An awkward silence ensued. “Uh, Kelley O’Hara?”

“Oh! Sorry, I was trying to think of a polite way to ask ‘which Kelley?’ How’s life away from the castle going?”

“My bad, sorry. Um…I’m fine. Hope’s not. She’s…well, she didn’t say over the phone what’s going on, but she’s…been arrested in Seattle. She says she needs a lawyer. I’m on my way to see her.”

Mia went silent again. “Forgive me, it’s just shock. I will get right on it.”

“Thank you.” Kelley gave the details, and then rang Ashlyn again.

“Did Mia have what you needed?”

“Yeah. Ash…you know that song you always listen to? The one that’s so raw and real to you?”

“’Lose Yourself’?”

“I think so. You know how it goes, ‘I’ve got to formulate a plot, or I end up in jail or shot?’”

“Yeah. Is Hope in that kind of trouble?”

“Ash, I wanted to ask you…”

“Yes?”

“Have you ever been in a – to a…”
“Jail?”

“I want to know what to expect. What it’ll be like, for Hope.”

Kelley could picture Ashlyn pursing her lips and staring into the distance. “*If I can answer a quote with a quote,*” she finally replied, “‘Police officers are lifeguards on the shores of Lake Fucked’. Whatever happened, remember that a few days or even months in jail is better than a lot of the alternatives. I mean, if Hope was arrested for driving drunk, it kept her from hurting anyone. If there was a fight, the cops may have stopped it before someone found a weapon.”

“But that’s all so…so…” overwhelming. Kelley hadn’t yet imagined why Hope might’ve been arrested. “I’m scared, Ash.”

“What, exactly, are you scared of?”

Kelley grappled to make sense of the maelstrom in her chest and put words to her feelings. “I’m afraid…” Her tone hardened. “No. I’m angry that something’s gone wrong for Hope now, after she’s come so far!” She paused to cool down. “I’m scared of all that good falling apart. I was scared of that already – I hadn’t heard from her in days, and I actually came to Washington this morning – and now I’m terrified that being thrown in jail is going to break her down again.”

Ashlyn took a moment to respond. “*Did she ask you to come to her?*”

“Yes.”

“*Then she’s afraid of all that, too.*”

A fresh tear rolled down Kelley’s cheek. “Thank you, Ash.”

Hope, Kelley saw, looked trapped: wounded, frustrated, angry, despairing, and bitter. Kelley forced herself to walk calmly across the visiting room. She wanted to run to her girlfriend, but knew that the guards wouldn’t see it so innocently. When she was still two paces beyond hugging distance, Hope said distinctly, “They’re charging me with assault.”

Kelley stopped in surprise. Hope’s mouth twisted as if to say, ‘told you so’; Kelley rushed in and hugged her. “That was just shock, Hope. It’s hard to believe. Do you want to talk about it?”

“Yes. It’s driving Mia’s lawyer up the wall,” Hope jerked her head toward a crisp woman in a gray pantsuit who waited by a door, “but I refused to talk to her until you got here. This way, nobody can make you testify.”

“Couldn’t I plead the fourth or whatever?”

“The Fifth Amendment,” the lawyer corrected, “only applies to testimony about yourself. A client's discussions with her attorney, however, are privileged – off-limits in court. Now, can we get started before the judges go home?” She opened the door and waved them into a tiny conference room.

The lawyer opened her briefcase and produced a legal pad and pen. “To reiterate: you, Hope Solo, were arrested at your half-sister’s residence at 12:13 AM today, after she phoned 911 and alleged that you were beating her and her teenage son. You’re being charged with two counts of assault and one of driving under the influence of alcohol. The responding officers also report that you were ‘verbally belligerent’ towards them. Since you woke up this morning, you have refused to answer any and all questions until after consulting an attorney…”
Kelley slipped her hand around Hope's and held on.

“…My first concern is this: do you want to pursue a plea of not guilty?”

“Obviously, but that’s the thing,” Hope said, with frustration; “I barely remember anything.”

“Not ‘obviously’, but we'll come back to that. What parts do you remember?”

“I remember driving to the store for a bottle of wine, driving back and drinking in front of my mom’s house, and then I decided to go to my sister’s. After that, everything’s blurry or just missing. All I know for sure is I got hit hard on my head, because it's still swollen.”

The lawyer frowned but nodded. “If you remember anything later, tell me immediately. Don’t make anything up or try to guess what happened. It won't help.”

Kelley sensed Hope stiffen and squeezed her hand. As she thought about it, she realized something didn’t add up. “When did you come to Seattle? Yesterday?”

“I drove last night, like I said.”

“All the way from Richland?”

“Richland!” The lawyer started. “What time did you leave for Seattle?”

“Not long after nine.”

The lawyer flipped through her notes. “Hope, the 911 call was at…and you were there for a while before, right? You can’t have driven here in that time.”

“Then just what do you suggest instead…” Hope’s hostility melted. “Oh, shit. I remember wondering why my knee felt weird when I got there.” She slumped back and stared up at the ceiling. “I must've apparated myself and the whole fucking car halfway across the state. Probably added a week to my goddamn recovery!”

“Well, that settles the question of which court system would try your case.” The lawyer made a note. “There’s still the question of your plea. The first option, and the one the DA’s office will push for, is a plea bargain. You’d plead guilty to the charges in exchange for a reduced sentence, compared to what you’d get if a jury found you guilty. I expect they'll tell us what they're offering by the end of the day. The second option is to plead not guilty and fight the case as far as we can. The challenge will be to convince a jury to acquit when you don’t have an alternative account of what happened.”

Hope rubbed her forehead. “So, I can confess to something I don’t think I did or claim I didn’t do something I don't remember?”

“In this case, the move to a wizards' court might be to your advantage. We could subpoena the witnesses' actual memories and view the events through their eyes.”

“They're Muggles,” Hope objected.

“They'll have their memories of the trial confiscated when they leave. There is a downside for you, though. Sports teams and sponsors are more likely to care if you're convicted in a magic court than if you take a plea deal to avoid a Muggle trial.”

“So I'm fucked either way,” Hope said flatly. Kelley squeezed her hand again and tilted her head to glare from under her brows. Hope met her eyes. As Kelley watched, Hope softened, slouched in her
seat, and then took her hand away and wiped her face with it. She folded her hands on the little table and spoke with a voice both burdened and firm. “I need to know what happened. We’ll do the wizards’ court with the memories.”

The lawyer nodded calmly. “I understand. I want to be clear, though, that memories are not objective recordings. If the alleged victims felt, for example, angry or afraid, your image in their extracted memories will be hateful or frightening. Take it with reservations. Judges instruct jurors to do the same.”

When Hope kept her hands on the desk, Kelley settled for resting her hand on Hope’s leg. “What about bail?”

“We’ll make our case for it tomorrow morning, I expect.” The lawyer folded her notebook. “That’s all from me, unless you remember something new?” Hope shook her head. “Well, then, I’ll get to work. You can’t stay in here, by the way.”

They filed out of the room and the couple sat at the nearest of the institutional steel tables. “Hope,” Kelley began, but her girlfriend interrupted her.

“Kelley, until I know whether you’re safe around me-”

Kelley objected. “But you didn’t do it!”

“While we were in there, I realized that just thinking I didn’t isn’t good enough. Until I know, we should…back off some.”

Kelley stared, then glared. “Hell, no! Don’t start with that ‘walking disaster’ crap again.”

“Think, Kelley! If…if I really did, and you'd been there-“

Kelley’s eyes flashed. “The only problem I see is that I should've been there! My god, Hope, I'd have dropped everything if I thought you were in trouble.” Kelley simmered down to a warm grin. “You couldn’t pry me away from you with a crowbar, Hope.”

Hope’s lips twitched upward and then sank again. “I couldn’t live with myself if I hurt you, Kell.”

“You won’t.” Kelley cupped Hope’s cheek with one hand and twirled the fingers of the other in her hair. “Did you go to pieces again, like you did over liking me?”

A sigh. “Yes.”

“What happened that killed your spirit?”

“Every fucki-” Hope stopped herself. “Not being able to go anywhere or do anything or see anyone.”

“Family wasn’t such a good place to recuperate?”

“It’s really just Mom and Gran’ around here – I mean, there, and they both keep busy. Too much time alone.”

“Stay with me.”

Hope’s eyes widened. “Kelley, we don’t even know if they'll let me out of jail.”

“But if you can, come stay with my family.” Kelley saw Hope’s frown and shook her head. “Would
you rather be miserable than meet them now?”

Hope threw her arms wide. “Hey, Mom and Pop, meet my girlfriend! She's charged with beating her relatives in a drunken rage.” She relaxed but remained sarcastic. “What better time to meet the O’Hara’s?”

“I’d rather deal with that than send you back to Richland, Hope.”

Hope sighed. “We'll talk about it once we know if can even travel.”

Kelley caught her eyes again and smiled until Hope's features followed, then kissed her on each cheek. “I'm with you, Hope, no matter who did what.”

“Hi, Mom, it's me…I'm doing well – yes, still in Seattle. I think I'll be back tonight…Hope is – actually, that’s what I want to talk to you about. A big part of the problem was that she was in a bad environment at home. I want her to stay with us for a couple weeks. She'll go back to the team in Scotland as soon as…Yes, Mom, it's a bad situation. I was going to be upfront about it but you kept asking…Look, she hit rock bottom here and hit hard. I know she'll get better, faster, if I'm around…it's not dependent! She was just fine in Montrose. Listen, this is my only question: will you support her? ‘Cause if you judge her before you even meet her, that’s like the only way this could get worse for her. She's already afraid…fine, sure, put him on.

“Hey, Dad…Mhmm…yes…no, she's free to leave the city. They can track her with you-know-what. Dad, please just listen for a- you do?! But…Ha-ha, that actually makes sense. Will you give her an honest chance, though? Because if y'all make her feel unwelcome…Thank you, Dad. What about Mom? …Yeah, I understand. You both would love her, though, if you'd met her a month ago…I know, stability is on my mind, too, but I know what brings out her best and worst. Just trust me on this one, please…Aww, you're the best, Dad! So, hey, there's the matter of tickets home…yeah, I remember your employee number…thank you again, this means so much to me. I love you, Dad. Mom too, tell her for me? …See you soon. Bye.” Kelley put away her phone and stepped out of another phone booth. Hope looked up at her and she smiled. “We're good.”

“Are they really okay with me staying?” Hope asked, evidently not ready to believe.

Kelley nodded and sat next to her girlfriend. “Mom's worried about her little girl, naturally. Dad joked that if you were really that bad, he wanted you where he could see you. But seriously, he promised they'd be supportive of us both. Believe me, they're good about being slow to judge.”

Hope tried to smile and failed. “I wish I didn’t have to meet them like this.”

“Yeah, well, you really do need to do better at taking care of yourself. I'm with you, Hope, but that doesn’t mean this is nothing to me. I'm appalled, Hope, appalled that you lost yourself like this. And if it turns out you actually…” she didn’t want to say the words.

“I still don’t believe I started it, but they didn’t beat themselves, Kelley.”

Kelley wrapped an arm around Hope. “Look at me.” Hope did. “I love you, Hope. I hate what we know about what happened, but I still love you. Please believe me, Hope, because you need to understand that what I'm about to say is not any kind of ultimatum. Hope, this death spiral thing can’t happen again. Not because I might not be with you afterward, because I will, but because you might not.”

“Did I ever tell you that I hate airplanes?” Hope said, after they'd settled in for their flight.
“Because you’re a passenger?” Kelley asked.

“Miles up, in a metal tube, with no control at all.”

“Cruising is actually the safest part of the flight.”

“Not reassuring.” She gave Kelley a dirty look and tried to get comfortable. Her knee ached. They bought a pair of crutches for her on the way to SeaTac, which had been fun. Not. Crutching through the busy airport was enough to sour her mood on its own. Navigating the airplane’s aisle was even harder. At least the flight attendants stowed the crutches in a closet for her – Kelley had made sure they could when she’d booked their flight. Kelley had done everything. “Why are you still here?”

Kelley twisted to face her. “Look me in the eye when you ask me that.”

Hope did. “Why are you still here?”

“Because I love you.”

“And that outweighs…?”

“I’ve seen your best, Hope. This is…a…a horrible bump in the road.”

“They claim I slammed my nephew’s head against the floor and you call it just a ‘bump’?”

Kelley sighed. “No, it's not. It's big and it's bad. You might go to prison for it. I just don't know any words that don’t make it sound like I'm minimizing it.”

“So, why are you still here?”

“Because you can still not let it define you…and I want to see you smile again. Hope, I keep saying I’m with you, no matter who did what, because, even if it happened exactly like they say, you still have a future and I still want to be part of it.”

Their arrival at the O’Hara household was late and subdued. Both they and her parents seemed intent on sleeping first and talking later. That was probably for the best. Now, Hope was in the guest bed and Kelley was in her old room. She’d offered to keep Hope company, but Hope turned her down. “I don’t want to overwhelm your parents,” she’d said. Kelley had admitted she had a point, but, in her own bed, alone with her thoughts for the first time all day, she regretted it. How had things gone so wrong? What was wrong with Hope? Was something wrong with her? She reached for her phone and called Alex.

“Kelley?”

“Hey.”

“What’s up? Are you home now? Isn’t it late where you are?”

“Yeah. Hope’s staying with us, for now.”

“Does her mom know?”

“Yeah. It sounded like a hard conversation, but I think she understood that Hope needed company.”

“How is she?”
“Bitter and exhausted.”

“And you?”

“Drained.” Kelley pushed through it. “I don’t get it, Alex. How could she get so out of control? How can she be worse now than when we got together?”

“Um,” Alex paused. “Are you asking about her or you?”

“What?”

“Like, it sounded like you were putting her situation on yourself.”

“Alex…am I not enough?” Her tears started as soon as she said the words.

“Kelley! Aww, Kelley…I’m so sorry you’re having to go through this.”

“Am I, though?”

“Kelley, listen, of course you aren’t. You can’t ‘fix’ her. Like, you can’t even think about it that way. All you can do is encourage her and challenge her when something looks off.”

Kelley sighed. “Fuck long distance.”

“We knew it would be hard,” Alex consoled her. “We put our focus on the time-turner, but the injury…”

“Ruined everything.”

“You’ve got her back, now. Help her help herself, Kelley.”

“I’ll try.” Kelley sighed. “Again.”

“You’re literally the best I’ve ever seen, girl. You are so patient and understanding, without giving any slack.”

“Thanks, Alex.”

“Good night, Kelley. Sleep well and think good thoughts.”

Soft light, the smell of coffee brewing…Hope shifted and felt nicer sheets than usual. Where was she? Right, Kelley’s house. That wasn’t so bad, was it?

Her first attempt at standing filled her knee with angry pain. Not good; it hadn't felt that bad since the first few days. With the aid of the crutches, she limped to the bathroom, where she found towels and a robe laid out for her. That’s when she noticed the bruises, which brought the whole reality back. Her insides imploded. “What kind of monster beats her own sister?” she said to no one. Your brother, that’s who, and you’re just like him. What a shitty person you are, Hope.

But I didn’t! There’s no way I did what they said! Her internal monologue refought the argument.

Do you believe they’d just make it up? Or start a fight and pin it on you?

No. But I still don’t believe I did.

Oh, sure, that’ll hold up just fine in court. She lowered herself to the floor, slumped against the wall,
and let the steam flush away her tears.

Finally, Hope made it to the kitchen, where Kelley turned away from the stove. “Good morning, Hope.” The smile on her face defied Hope's expectations.

“Morning, Kell.” She saw no others in the kitchen. “Where’s your family?”

“On a run. Did you slee- wait, hang on a sec.’” Kelley removed the last of the bacon from the skillet and shut off the stove. She wiped her hands on a towel and walked to meet Hope halfway. “Did you sleep well, babe?”

“Much better than I thought I would,” Hope admitted. “I actually didn’t remember until I got in the shower. My knee hurts like hell. I think it got knocked around during…and then we walked a lot yesterday.”

“I’m sorry, Hope.” She patted the countertop. “Hop up here and let me take care of you.”

“I’m not doing any hopping, Kell.”

“I’ll help. Use your hands, not your legs.” Kelley gripped Hope’s waist and helped her push up and onto the counter.

“Thank god you work out,” Hope said, in a half-hearted attempt at humor.

Kelley smiled anyway. “That’s progress,” she said with a gentle voice and a searching look. “Have you decided to start living again?”

Hope shrugged with her hands. “How?”

In Kelley’s eyes, tears glistened. “You were doing so well, Hope. All you ever needed to do was keep trying, but you quit! Why did you quit?”

“I guess it’s hard to keep putting one foot in front of the other when you can’t actually walk”

“Hard.” Kelley looked disappointed but stayed gentle. “You fought tooth and nail to get ready for your first match, but keeping a positive outlook was too hard?”

Hope knew it wasn’t impressive, but, “Yeah, basically.”

“You risked a career-ending maiming by apparating while blackout drunk, while driving, and then got in a fight, because taking care of yourself for a couple weeks is hard?”

Kelley’s voice and eyes, soft throughout, burned into and through Hope's shame and self-derision. “It’s not supposed to be, is it?”

“Not that hard, babe. Let’s start eating before we forget again.” Kelley shoveled the now lukewarm bacon into a bowl and tossed a few apples and oranges in with it. “Drink?”

“I feel like just water today.”

“Ice?” Hope nodded. Kelley got drinks for the two of them and moved the bowl to the middle of the island countertop. She hopped up alongside Hope, sat on it with her legs hanging over the edge, and grinned like a little girl. Hope really, wholeheartedly smiled back. “So,” Kelley mumbled around a mouthful of apple, “you were making progress with that therapist, right?”

“I…” But Hope couldn’t continue, because Kelley, cheeks full and looking up at her with those
eyes, looked more like a squirrel than ever. She laughed, fitfully at first, but growing as Kelley’s smile encouraged her.

“Instant sadness cure,” Kelley said after she’d swallowed. “It’s basically my superpower.”

“Oh, I think you have a few others.”

At that, Kelley wiggled her eyebrows while making the most absurd suggestive face she could, then snorted and broke down laughing at herself. “I'm not sure if I just proved you wrong or right,” she said.

“How are you always grinning?”

“Hope, I’m not always – I know you know, but I think it’s important to say so. I love making my friends laugh, I love playing and competing, and of course I love winning, so I do those things as often as possible. That means I grin a lot. What – oh god, this sounds corny – what makes you grin, Hope?”

Hope grinned. “You, ‘cause you’re corny as Kansas in August.” Kelley nearly choked on her bacon. “Competing and winning, like you said, good times with my favorite people…I think I might be more a smiler than a grinner, though.”

“’s long as you feel good,” Kelley affirmed.

“Reading good writing…visiting cool places…”

“So, getting immobilized was like a perfect storm for you. Did you at least read a lot?”

“Yeah, but I ran out of books after half a week of reading all day.” Hope sighed. “Kelley, you’re right, I should’ve and could handle myself better than I did. But somehow it's like…like, whenever I should have bucked up and gotten control, I couldn’t. Like I had no will to notice, or do anything if I did notice.”

Kelley nodded and held her hand. “Did you get into this with the therapist?”

“Not really. There was so much else to talk about and, well, I started seeing her right after we got together, so I felt generally happy. It didn’t come up.”

“Hope, I'm no expert, but does the word ‘depression’ seem like it fits?”

Hope pursed her lips. “That might be accurate.”

“How would you feel about seeing a psychiatrist while you’re here?”

Hope sat still and thought. “I guess it can’t make things any worse. How am I gonna get to one, though?”

“We’ll find a way, Hope.” They heard the door open, followed by voices from the hall.

“Looks the same as when we left. I don’t see any debris.”

“Stop it, hon’. If she's everything Kelley says, she's taking this all very hard.”

“Just testin’ you.”

Kelley gave Hope an encouraging smile. “It’s going to be good, I promise. Just relax.”
Kelley helped Hope research psychiatrists in the area. Now, they were parked outside of one, in Kelley’s mom’s car. “How are you doing, babe?”

“Afraid,” Hope confessed in a small voice.

Kelley turned in her seat to face Hope and took both her hands. “Of what, goalkeeper?”

In her chest, Hope felt a spark of warmth and pride; Kelley still thought of her as an athlete. It helped her keep her chin up as she said, ‘I’m afraid – terrified – that the psychiatrist is going to do whatever tests they do and say, ‘Nope, you don’t have depression, you’re just screwed up that way. Nothing anyone can do, sorry.’” She clenched her jaw to stop it from quivering.

Kelley wrapped her up as best she could across the center console. “Hope,” she whispered against her girlfriend’s neck, “there’s no such thing. I can’t believe it. You'll leave with a strategy for beating this, whatever it is.”

“Thank you, Kell.” She took a deep breath through Kelley’s hair. “Nothing left to do but go.” They got out, Kelley retrieved the crutches from the back, and they went inside.

“Hope Solo? Yes, she's here. I'll put her on.” Kelley held her phone out for Hope. “It’s the lawyer.”

“Hello,” Hope said, with unwelcome nervousness.

“Hope! Tell me you lost your phone.”

Her tone put Hope on the defensive. “I lost my phone,” she said coolly. Kelley smirked at her; she knew Hope had left it upstairs.

“You should've given me an alternate contact number. Listen, there’s been a development. The Assistant DA for magic went to serve the subpoenas on the witnesses' memories yesterday. It turns out that your half-sister and nephew went on some kind of ‘purge’ and threw out or destroyed everything having to do with you and the night of the incident. Things like the handgun you remembered but they claim was a BB pistol – thrown in the river or burned. What’s even worse is your sister found a Legilimens who agreed to extract and obliterate their memories of the night of the incident.”

“What?!”

“It's unprecedented. The DA's office confirmed that she and her son retain nothing but the belief that you acted as described in their statements to the police. They also tracked down the memories and they're beyond para-forensic reconstruction.”

Hope felt a lump forming in her throat. “So now what happens?”

“The city’s case against you collapses, is what happens. They have no evidence and no credible witnesses. The assault charges will be dropped. I see no way out of the DUI, but I think I can get it down to just a fine and a suspended license. It’s over, Hope. You’re a free woman.”

“I…” Hope’s mind couldn’t form words. When she said, “Thank you,” it was as much a shortcut as an expression of gratitude. She hung up.

Kelley saw the stress and worry in Hope’s tightened face. “Babe?”
“My half-sister and her nephew destroyed everything having to do with me. They even got some wizard to erase their memories. The city’s giving up on the case.”

Kelley laid a hand on Hope’s arm. “Which means there’s no way to be certain what happened.”

Hope slammed her fist on the counter and clenched her eyes shut.

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*My dearest friends,*

*Greetings from Georgia! I wish I was writing to tell you about my vindication, but I’m not. The people who accused me of beating them – my own family members – destroyed everything which reminded them of me. Even their own memories are gone forever. Basically, the case is the word of a drunk driver against the word of the people who burned the evidence. There’s no way to try it. My charges are dropped, but I will never know if I behaved the way they claimed or not.*

*I’m dealing with this, as Kelley perfectly put it, by making my own closure. On the one end, I’m refusing to condemn myself for something I may not have done. I’m going to face you and the world each day as though I know I am innocent, because that’s who I want to be. I choose to be a Hope Solo who does not abuse the people she cares about.*

*On the other end, I am absolutely guilty of several terrible decisions. I didn’t ask for help. I looked for relief at the bottom of a bottle. I drove and apparated while blackout drunk. I’m sure there are more that I don’t remember. As friends and teammates who depend on me, you deserve to know how I’m addressing my shortcomings. For starters, I’m doubling down on my counseling sessions. Second, I’m seeing a psychiatrist and we’re working on a plan to treat my current depression and make it less likely to recur. I start on my first antidepressant tomorrow. Third, I’m spending so much quality time with the O’Hara family. So far, that’s been the most healing and the most inspiring part of my recovery, because, damn, do I love that girl! I want to be my best self every day to make her family proud.*

*I can't wait to see y'all again! As soon as I'm cleared to travel, I'm coming to see all of you. You deserve the best from me. Also, I love you.*

*USA!*

*Hope Solo*

*P.S. Please burn this letter. If any news of this gets back to England, Rita Skeeter will be screaming about it. I'm serious, don't even set this down. Burn it right now.*

“Do you think they'll accept it?” Hope asked Kelley, that night.

“Who-what?”

“What I said in the letter, about putting this awful mess behind me. Do you think...?”

“They won’t reject you, Hope. They know you.”

“Yeah, but-“

“No ‘but's. We’ve got your back, even with grave, self-inflicted stuff like this.”

“How long, though? When do you all get to a point where you do leave me?”
“If you made a pattern of getting mixed up in drunken altercations, we'd have this conversation again,” Kelley answered, “but you won’t.”

Hope smiled sadly. “I really believe you'd hang on until it killed you, Kelley, but the others? They're not in love with me. When does, say, Tobin go, ‘I’ve had it with you’?”

“When would you want her to?”

“When I deserved it.”

Damn, Kelley sighed, I thought I had her with that one. “Do you plan to deserve it?”

“More of a contingency plan.”

“So, you don’t plan to have a terrible match, but you expect to? Lord knows, I can’t tell the difference!”

Hope raised a half-hearted eyebrow. “‘Lord knows’?”

“I think I was channeling my mom just then,” Kelley admitted. “Seriously, Hope, this is all in your head, not your soul. You can practice and beat it.”

“There's just so much, Kelley…”

“That’s your negative habits talking. Positive Hope sees all that as motivation to start ASAP.”

Hope sighed and inspected the ceiling. “Goalkeeping is so fucking simple compared to this.”

Kelley smiled sideways and glanced at the clock. “No, you’re just used to being in practice, but you’re facing all of this at once.”

“I guess so. What time is it?”

“About one minute,” was Kelley’s cryptic reply.

“Huh?”

Kelley looked back at the clock and waited. “Thirty seconds”

“Until what? Nine-fifteen?”

“…fifteen…ten…five, four, three, two, one.” She sat back and folded her arms.

“What?” Hope asked, as nothing happened. Kelley held a finger against smirking lips.

Ssss-Pow! A noise came from the basement, and then another, sharper; Crack! Then came many footsteps on the stairs. “It’s so weird, seeing the inside before the outside,” said a familiar rasp.

“Alex?!” Hope exclaimed.

Amy stepped into the room, followed by Alex and all their crew. “Wait until you can travel? Ain’t nobody got time for that.”

“We would’ve apparated out to Washington every day if we knew you needed company,” Ashlyn said.

“We all thought you were right where you wanted to be,” Lauren explained. “All you ever have to
do is ask for help, okay? We’ve got your back.”

“Thank you.” Hope felt the too-familiar welling of tears in her eyes. “Dammit, I failed all of you. I failed.”

“We know, and we know you can do better,” Ashlyn said. “That’s part of what we mean by ‘we’ve got your back’. We want to be there for you before you get hurt.”

Hope asked the question she’d been asking all week: “Why?”

Alex and Tobin both tried to answer; Tobin deferred. “Hope, we remember you at your best. It’s worth the effort to help you be that person,” Alex said.

Hope smirked. “For Kelley?”

“For you.” Hope saw that Alex meant it.

September

Finally back in Montrose, Hope felt reasonably good. Being away from Kelley was a bummer, obviously, but her rehabilitation was finally becoming interesting. She might even be cleared to run tomorrow! The medication seemed to help, too. She saw a future for herself again.

Lindsay Tarpley poked her head into the weight room, were Hope was working on re-strengthening her legs. “Hey, Hope. G.M. wants a word.” Hope toweled off, threw on a shirt and pants, and followed her out to the team manager’s office.

The man inside sat behind a desk befitting the head of a centuries-old team. “Hope Solo. First, my goalkeeping staff is very impressed with you. We’re excited to see you develop over the next seasons. I’ve had a report, though…” he poked a paper on his desk with a pencil. “This business in Seattle while you were DL’d. It’s a bad spot for us. I include you in ‘us’, by the way.”

Hope nodded. “I know.”

“If this gets into the media, there'll be all kinds of pressures and distractions which we don't need. It's in everyone’s interest for you to steer clear of controversy.” He leaned back in his chair. “Honestly, Hope, you can wale away on squibs all you like, for all I care, but you not if you get caught. The publicity…”

He kept talking, but all Hope heard was the blood pounding in her ears. Her face heated until it boiled over. “You do not talk about my family that way.”

The G.M. looked surprised. “Be reasonable; it’s manifest that they don’t see you as family. Better to wash your hands of the Muggles and have done with it. I’m just looking out for you here, Hope.”

“You patronizing…” She stopped only because Lindsay grabbed her arm and dragged her from the room. Now, she shook her teammate off and stormed down the hall.

“Hope!”

She didn’t want to stop until the weight room door slammed behind her.

“Hope, please.”

Alright, Hope thought, if she's begging, that means she knows that I'm right. She stopped and half-
“Hope, next chance you get, there's a movie you and Kelley should watch.”

“What?” Hope was stunned.

“It’s called *Patton*,” Lindsay said. “It’s about a brilliant general who couldn’t stay out of trouble. It's kind of a dad movie, so start it early.”

“After that, you’re suggesting a movie?” Hope's voice was so cold it burned.

“I don't know how to segue from 'that', but yes, I am, and I'm completely serious. You could be him reincarnated, Hope.”

A new thought distracted Hope from her anger. “Is that actually a thing? I thought it wasn't, but I'm also a witch, so…”

“No, not that I've heard of.”

Hope got a grip on herself. “You just saved my career, didn’t you?”

“Maybe. Don't make me do it again.”

“I can’t believe…” Hope rubbed her face, then checked to make sure they were alone. “I can't believe I was going to call the manager a 'patronizing son of a bitch'. Like you can't believe you beat your family? A little voice whispered.

“If I'd known he was, I would've warned you.” Lindsay cocked her head at Hope. “Don’t take this personally, but I can’t help wondering; did nobody tell you, when you were little, ‘if you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all’?”

“I probably told them to go fuck themselves,” Hope muttered. “No, I remember that. I just didn’t see the point until now.”

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*Graceless in Defeat*

**Ginevra Potter**

*Quidditch Correspondent*

(6 October 2008) It's been said (at least, I assume it has; if not, I'll take credit) that we play sports because we do not know what will happen. After the last week of the season, it feels as if we still don’t know what happened. In a match featuring Montrose FC’s (8-4-0, final) league-leading defense, the Appleby Arrows’ (8-3-1, final) top-scoring offense, three scoring area violations, two six-second calls, and a partridge in a pear tree, Appleby won by 8 goals to 3 and took the snitch. It is Montrose’s worst result of the season. With the win, Appleby claimed the 2008 England-Ireland Quidditch League title.

Let’s start with those scoring area calls, all of which went against the Magpies. Each time, the linesmen flagged a chaser who was leaving the area while another was entering with the quaffle. It has been the custom of officials in this league to not call one-player-in-the-area violations when one player is clearly exiting, but not fully across the line, when a second enters. This interpretation was nowhere to be found on Sunday, and it cost Montrose three good scoring chances.

Now, about the six-second rule. On paper, the letter of the law is that a goalkeeper may not retain
control of the quaffle for more than six seconds. In practice, the only rule which is less enforced is the one against logos on the corner flags. We observe season after season without a six-second call, and yet, last night, the referee appeared to warn the Montrose keeper about holding onto the quaffle, then blew his whistle not once, but twice. Appleby scored off of both indirect restarts. It was a strange night, and the atmosphere among the Montrose fans was negative, to say the least.

Which brings me to the stinger at the end of the night. Montrose, missing their first-choice goalkeeper, again played Hope Solo against Appleby. She performed well, though not as well as in her previous appearance. Whether she is still returning to form after her ACL injury, or was simply frustrated with the course of the game, or both, is anyone’s guess. What we need not guess is her feeling about the result. Speaking to reporters on the sideline, she accused the officials of fixing the match.

Yes. Really.

Now, Montrose fans out there may share her sentiment, but there is an internal, non-inflammatory way for such complaints to be made. Lashing out in front of the media is unbecoming of a champion and bad PR for the league. Expect to see a fine and suspension handed down today or tomorrow.

For the record, we reviewed footage of the match and determined that the referees were unbiased in applying their strict interpretations. Appleby was simply not guilty of breaking either rule.

There were also other matches this weekend, though none of the other teams were in contention for the league title. Holyhead finally snapped its losing streak by beating Caerphilly…

——

“Hope, remember that ‘dad movie’ that Tarp recommended? My dad knew exactly what she meant. He says it's really well done, but slow, so we should make a game out of it.”

“What kind of game?”

“We each write down quotes that remind us of you, then talk about them after.”

“Sounds like watching a movie for school, honestly.”

“Dad says it'll put us to sleep unless we approach it that way.”

“Best movie night ever. Wanna do it this weekend at my place?”

“It’s a date, babe.”

——

When the credits finished, Kelley peeled herself up from the couch and headed for the light switch. “Wow.”

“I just know I'm gonna be hearing that music all week – gahh, too bright!”

“Sorry!”

Hope rubbed at her eyes. “Say something next time, Kell.”

Kelley flipped the switch off again. “Babe, you cool with me turning on the lights?”

“Sure, please, I haven’t cried in a while.” And she hadn’t, Hope realized.

Kelley turned them back on, and then sat facing Hope. “So, what’s on your quote list?”
“A bunch, but the one I double-underlined is, ‘Your worst enemy is your own big mouth’.”

“Yeah, I starred that one…”

Hope began another. “‘They said I was the greatest general since Stonewall Jackson!’”

“‘And now they draw cartoons about you’,” Kelley finished the exchange.

“And this was only my first season.” Hope sighed. “You know, what actually got to me, more than any of that stuff, was that last scene, where he's walking the dog, and it's just the horn, the strings, and him with the voiceover about Rome.”

Kelley stared into space as the words echoed in her head. “A slave stood behind the conqueror, holding a golden crown, and whispering in his ear a warning: that all glory is fleeting.”

Kelley returned from Hope’s kitchen and slipped back into bed. Hope – her Hope – slept on, swaddled in soft light and peace. It made Kelley a little misty-eyed. She wished the rest of the world could see her like this. Yeah, so Hope could be undiplomatic. She needed time to handle a bad loss, but the world demanded she speak on the record within minutes. If you don’t want harsh, unfiltered Hope, don’t ask for it!

Of course, people didn’t think they were asking for it. The US soccer team handled last year’s Women’s World Cup loss respectfully. You could call Hope ‘flawed’, in comparison. Alright, she wasn’t as good a role model as Mia Hamm, but was Hope even interested in modeling a role? “Fuck roles,” she'd probably say, “I'm here to play my game, not someone else's. I hope girls find inspiration in my success, but I didn't get here by trying to be ‘like’ anyone and I don't care whether anybody wants to be ‘like’ me”. Was she right to think that way?

So absorbed in thought was Kelley that Hope's awakening surprised her. “Here's lookin' at you, too, Kell.”

Kelley smiled and touched her cheek. “You look so beautiful when you’re asleep. I was thinking, sleep is like this thing that puts every human on equal ground. No matter who we are, we're all equally vulnerable when we're asleep. I wish all the haters could see you before you wake up in the morning.”

Hope pulled a wry smile. “Because that’s when I'm most likeable?”

Kelley looked for the light in Hope's eyes which meant she was only kidding, found it, and grinned. “Most relatable to complete strangers. I like you best when you’re awake.”

“I'll bet you do,” Hope replied, voice suddenly sultry.

A matching hum escaped Kelley’s throat and she leaned in to kiss. “As pretty a picture as you were, I think you’re more beautiful on the field.”

Surprised, Hope drew her head back. “What? If I look half as lovely asleep as you do – I mean, resting pitch face? Seriously?”

“As seriously as your face,” Kelley said seriously, and there was a beat of silence. They broke down in giggles and snorts. “But really, you look hot when you get in the zone. Thing is,” she lowered her voice to a caress, “everybody gets to see that, but there's one special face that only I get to see.”

Hope figured it out. “My orgasm face.”
Way to blow my moment, Kelley thought, but she got it back on track. “You coming undone is the most amazing sight I’ve ever been blessed to see.”

Hope smiled. “I never told you, ‘cause I literally can’t, how I felt when I made you come that first time.”

“I know, I saw your eyes as I was coming down. You looked almost afraid.”

“I was. I was in, like, existential awe of you and what we'd just done.”

Kelley traced a hand along Hope's side and down to her butt. “Wanna get existential again?”

Hope abhorred the idea of turning her down, but… “It seems awfully late in the morning, Kell.”

“I already put coffee on.”

Hope grinned. “You've been planning this from the beginning.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Hope threw back the sheet and pulled Kelley on top of her.

Chapter End Notes

In the words of Mark Twain, persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished.

Basically, I don't want to hear if you think I was too hard/not hard enough on Hope. Other than that, your comments are always appreciated ;) See you at J.J.’s Sorting!
Newcomers

Chapter Summary

Welcome back for the new year :)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Julie sat alone on Platform 9 ¾, untying and retying her necktie over and over again. Dad's been traveling as a Muggle for too long, she huffed to herself. He'd insisted that she allow two hours for each connection in her trip, which was alright for airports, but this was travel by magic! Now, she had almost three hours before her train left. Hell, it hadn't even arrived yet, and it wasn't like it had anywhere else to be.

Then there was the tie. Julie Johnston, eighteen years of age, had never worn a necktie before yesterday – or was it today? She’d left her Arizona home at night and arrived in London in the morning, but was it the same morning? I don't even know anymore. Ugh, I'm going to be toast tomorrow. Whichever it was, on the evening before leaving, Dad gave her a crash course in knots. She wanted to get the motions down to rote before jet-lag knocked her flat.

The day held other firsts for Julie, too. It was the first time she'd worn closed shoes, long leggings, and full-length sleeves to school. If you planned to be out in the desert sun all day, coverage was a must, but, inside, it was all about the school’s air conditioning budget. Julie Johnston's preferred school uniform was flip-flops, mesh shorts, and a team T-shirt with the sleeves rolled in. Under all the layers of Hogwarts apparel, she didn’t feel dressed so much as upholstered. And the cloak! Was it just an Old World formality or did it seriously rain that much in Scotland?

When her fingers started to ache, she gave the tie a reprieve and tried a book. From her luggage, she retrieved The Muggle Reader: A Primer on Non-Magic Society. Julie recognized some items in the table of contents: “‘Genesis…John Locke…Isaac Newton…Darwin, Dickens…Engines and Electricity…Virginia Woolf…heh, a whole chapter on the Beatles! Very Anglo-centric, though.” There was more, but Julie felt her focus slipping and made herself read something. “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times…”

A noise, which grew from a small, low rumble to a great crescendo of mass and movement, ushered Julie to consciousness. She got off the bench and stretched – really stretched, like the athlete she was – and felt her shirt pull out of her skirt. “Ugh! Whose idea was this?!” At least it reminded her that she wore a skirt before she tried any other stretches. “I swear,” she grumbled, “whenever I'm in my dorm, I'm going to live in sweats.” Then, she noticed the train.

When she saw the illustration of the Hogwarts Express in the orientation folio, Julie assumed it was just nostalgia for life before some British equivalent to Amtrak. Wrong. She stared at the enormous red locomotive while she tucked her shirt back in. It had to be twice as long as the one she’d seen at a tourist railroad back home – the wheels were taller than she was! The movements and counter-movements of the driving rods and cranks mesmerized her as the train eased to a stop. Porters and conductors sprang forth and helped the first students and their luggage up the steps of the carriages. Julie gathered her belongings and joined a line.
“Not Amtrak.” The thought slipped from her mouth when she saw the inside of a passenger compartment. It was a little room, wood-paneled, with two cushioned benches facing each other, windows on the far side, and a sliding door to the narrow hall where Julie stood.

“You’re not in Kansas anymore.” The round-faced blonde inside had a quick wit and an accent between the extremes of Keira Knightley and Monty Python, which were Julie's only reference points.

“Arizona, actually.” Julie stepped inside and sat opposite her. “I’m Julie.”

“Alex Greenwood. Are you an exchange student?”

“Pretty much.”

More first-years filled in the benches and picked up the conversation. Within a minute, Julie felt left behind. Every third word was wizard jargon she’d never heard before. Sure, both her parents were magic and, yes, she’d grown up among wizards and witches, but Arizona’s wizard culture was nothing like this. Julie Johnston grew up living a double life: suburban Muggle girl by day, witch by evening and weekends. Her childhood was a collage of public schools, backyard Quidditch (concealed by spells, of course), travel soccer, potions with Mom, algebra homework with Dad, underground wizard gatherings, and sleepovers with Muggle friends. Wake and repeat.

“…Gryffindor.” Finally, a word she recognized! Julie tuned back into the conversation.

“Massive, me too!” Alex Greenwood agreed with the previous speaker, “Definitely Gryffindor.”

“Really, anything but Slytherin,” another said.

“So, Hufflepuff for you, then,” Alex smirked.

“You think so?”

“Well, if you were cut out for Gryffindor or Ravenclaw, you'd want to be in one of them, and you’re obviously not a ‘Pure-blood’,” she put sarcastic emphasis on the phrase, “so you won't default to Slytherin. By elimination, you’re a Hufflepuff.”

Julie frowned. “You can tell who's pure-blood just by looking?”

“Well, yeah, of course! They always have this imperiousness about them from generations of feeling superior to everyone. It's obvious that none of us are. What about you? Any idea what House you’ll belong to?”

“They all sound like places I could do well in,” Julie replied, added a shrug, and went back to looking out the window.

In the walk from the train to the boats, Julie searched for people who might be athletes, Americans, or else just didn’t fit in, either. Her eyes picked one out: a tall, blonde girl at the front of the group. She had an easy confidence to her movement, yet she wasn't talking or walking with anyone else and she looked around like everything was new to her. Julie power-walked to catch up. She drew level with her just as they reached a quay. Their guide shepherded them into waiting boats and the two girls sat together on a bench. Here goes, Julie thought, and introduced herself.

The girl turned to her with a surprised look. “Hannah Wilkinson. I didn’t know Americans came here.” Her accent threw Julie for a loop. It didn’t fit anywhere in the UK, and it wasn't right for an
“There’s a few of us. Where are you from, Hannah?”

“New Zealand.”

“Oh, cool! Like Lord of the Rings?”

Hannah smiled ruefully and shook her head. “That’s all you Americans ever know about us. That and Xena.”

“Sorry.”

“Ah, no worries.” Hannah gave Julie a closer look. “Do you play a sport?”

“Yeah, actually, I played soccer through high school and I’m going to try for my House’s Quidditch team.”

“Choice! Same here.” The boats began their effortless procession into Hogwarts Castle. “I’m not sure how I feel about these magic boats.”

Julie didn’t know what to make of that. “Um, why?”

“Well, they’re beautifully made, no question, and I see we’re going underground where there’s no wind, but just regular sailing always felt magical to me already. This takes all the joy out of it.”

“You sail? Like, on a sailboat? Sorry if I sound clueless,” Julie added, “I’m from Arizona. It’s all desert.”

“Yeah, my family has a sailboat. It’s popular in New Zealand. We’re an island, after all – two islands – and the weather’s a lot better than up here. My true love is surfing, though.”

“I’ve always wanted to try that! It looks like so much fun.”

“Oh, it’s the best! Doesn’t look like we’re going to have a chance anytime soon, though.”

“Actually, I met some of the girls here from the US and they’re way into surfing, too. They told me they figured out how to charm up some impressive waves on the lake.”

“Sweet as! You have to introduce me.”

“Sure thing, first chance I get.” Julie wrinkled her nose. “Um…’sweet as’?”

Hannah laughed. “It’s a New Zealand thing.”

When they reached the Great Hall and the Sorting Hat was brought forth, Julie made a suggestion. “Let me go first,” she whispered to Hannah. “That way, you’ll see who I know in the Houses.”

“Right on. I tell ‘em you sent me.”

Julie stepped forward to the stool and received the Hat. The assembled school fell silent for the Sorting.

First one…another American! And an athlete, no less – a footballer? It’s like déjà vu all over again. Beneath the floppy brim, Julie smirked. Yogi Berra.
I'll have you know I thought of that four centuries before your fellow was even born! Above her, the Hat harrumphed. Well, to business. Ambitious, yes, and…no, no, I'm off to a lazy, surface-level start. That won't do. Hmmm…my, you’re a scrappy one, aren't you? Actually, no, I take that back! Since you missed the roster for your youth national team-

“Excuse me?!”

-you've uncovered a whole new level of intensity. You stopped being ‘scrappy' when you stopped believing in obstacles.

Oh. Julie saw the Hat's point. Yeah, everything in my life now is either maxed-out or cut.

Indeed, you went on a kind of Spanish Inquisition for your excuses!

The Hat’s amused tone went in one ear and straight out the other. It's either now, before I succeed, or later, after I fail. I choose now.

So serious. You have a sense of humor, don’t you?

What’s with all the questions? I didn’t expect a kind of Spanish Inquisition!

“NOBODY expects the Spanish Inquisition!” Please, don't get me started, else we'll be here all day.

Alright, then, Julie grinned beneath the Hat’s floppy brim, and now for something completely different.

I swear, you will be the death of me! Well, you do have a sense of humor and a light spirit, when you relax. You aren’t a warm, crackling fire, though; you’re a gas torch, cool blue yet able to cut through anything. Yes, your ruthless purposefulness clinches it. My instincts were right, but I'm glad we took the scenic route to get here. Welcome to the House of limitless ambitions, Julie! Send my love to Kelley O'Hara…

“SLYTHERIN!”

Across the tables of the Great Hall, a bright-eyed girl leapt to her feet and whooped, “JULIE! Get over here!” Another young woman, blonde and entertained, rose next to her and waved. Cheers came from the green tables and a few members of other Houses: two young women in yellow and three in red. The rest of the Hall proffered polite applause.

…and tell Hope Solo I'm proud of her. The weight left Julie's head and she strode to her new Housemates.

“Dude, I am so happy you’re with us,” Kelley said as she clapped an arm around Julie's shoulders. “This is totally the best House! You'll love it.”

“I hope so.” Julie didn’t feel it.

“What’s wrong?” Amy asked, quietly.

“Nothing.”

Hannah noted the faces of Julie's cheerleaders – and the looks their Housemates had for them. Then it was her turn.

Ah-ha! The Hat shifted, then paused as if considering a new idea.
Hi, uh, Hat. Hannah felt like she should 'say' something. Can I help you?

Honestly, Hannah, you I sorted the moment I touched your head. In a way, you're just as intriguing as the ones who take me ages to place, but I usually don't get to enjoy your kind for more than a second. I'm just talking to stall while I study your psyche. I hope you don't mind; I never sort and tell.

Um, I guess that's fine. A craftsman should enjoy his work, right?

My sentiments exactly.

While we're here, is there anything you think I should know about Hogwarts?

Ah, giving me more to do! You're too kind, ma'am. Let's see...look for Tobin Heath, a third-year from across the pond. You two have much in common. Don't let the Gryffindor poster children convince you that their House has a monopoly on daring. The Potions Master's bark is worse than her bite, unless she catches you saying so; if she does, you're dead. Hmmm...is there anything particular you wonder about?

There was one thing. Yes. What's the story with Slytherin? Everyone in my compartment on the Express said how much they didn't want to go there, but Julie seemed nice and you put her in it.

My word, girl, you ask quite a question! Let me start with the other Houses and build back to Salazar's own. Hufflepuff is all about hard work and loyalty, which keep egos down and cooperation up. Gryffindor looks outward for causes to champion, which often helps them stay humble and focus on the greater good. The major exception is when the cause is House Gryffindor itself; then they annoy the stuffing out of the other Houses. Ravenclaw's interest in intellectual prowess doesn't promote humility directly, but most of them appreciate the utility of congeniality. The rest become devious backstabbers, but, since their greatest intellectual competition is other Ravenclaws, nobody on the outside has to deal with it. With Slytherin, cunning and ambition are the defining qualities, so there's no principle to guide how they're used. That's an unstable environment for wizards and witches who are just coming of age. We've had mixed results: Merlin was benevolent toward Muggles yet came off as curt and brusque on first impression, old Horace Slughorn was a genial fellow with a strong self-serving streak, and Tom Riddle became obsessed by immortality and started a cult and two wars. That's why there's a marked difference in reputation: a bad Hufflepuff is frustrating, a bad Gryffindor is an ass, and a bad Ravenclaw isn't your problem, but a bad Slytherin hurts people. There's less of that now than ever in the last several centuries, I'm happy to say. It was deeply upsetting to look into so many young minds and know their potential would likely be seduced to ill purposes. That won't happen to your new friend, though. Really, most Slytherins are decent people, if you get to know them – though that can be a daunting 'if', sometimes...dear me, I do go on a bit! I must get on to the rest of your class. Good hunting!

“HUFFLEPUFF!”

When Hannah found the two yellow-trimmed students who'd cheered Julie, she took one look at the tanned girl and said, “Tobin Heath?”

Tobin smiled. “Yeah, did Julie tell you?”

“Nah, she just said she knew a surfer. The Hat told me I have a lot in common with one Tobin Heath.”

The girl next to Tobin, clear-faced with cascading curls of brown hair, laughed. “Well played! I'm Lauren. Hurry up and sit with us! What's your name?”
“Hannah Wilkinson. I'm from New Zealand.” She sat across from them.

“And you surf?” Tobin asked.

“I love it.”

Lauren grinned at her. “Hannah, say hello to your new best friend.”

“SLYTHERIN!” Alex Greenwood stared across the Hall at Julie, looking ghost-white and shell-shocked, and had to be prodded off of the stool.

“Oh boy,” Julie muttered. “She really wanted Gryffindor.”

Amy shrugged. “There’s at least one in every year. She'll get over it.”

“Hopefully, in a non-grumpy way,” Kelley added.

Alex Greenwood sat across from Julie. “Hey…”

“Hey, Alex,” Julie replied with more positivity. “This is Kelley and Amy. They’re totally cool and friendly.”

“Julie mentioned that you don’t want to be here,” Kelley said. “I learned to love Slytherin and the Hat thinks you will, too.”

“Sorting Slytherin doesn’t mean you’re secretly evil,” Amy added. Alex nodded, recovering from her distress, but clearly far from convinced.

As another student approached the stool, Julie blurted, “Where was she on the train?”

“What?” Kelley and Amy looked at Julie.

“Look at her and tell me she's not a footballer.”

The two older students studied the Sorting candidate. Unusually tanned for an Anglo-Saxon, she seemed lithe and lean despite the Hogwarts uniform. Her rich blonde hair fell from a high ponytail to below her shoulders. “I could, but I’d probably be lying,” Kelley agreed. “You can see how her calves are bigger than the others’.”

“What did you mean about the train, though?” Amy asked.

“I was in a compartment with a bunch of non-athlete girls raised entirely in U.K. wizard culture. We had literally nothing in common. I was dying to talk to someone more like me.”

Kelley nodded. “Culture shock is a bitch, isn't it?”

“Wow, Hope certainly rubbed off on you,” Amy observed.

With a smirk and flashing eyes, Kelley replied, “Oh, that’s not all tha-”

“Just no,” Amy interrupted.

“GRYFFINDOR!”

Julie watched the girl go and sighed.
Alex Greenwood caught her eye. “I don’t blame you for missing it, but I am a footballer and Quidditcher.”

“Oh! Gosh, I totally profiled you. I’m glad to have a fellow soccer girl in my year, in my House.” Julie smiled, but Alex still looked disappointed.

“I had it all planned out,” she said, sighing to herself, “I was going to be a Gryffindor, make the team as a seeker—”

Kelley, Amy, and Julie all shook their heads. “Nope,” Kelley replied. “It’s good you didn’t get Gryffindor, because they already have the best seeker anyone’s ever seen. If you can compete with her, it’s better to do it in front of an audience than in a tryout.”

“Huh. I guess that’s true. Maybe this is a blessing in disguise.”

Kelley grinned. “See? That’s Slytherin logic.”

Amy nodded and gave Alex an encouraging smile. “Forget what you’ve heard. If you want to go places, this is the House for you.”

Kelley, Amy, and Julie all shook their heads. “Nope,” Kelley replied. “It’s good you didn’t get Gryffindor, because they already have the best seeker anyone’s ever seen. If you can compete with her, it’s better to do it in front of an audience than in a tryout.”

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Kelley grinned. “See? That’s Slytherin logic.”

Amy nodded and gave Alex an encouraging smile. “Forget what you’ve heard. If you want to go places, this is the House for you.”

“Welcome, all, faces fresh and others, fond.” The Headmistress of Hogwarts gave the traditional induction speech. Alex tuned it out. Her mind was preoccupied with how different she felt this time, a year removed from her crush on Kelley. Then, she had someone in mind but didn’t know what she wanted; now, she had the opposite problem. Maybe she’d meet someone intriguing among the first-years? Then again, don’t they say you sometimes fall for a person hiding in plain sight?

A change in Headmistress McGonagall’s intonation broke into Alex’s musings. “This year also brings the fourth edition of the Triwizard Symposium. As you may have heard, the Symposium is a biennial event created to forge closer links among the European wizarding schools. It's our turn to host Durmstrang and Beauxbatons for a week-long conference, a Yuletide ball, and, of course, a Quidditch tournament.”

That’s why she was so interested in whether I’d practice over the summer, Alex realized.

“In the interest of fairness, Madame Hooch will select the Hogwarts school team, based on her observations of practices, matches, and a closed tryout. The first two fixtures of the Inter-House Cup we will hold in October, rather than November, to give the players time to practice with their new teammates before the Triwizard Cup.”

“An all-star team!” Kelley whispered.

“Do you think Alex will be starting seeker?” Julie asked.

“Are you kidding? ‘Pry it from her cold, dead hands' comes to mind.”

Alex Greenwood looked distinctly uncomfortable.

The following morning, on the way to their first pre-breakfast workout of the year, Julie stopped in her tracks. “Aauugh, I can't believe I forgot…”

“Forgot what?” Amy and Kelley asked in unison.

“Pre-wrap. Go on, I’ll run back and get it.”
Kelley tugged on Julie’s hand. “We have plenty. No need to stress out.”

“In baby blue?” When the two others shook their heads, Julie smiled apologetically. “It’s kinda my thing. Normally, I'm not picky, but, if there’s ever a time to be superstitious, it's the first day of witch college. Go on ahead, I won't get lost.”

Amy shrugged. “If you insist.”

Ten minutes and much frustration later, Julie again stepped into the quad, with her pre-wrap in her bag – where it’d been the whole time. So annoyed was she that she almost didn’t notice a familiar sound:

*Tap, tap, tap, tap…tap…tap, tap…tap…thump.* “Ahh, forty-three.”

Julie turned. The tanned, lithe girl she noticed at Sorting retrieved a soccer ball and resumed juggling. *Tap, tap, tap…* the girl tried a trick with her back heel – and made it! *She’s good,* Julie thought. As if on cue, she tried it again on her other foot and mist-hit it. The ball pinged off the edge of her sole and came to rest near Julie, who flicked it up into the air, juggled it once, and volleyed it back. “You’re pretty good at this,” she said admiringly.

“I’m always trying to be better,” the girl replied. “You’re an international?”

“Yep, Julie Johnston. I played soccer back home.” She offered her hand.

The English girl – Gryffindor, Julie remembered – didn’t move. “So you don’t know what that green on you means, do you?”

Julie looked down sharply, afraid her shirt had a bright green stain or something. “Oh, the Slytherin colors. I know about ‘You-Know-Who’ and all the awful stuff, if that’s what you mean. I want nothing to do with that.”

The girl relaxed. “I guess you’re not a Pure-blood, then.”

“Nobody in Arizona cares about blood. Besides, that’s not what Slytherin is about, for me. The Hat sorted me there for reasons that I'm proud of.”

“Really.” The girl's guard went up again.

“Purpose, dedication, drive to win. I'm always training to be the best.”

An eyebrow arched upward. “Is that a challenge?”

Julie smiled. “A friendly challenge. Also, an olive branch. I think we have a lot in common.”

“Yeah?” The girl regarded her for a moment. “You may be right about that.” She offered her hand. “Rachel Daly.”

“Julie Johnston.” She clasped it and smiled.

“I hope you understand my defensiveness, Julie. Nobody really knows what to expect from Slytherin anymore.”

Julie shrugged again. “I get it, but I’m not looking forward to four years of it. So, Gryffindor? Have you met Alex Morgan? You kinda remind me of her.”

Rachel shook her head. “Not properly. She hung out in the common room for a little while last night,
but I think she didn’t like how much attention she got. She retired pretty early. You know her?”

“Not really, yet. I met her and a couple others before I decided on coming here, but only for a little while.”

“It’s day one.” Rachel shrugged, then smirked. “Football, then? Let’s see what you’ve got.”

“We should sit near the entrance,” Julie suggested to Rachel, as they entered the Great Hall for breakfast. “I was actually on my way to meet some people when I ran into you, so the least I can do is save them seats.”

The first of her friends soon found them. “Julie! We missed you!” Lauren hauled her up out of her seat and hugged her, and then she and Tobin took seats next to her. “We flew around the grounds, in case you got lost, but we couldn’t find you.”

“I got sidetracked before I left the Castle,” Julie confessed. “Rachel here was in the quad with a soccer ball.”

Tobin grinned. “That’s all it took? Nice! I’m Tobin,” she introduced herself to Rachel, “and this is Lauren.”

“Well, well, well, look who decided to show up.” Ali took the next space at the table, followed by Ashlyn.

“I’m sorry, I got sidetracked.” Julie explained again.

“What were all of you doing?” Rachel asked.

“Fitness training,” Ashlyn answered.

Rachel raised her eyebrows. “Bright and early.”

Ali half-smiled. “If you do it first thing, you preempt all the conflicts and excuses you might make.”

“Also, you were up almost as early,” Julie pointed out.

“Yes, and I’m impressed. Is this how tough the competition to make the House teams is?”

“Now that we’re not new, it is,” Ali answered with resolve.

“What position do you play, Rachel?” Ashlyn asked.

“Seeker.”

Tobin raised her eyebrows. “Just seeker? Not, ‘or chaser, as a second choice’?”

“I don’t aim for second place.”

“You will fit right in,” Julie said, smiling.

Ali wasn’t thrilled about her schedule and the capricious stairs weren’t helping. “I’m not sure how I feel about having Potions as my first class of the day.”

“I just hope we’re with Slytherin again,” Alex replied, “since I couldn’t handle sitting with Kelley a
year ago."

“If she were there to liven things up, it wouldn’t be so bad, but I heard they don’t pair Houses for the same classes two years in a row.”

“Ali hates the smell of eyeballs in the morning,” Ashlyn piped up.

“Ew! I hate the feel of newts’ eyes no matter what time it is!”

Alex grinned. “Well, it’s a good thing we’re only using frogs’ eyes today, Also, cats’ teeth, poison ivy, lemur snot, snakeskin—”

Ali clapped a hand over Alex’s mouth. “Seriously, stop!”

“It wouldn’t be as bad if the snakes had already shed the skins,” Ashlyn said casually. Ali spun and glared.

Alex had had enough, too. “Okay, Ash, that is actually gross.”

“Just ‘snakes’ in general would be too much! Ugh.”

Ashlyn stood down. “Okay, I’m done. Honestly, though, I don’t agree about that. I think snakes are beautiful.”

“Oh, you know we are!” Kelley appeared and hopped onto Alex’s back. “Are you going to Arithmancy?”

“Whoa! Uh, hi, Kelley.” Alex rebalanced her clinging friend. “No, we have Potions. We miss you already!”

“Aww, well, hopefully we’ll have Care of Magical Creatures together.”

Ali smiled wide. “Oh my god, that would be awesome!”

Alex craned her neck to smirk at Kelley. “But I thought you’d be there as a subject, not a student.”

“Nah, I’ve already trained you all to take care of me,” Kelley grinned back. She pointed down the hall. “Arithmancy. Mush!” They careened away.

When Alex arrived at the Potions classroom, she found Ashlyn and Ali sitting together and Dr. Couture speaking with a student at her desk. Alex sat at the adjacent table nearest to Ali and wondered who her new lab partner might be.

“We’re with Hufflepuff, by the way,” Ashlyn said.

“Hmmm…” Alex thought through the Hufflepuffs in her year. She felt pretty sure she’d met most of them and seen all of them…

“Excuse me,” a mild, modest, and surprisingly inflected voice interposed. “Is it cool if I sit here, or are you keen to work with someone else?”

Alex looked up, then looked up more. A sun-kissed, blonde-framed face looked down at her. “Uh…” The new girl’s height and accent threw Alex off-balance. *She has to be new, somehow. There’s no way anyone could miss her.*

“It’s cool if you are,” the girl offered.
“Oh, no, no, it's totally fine.” Alex pulled her thoughts together. “Go ahead, please. What’s your name?”

“Hannah Wilkinson.” She smiled and sat. “I'm from New Zealand. I'm new here, but I came with credits for most of the first-year courses.”

“New Zealand? Wow, that is so cool! I'm Alex Morgan. From America.”

“If that’s not obvious,” Ali chimed in. “I’m Ali, this is Ash – Ashlyn.”

Hannah acknowledged them both. “Pleased to meet you,” She returned her eyes to Alex. “Gryffindor, second year? Are you the Alex that our House’s Quidditch players were on about last night?”

“Probably,” Alex admitted.


Hannah looked very impressed. “They told some wicked stories about you.”

“Almost superhuman?” Ashlyn asked. Hannah nodded. “Just like Hope last year,” she grinned at Alex.

“And you next year,” Ali said and nudged her woman.

“Hope? I think someone mentioned a Slytherin named Hope.”

“Hope Solo,” Alex explained to Hannah. “She's a freaking beast in goal. She's such a beast that she's now a professional beast.”

“As for stories,” Ashlyn brought the conversation back to Alex, “if Lauren or Tobin said it and they weren’t giving each other knowing glances—”

“Or acting overly serious,” Ali added.

“-then it's true.”

Hannah nodded and sorted fact from fiction. “Then you did play your first Quidditch match with no warning and on a borrowed broom?” Alex confirmed it. “But you didn’t bicycle kick the snitch out from between the Ravenclaw seeker’s hands?”

From across the room, Dr. Couture answered for Alex. “Don’t be absurd, Ms. Wilkinson. That poor kid never came within three broom-lengths of the snitch.” Alex flushed with pride as her friends laughed.

At lunch, Kelley leaned forward and gave Julie an impish look. “So. What’s her name?”

“It’s not like that,” Julie asserted.

“It’s not?” Kelley looked to Amy. “That’s funny, I totally thought it was like that.”

“It certainly looked like that,” Amy agreed. “I still think it could be like that.”

Kelley turned back to Julie and grinned suggestively. “Yeah, I'm thinking it's exactly like that.”
Julie sighed in exasperation. “Guys, I swear, I’m not crushing on her. It was just soccer withdrawal symptoms.”

“Alright, alright,” Kelley said. “How about you just tell us everything about the girl you definitely aren’t in- Alex! Sit with us!”

Alex stopped between the rows of tables and looked from her friends to a nearby cluster of young Gryffindors. “I would, but I feel like I should sit with some of our first-years for their first day.”

“We can make that happen.” Kelley looked around and waved at the first Gryffindor she didn’t recognize. “Hey! Griffy! Come sit with Alex and us!”

The student turned, and then Kelley recognized her. Julie did, too; “Rachel! Over here!”

Rachel looked at Julie, Alex, and the other Slytherins. Evidently, sitting with Alex outweighed the rest for her, because she started toward them.

Kelley spun back to Julie and smirked. “Rachel. Nice name, don'cha think?”

“Kelley,” Julie began through gritted teeth, but she stopped when Alex touched her hand.

“Save it, Kelley, whatever it is,” Alex said softly.

Kelley sighed. “Okay.”

Rachel arrived and Julie introduced her. “This is Rachel Daly. She's a footballer, too.”

“Awesome! I'm Alex. This silly girl is my best friend, Kelley.”

Kelley smiled. “Turns out, if you’re indispensable to your House, you can be friends with whoever you want.”

“It's a little early for you to be claiming that,” Amy said with a smirk, then recoiled when Kelley flicked mash at her. “I’m Amy Rodriguez. We all played soccer back home.”

“And still do, on weekends,” Alex added.

Rachel looked at them each again. “Then I'm glad to meet you all. What level did you play at?”

“All of us turned down athletics scholarships to come here,” Alex answered. “Kelley and a few others actually played for colleges for a year.”

“So you're quality players, then.”

Amy and Kelley raised their eyebrows. “Oh? And you?”

“I talked to a few college coaches in America, too, before I decided on Hogwarts.”

“Sweet. Oh, hey, Alex, how about that all-star team?” Julie asked. “Kelley said anyone who wanted to start instead of you would have to pry the spot from your ’cold, dead hands’.”

Rachel's eyes snapped to Alex and widened when she laughed. “I wouldn’t have put it that way, but yes,” Alex said, “that spot is mine.”

“You’re that confident?” Rachel asked.
“She’s the best,” Amy asserted.

“I know that I want it more than anyone else here,” Alex offered. “I played all the best seekers last year and I know I’m at least as good as any of them.”

“False modesty,” Kelley chided playfully.

Alex shook her head, though. “I don’t want to convince myself I’m untouchable. I have to believe that hard work is the only thing keeping me on top.”

“But you’re definitely starting for Hogwarts.”

“Definitely.”

Rachel seemed to relax after that.

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Despite a great first day, Kelley felt let down that evening. As soon as she opened the door to Slytherin Dungeon, everything evaporated except for the fact that Hope wasn’t there. All the familiar sights seemed less bright and less colorful. For the first time, it felt like a dungeon to Kelley.

The lights in her room were out, except for the lamp on Julie's nightstand. The newest kid lay on her bed, staring up at the glass ceiling with one hand under her head. Her face appeared drawn and heavy. “Hey,” Kelley said quietly.

Julie didn’t answer.

“Are you feeling a first-day letdown?” Kelley walked over to her.

“No.” It was flat and empty.

“Well, I am. Can I join you?”

Julie finally looked at her. “What?”

Kelley gestured at the bed. “Can I climb in and commiserate?”

“No.” This time, it had life behind it.

Kelley stepped back and searched for a reason why Julie would be mad at her. “Did I go too far teasing you about Rachel?”

Julie huffed and rolled her eyes.

“I think that’s a ‘yes’. I'm sorry; if I’d known, I would've stopped.”

Julie nodded. “Obviously, but I don’t think you spared a second’s thought for how I felt.” It was Kelley's turn to stay silent. “I'm not a game. You don’t get to play with my reactions for your entertainment.”

“Oh, no! Julie, that wasn't it at all!” Kelley stepped in again and perched herself on the edge of the bed.

“Oh? You were doing something other than teasing me?”

Kelley’s heart ached. “Julie, I thought you might really feel something for Rachel and I didn’t want
you to ignore it.”

“Really.” Julie oozed caustic dubiousness.

“I’m dead serious.”

Julie looked at Kelley again. “Then be serious.”

“That’s just not how I…” Kelley abandoned that argument and took a different tack. “Julie, I promise not to tease you about who you might be attracted to more than once per person.”

Julie wrinkled her lips. “I guess I'm supposed to take what I can get?”

“Not in groups, either.”


Kelley kicked off her shoes and slid so that she lay parallel with Julie. On her side, head propped up on her hand, she asked gently, “Would you like to be more than friends with Rachel?”

Julie shook her head. “No. I just really want a close friend in my year. You know, like Alex is for you.”

Kelley nodded slowly. “Lauren, Tobin, and Amy might be better examples, ‘cause I'm pretty sure Alex – don’t repeat this, ever – had a crush on me for the first few weeks of school.”

Julie almost smirked. “Well, we may never know what their first reactions were, either.”

“True, though I'm pretty sure at least two of them are straight,” Kelley said with a chuckle, then quieted again. “What about you?”

“I think I'm bi.” Julie pursed her lips. “Which, for me, basically means ‘it depends’. If the chemistry is right, I could go for a guy or a girl. I don’t see myself being less happy with one than the other.”

“But Rachel doesn’t interest you.”

“No. It's kinda like she's attractive, but I'm not attracted to her, if that makes sense.”

Kelley nodded. “Yeah, I felt the same about Alex. Freakin' pin-up girl!”

Julie giggled quietly. “It is easy to imagine her on a *Sports Illustrated* poster in a few years, isn't it?”

“Do you think she might be attracted to Rachel? Rachel seemed interested in her.”

“Oh my god, Kelley!” Julie gave her a playful shove. “Go write Hope an owl and get all the angst out of your system.”

“That's a good idea!” Kelley bounced up and made use of her personal writing supplies: colored gel pens and U.S. letter paper.

“Oh, Kelley, I forgot to tell you something. When the Hat sorted me, he asked me to send you his love and tell Hope he's proud of her.”

Kelley’s eyes were already far away. “Thank you. I'll tell her.”

Alex slipped out of the Gryffindor common room and plodded towards the castle stairs. She'd had
enough attention for one day and wanted quiet. Deep quiet. At the grand staircase, she crawled out to a bay window. On her right, she had a view of the quad; on her left, seven flights of empty space. All the students were in their Houses. There was no sound at all. Blissful quiet.

So quiet that the sound of footsteps drew her back from the edge of a doze. “Alex?” The voice was soft and English. Alex didn’t want to respond, but she kicked that thought away. Turning her neck and body, she saw Rachel Daly, whose eyes widened. “Oh, wow, you are way out there. Um, I hoped I could talk to you some.”

“Sure. Come on.” Alex left herself that much wiggle room; if the girl was afraid of heights, she wouldn’t have to talk to her tonight. Rachel wasn’t. Alex made room in the window bay and Rachel sat with her, backs against the glass and legs dangling in space.

“There’s something I’m wondering,” Rachel began.

“I can’t talk about tryouts yet.” Alex felt like a broken record.

“Oh, no, nothing to do with Quidditch. It’s about Slytherin.”

“That’s a relief. What about them?”

“I guess it’s as much about Gryffindor as Slytherin.” She made eye contact again. “Basically…how are you friends with Kelley?”

“How?” Alex frowned. “Across Houses, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“Well…” How had it happened? “It helped that we started before we arrived. Like, we traveled here together.”

“Oh.” Rachel sounded disappointed.

“With the Houses, though, we really just put our friendship first. Like, we got to be friends the same way anyone does. Once people caught on that we didn’t care what they thought, they either got over it or shut us out. After I caught a snitch, I guess they decided I could hang out with Slytherins as long as I beat them.”

“Was it bad, before that?”

“Only if we were around a lot of people from one House. I didn’t care, since I already felt like an outsider. I think Kelley benefitted from having older Slytherin friends, too. When people see a person they respect is friends with someone, they give her respect, too.”

A light bulb flipped on in Rachel’s head. “That’s why Lauren and Tobin were so eager to sit with Julie at breakfast.”

“They did the same for Kelley last year,” Alex confirmed. She shifted to face Rachel more. “Are you worried about being friends with Julie?”

“Yeah.” Rachel flexed her toes inside her shoes. “She’s so…very not what I expected Slytherins to be like.”

“They’re not all like that, but not every Gryffindor is someone I’d trust to have my back, either.”

Rachel winced. “That’s about the most damning commentary for a Gryffindor.”
Alex shrugged. “Maybe there are more bad apples in Slytherin than in the other Houses, but still – hey, look, what’s the British stereotype of Americans?”

“Um…”

“Americans are fat and stupid, right?” Rachel let Alex answer her own question. “Probably too loud, too. Am I any of those things?”

“No.”

“Right, and Kelley and Hope aren’t some kind of wizarding Pinky and the Brain.” Rachel Daly gave her a blank look. “They’re not plotting to take over the world,” Alex translated.

Rachel laughed. “No, I knew that. Who is Hope?”

“Oh, right. Kelley's girlfriend. She graduated last spring.”

“Girlfriend,” Rachel repeated, quietly.

“Yep. Now, she's a rookie keeper at the Montrose Magpies.”

Rachel’s jaw dropped so far that Alex caught a glimpse of her uvula. “Hope Solo?!”

“That's her. I guess she attracted some attention in her first season.”

“You could call it that.” Rachel shook her head in what looked like amazement. “One month, she's in the spotlight for breaking the all-time record for a goalkeeper’s debut game. Then, she's injured, and now there’s rumors that she had words with some of the staff.”

Alex smirked. “Sounds about right.”

“And that Kelley is her girlfriend?”

“Yes!” Alex actually preened a little on Kelley’s behalf.

“Bloody hell…”

“Anyway, there's nothing stopping you and Julie from becoming BFF’s,” Alex concluded.

“Right.”

Something in the way the word landed made Alex wonder. “Rachel, is there something more about this that’s bothering you?” Rachel didn’t reply. “If you ever do need to talk to someone about anything, you can always come to me,” Alex said.

“Thanks.” Rachel smiled. “I think I'll turn in now. Good night, Alex.”

“Night.” Alex watched her clamber back and wondered what it'd all been about.

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When Kelley returned from posting her letter, Julie looked only slightly improved from when she'd first entered. “For reals, Julie, what’s wrong?”

“Come back here and convince me you can keep a secret.”

“I’m practically a bank vault.” Kelley climbed in alongside her again. “I haven't told one since I was a child. Let me help, please.”
Sighing, Julie spoke even quieter. “I’m pure-blood, and now I'm a Slytherin, too, and I have no idea how to feel about it.”

Chapter End Notes

Comments encouraged! I love hearing your responses.
New Challenges

Chapter Summary

Fall 2008, Part 1 of 3

Chapter Notes

Dear readers,

It’s been a long time, I know. I’m posting only part of the next chapter, because I’m lost trying to finish and edit all of it at once. The good news is that the next updates should follow within weeks, not months. Anyhow, I’m not done! I still write almost every night and I miss waking up to your comments :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alex didn’t look up from her book – assigned reading for Herbology – when she heard footsteps in the sand behind her. She couldn’t tell who it was without turning around, but, if it was her, she didn’t want to make eye contact from too far away. That would just feel awkward. Safer to, you know, just sit still and feel self-conscious…

“D’aww, they’re adorable!” It was Kelley.

Alex relaxed, looked up at her friend, and then turned again at the sound of a shoe striking a ball. A little further inland, on firmer, drier, and flatter ground, Rachel Daly practiced penalty kicks with Hope. Hope tossed back a saved shot and said something. They were too far to hear, but Hope wore an encouraging smile and Rachel looked encouraged. Alex smiled, too. “Right? They’ve been at it for like fifteen minutes. I was so worried they’d butt heads,” she admitted. “They’re, like, at the poles of their Houses.”

Kelley smirked. “Hope said they had a little discussion this morning.”

“A ‘discussion’?”

“Rachel wanted to know how there could be one Hope in public and another with friends. Hope explained. I guess she accepted it.”

“Looks like it. By ‘explained’, you mean how there’s only one and she doesn’t give a damn?”

“The technical term is ‘one solitary fuck’, but yes.”

Alex rolled her eyes. “Sometimes you two make perfect sense and other times I don’t know how you ever got together.”

“Oh, it’s both,” Kelley replied in a dreamy voice, “all the time.” She made herself comfortable in the sand next to Alex. “How are you holding up?”
Alex’s nose and mouth scrunched to one side. “Notice how I’m facing away from the beach.”

“Yeah, I couldn’t focus if Hope were surfing in front of me, either. Is it pretty much the same as earlier?”

“Just with more reasons to like her,” Alex answered, and sighed.

Six weeks earlier:

Alex bit her lower lip. She felt like a silly teenager again. Well, okay, technically she was still nineteen, but this was college, not Diamond Bar High! Adults didn’t glance up at every new footstep in the hall to see if it was hers, right? No? She shook her head at herself.

Kelley, seated next to her, poked her politely. “Talk to me, Alex.”

Reluctantly, Alex pulled her eyes away from the entrance to their classroom. “Hufflepuff has C.M.C. third and Divination fourth.”

“And?”

“They have to pass us in Astronomy to get there.” She made a weak gesture at the door to the hallway.

“…And?”

Alex bit her lip again. “Have you met Hannah Wilkinson?”


Alex leaned back and rolled her eyes – at the exact moment Hannah passed in front of the doorway. Their eyes met and Hannah smiled in recognition. Alex smiled back in relief.

“What a babe,” Kelley teased quietly, after the babe passed by.

“I’d be so screwed if she hadn’t sat with me in Potions. Literally, I would be completely distracted if I didn’t also have to work with her.”

“And from New Zealand,” Kelley thought aloud. “That is so cool.”

Alex sighed. “It’s like the kiss of death, though. I mean, there’s long distance and then there’s literally being on the opposite side of the world.”

“But magic travel-”

“It’s not that, Kelley. Let’s say we got married. Where would we live?”

“That is an issue,” Kelley admitted.

With the first round of matches only a month away, the Houses held their tryouts on the first weekend. Lauren looked around a group of aspiring Hufflepuff players. “I’ll just get this out of the way: I'll post the roster when we decide on it, but the names won't be visible until dawn tomorrow. Now, most of you have probably heard coaches and commentators talk about why a team lost a match. There are all sorts of explanations: bad officiating, biased crowds, tiring tournaments, plain
old dumb luck, or – this is my favorite – ‘we played better Quidditch, but the other team scored more goals’. I'm not interested in rationalizing my losses. I'm here to win. Team Hufflepuff exists to win. We all play the sport because we enjoy it, but when you put on the Hufflepuff colors, it’s about more than that. This team is for those people who will work their hardest and make sacrifices to be the best possible representatives of our friends and our House. Today’s tryouts are how we find out who those people are." She swept the group with her eyes. “Here’s a question for all of you: when is the competition?”

An uncertain-looking second-year spoke up. “The second Saturday in October?”

Lauren shook her head and jabbed a finger down at the field. “It’s now. Every day, every practice, every scrimmage, and every drill, is part of our next match. We’re looking for that attitude at least as much as technical skills. I can train you to handle a quaffle better, but only you can bring a champion’s heart.” Lauren paused and relaxed her posture. “There, I just gave you the answers to the exam. Let's get started. We'll have two full teams and we'll rotate all of you through at least twice. Chasers line up here, beaters here; keepers; seekers. Now, count off by two: one, two, one…”

Ali awoke to a soft nudge against her cheek. “Mmm…aww, Ash,” she murmured sleepily.

“Meow.”

“Tha’s a new one, stud.” She opened her eyes and found vertical pupils staring back. “Or it could just be my stupid cat.”

“Mroww.”

“Whadda’ya want, Nemo?”

The cat hopped off her bed and stood on the room’s trapdoor. “You want to go – no, you have your own way in and out…” Ali rubbed her eyes. “You want me to go downstairs?”

“Myow!”

“Why, what’s there-” Ali sat up, fully awake. “Really? I would've remembered first thing, if you hadn't distracted me!”

Ashlyn’s voice emanated from the adjacent bed. “W’er you yellin' ‘bout?”

“My familiar,” Ali said testily, “thought I needed reminding that the tryout results are up now.”

“S’er'sly? ’s not gonna change ‘ween now n' six.”

“Meow.”

“Meow, yourself,” Ashlyn grumbled, and buried her head in her pillow.

Ali, however, itched to know, since she wasn't a returning player. She clambered out of bed and scooped up her cat, which tried to squirm free. Ali held it tighter. “Hoh, no, you don’t. This was your idea.” Upon entering the common room, she saw Rachel Daly, arms folded, standing in front of their house’s bulletin board.

At the sound of Ali's footsteps, the first-year turned and smirked. “‘Sup, Chaser.”

Ali’s cat flattened her ears, hissed, and attempted another escape. “What the hell, Nemo?!” Ali struggled, but, this time, the cat was determined to get away. It scrabbled out of her arms and
retreated towards the stairs. “Gosh, Rachel, I'm sorry. Nemo's never-”

Rachel waved it away. “Never mind that. You made the roster!”

“Hell yeah, I did!” Ali smiled and inspected the other selections. “Ashlyn, good… Alex – Rachel! You’re the second seeker!” She stepped back from the board. “Wow. Alex is a tough act to follow… and she didn’t make the team in tryouts.”

Rachel took a moment to look smug. “I’m immensely satisfied, yes. If I were choosing the team, though, I would only consider seekers younger than Alex.”

“Yeah, that's true. Still.”

“Still,” Rachel agreed.

“Tryouts turned out like we hoped,” Ashlyn told the other Americans over breakfast. “Alex, obviously. Ali made the list of chasers. I'm competing for the starting spot with the guy they chose me over last year.”

“Tell ‘em about your new protégé,” Ali prompted Alex.

“Yeah. Rachel Daly is my new partner and nemesis.”

“She’s seriously that good?” Kelley asked.

“No, but she's going to be.”

“Kelley and I are on the team again,” Amy told her friends, “and we might both be starting. Julie is on as a beater, too.”

“Congrats, J.J.!” Lauren high-fived her across the table.

“We’re really lucky to have zero depth in that position,” Kelley explained. “Most of them were seniors – I mean, fourth-years.”

“One summer away and you lost the language?” Amy asked.

Kelley shook her head. “After the second person asked if I was at UVA, I made myself unlearn it.”

“Too bad you didn’t get Hufflepuff, J.J.,” Lauren mused. “I wish we had more time to work together.”

Kelley shrugged and tried not to smirk. “Badgers can't be choosers.”

Tobin answered with a challenge. “We’ll see who’s laughing after you try defending against us and Hannah.”

“She made it?!” Alex demanded.

“Yes,” Lauren replied, a little surprised by Alex's tone. “She’s fantastic as a target forward. Way more experienced than she lets on.”

“I bet her height helps, too,” Alex went on. “Like, how is she that tall? It’s crazy.”

Kelley answered immediately. “It’s because she’s from the Southern Hemisphere. In New Zealand,
gravity pulls down on them and stretches them taller.”

For one second, Alex went blank. “Wait…no! What?” Kelley broke into cackling and their friends laughed.

“Wow, K.O.,” Ashlyn said, “I’m impressed you kept a straight face through that.”
Kelley grinned even wider. “I’m stealing Hope's powers. I'm getting better at it and she’s getting worse.”
Lauren shook her head in dismay. “God help us.”

On the way back from their team’s first practice, the Slytherin girls heard a guitar and detoured to find its player. Their search ended just outside the castle walls, where Ali, Lauren, Tobin, and Hannah relaxed in the evening sun. Julie knew she should recognize the tune Hannah played, but couldn’t place it. Her teammates joined the Hufflepuffs on the grass and Julie followed on autopilot, still preoccupied by the nagging familiarity of the melody. Someone asked a question and, before she consciously understood it, she’d already answered, “Not really. I mean, I only know one song.”

“What song?”
Julie could've added that she'd never played in front of anyone outside her immediate family. “Oh, no, it's nothing interesting.”

“Aww, Julie!” “C'mon.” “Play it for us! Please?”

“I don’t…” Julie let out a breath and threw on the grin of a girl hiding her shyness. “Alright, you asked for it. Don’t judge.” She took the guitar from Hannah, strummed a couple of chords, and cleared her throat. Her fingers started picking a Western tune.

“Oh, give me a home, where the hippogriffs roam,
Where the wampus and the thunderbirds play,
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word
And the Muggles are out prospecting all day.

“Yes, a land where we’re free, my sweetheart and me,
To fly-yyyy and to apparate, too!
To remove a tick, with just a swish and a flick,
And not nail my horse to her shoes.

“Home, home on the range!”

She might’ve continued, but Kelley was laughing, Tobin was keeping Kelley upright, and Ali and Amy were grossed out, so she didn’t. “There’s more, plus the Muggle verses, but you get the idea. I don’t want you thinking I'm a cowgirl.”

“Then where did you learn that?” Amy teased.

“My dad.” Julie felt small and wished she was a lot smaller. “When we were really little, he sang songs like that with us. ‘I've been Working on the Railroad’, ‘My Darling Clementine’, you know…”

“Yeah, my dad did that, too!” Kelley’s eyes twinkled with intelligence. “But you said you only know one song on guitar.”
“Yep,” Julie replied, poker face in place.

“So, why that one?”

Julie felt shy and embarrassed beyond reason. “I like it. It’s...soothing.”

“Then what’s there to be ashamed about?”

Julie looked up at Kelley again. “You change gears so fast.”

Kelley waved a hand. “It’s all one gear. Are you worried you'll get stereotyped?”

“Yeah. You’re all East and West Coast kids.”

Kelley nodded sympathetically. “And the thing you’re actually afraid of?” She asked gently.

For a moment, Kelley’s soft eyes had Julie on the edge of opening up, but she remembered the five other pairs of eyes. “Jesus, Kelley. Now?”

At that moment, Alex arrived with Rachel. “This chica giving you trouble again?” Alex asked Julie, with a sharp glance at Kelley.

“K.O. just picked an odd moment to play counselor,” Amy answered, but Kelley shook her head.

“Let her speak for herself.”

Julie squinted at her. “You are the strangest mix of sensitive and oblivious I’ve ever met.”

“Sorry.” Kelley turned contrite. “It’s...habit, since...” She looked at Alex and Amy, who nodded in understanding.

Tobin caught Julie's eyes. “We weren't embarrassed or judging you, Julie. Still, Kelley, look before you leap, next time?” Kelley agreed.

“Anyway,” Rachel spoke up, “Julie, you play guitar?”

Julie groaned, then grinned. “Just one song, and I don't want to wear it out. Anyone who wants to hear it needs to provide a campfire and s’mores!”

Amy smirked. “I’d sign up just to watch Kelley try to make one.”

“Hey, I’m good at making them!” Kelley protested. “Eating them is the hard part.”

Alex chuckled. “I was always the girl who just wanted chocolate and graham crackers.”

“Pound it!” Tobin fist-bumped her.

“What you’re saying is,” Rachel interjected, “we need a tenting holiday.”

A half-second's delay preceded a chorus of enthusiasm. “Yeah!” “This is so happening.” “Ooh! Hope could come!” “Ash is gonna love this.” “Sweet as! When’s a good date for everyone?”

Camping trip with my crush, Alex thought. That's not nerve-wracking at all.

“We could leave right after the Hufflepuff-Ravenclaw match and come back Sunday afternoon.”

That wasn't a good date for Rachel. “That’d be the eleventh, right? I have a conflict that night. How
Hope has a match that weekend, too. Can we do the weekend after the Hufflepuff match?” The others approved. “Too bad, though,” Kelley thought aloud. “The moonlight won't be as good.”

Rachel looked askance at her. “You have the lunar calendar memorized?”

Kelley shrugged. “It started with wanting to know when the Slytherin rooms would be nice at night and when they'd be pitch-black, and then it turned out to be useful for classes.”

“So, um, tents…” Alex said awkwardly. The rest of the posse looked at her and each other.

“Oh! Hope and I will bring our own tent,” Kelley announced.

“Please,” Amy said dryly, “but we'd better not hear anything. Tha-”

“Don’t worry. You never did before.”

Amy froze, then cleared her throat. “That leaves…nine other people. Ali, do you want to be with just Ash, too?”

“Yes.”

“So, we need one small tent for you, and then…we could do it by year, but that's so uncreative.”

“And I'd be by myself,” Alex added. “We do everything by year or House, so let's mix it up.”

Lauren glanced around. “Amy, Rachel, and Hannah, Tobin and Alex, Julie and I?”

Rachel’s face broadcast ‘does not compute’. “Three tents?”

Tobin nodded. “That should be plenty of space, yeah.”

“Plenty,” Rachel echoed incredulously. “How much stuff do you bring camping?”

“Just the essentials.”

“You have three tents' worth of essentials?!”

“Oh,” Amy realized, “you’re thinking of those ‘TARDIS’ tents.”

“Tar-what?” Kelley asked.

“Bigger on the inside.” Rachel cocked her head. “Do you actually want to use Muggle tents?”

“Honestly,” Alex spoke up, “I’m not really comfortable closing myself inside a magic bubble. Besides, it’s not camping if you bring your whole house with you.”

Kelley grinned at Rachel. “I dare you to pack in real-volume bags.” The English witch tilted her chin up and shot Kelley a dirty look.

Chapter End Notes
Hmm...Hannex? Morkinson? Comments are always appreciated :)
Stress

Chapter Summary

Fall 2008, Part 2 of 3 or 4, depending on how I break it up..

Chapter Notes

Hope's quidditch match is the one reported near the end of Chapter 31..

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Rachel glanced at the clock on the wall of The Three Broomsticks, for the fourth time, Julie asked her, “Do you need to be somewhere soon?”

“Yeah. I should go now, actually.” The Englishwoman counted out coins to pay her tab.

Their friends noticed. “You’re leaving already?”

Rachel sighed. “Yeah, I know. I have to see Doctor Couture about something.”

“Rach’, it's Friday evening!”

“I know,” the English witch repeated. “I still have to go.”

Kelley pushed back from the table and stood. “I was going to leave soon, anyway, so I'll go with you.”

“There’s no need for you to cut short your own evening,” Rachel objected.

“Yeah, but this is my first chance to get you alone and corrupt you.” Groans of “Kelley…” rose from their friends. Kelley defended herself; “What? No! I didn't mean sexually!”

Half the table exclaimed, “No, that's even worse!” and the other half asked, “Then what did you mean?”

“I meant Slytherin,” Kelley asserted, “and I was joking. We should go.” She touched Rachel’s elbow and departed. When Rachel joined her, outside, she offered an apology. “Sorry about that. I was trying to be funny, not embarrassing.”

"You very nearly were, I thought.” Rachel shrugged and threw a smirk at Kelley. “I've learned not to take you too seriously.”

Kelley smirked back. “At your peril. For example,” she paused until Rachel looked again and saw her new, earnest expression, “if you have a thing for Julie, A-Rod and I will see to it that none of our housemates give you trouble.”

Rachel showed neither surprise nor concern. “I don’t, but thanks. I appreciate the gesture.”
“Okay. I'm gonna tell you a story, anyway. Last fall, I liked a girl, who I didn’t believe I had a chance with. I let that paralysis me for a while, until I poured it all out on Alex. She helped me see that I needed to either make a move or move on. I made a move. It was nerve-wracking and painful, at first, but it was the best decision I ever made.”

“You really believe I fancy Julie.” Rachel stated it as an observation, not a question.

“No, I think you probably don't, but I also think you might, so…” Kelley shrugged and gave the first-year a conciliatory smile. “If not, hey, you got some free, Gryffindor-approved wisdom and you'll trust me a little more, for being vulnerable.”

Rachel’s brows lowered an eighth of an inch. “That's quite…calculating.”

Kelley smirked. “Would you be more comfortable if I talked about this impulsively?”

“That’s a point.”

“We all know you're wary of Slytherins, and we don't hold it against you, but we'd all like to see you grow comfortable with A-Rod and me.”

Rachel nodded. She hadn't decided how to reply, when she realized what Kelley had left unsaid and sent the older student a sharp glance.

Kelley met her eyes. “Just an observation. What I said earlier is all I'm going to say. What do you need to see the Potions Mistress about?”

“Just a lab thing we couldn’t find a better make-up time for. Can I ask a personal question?” Kelley allowed it. “What’s it like to be in a relationship with a professional athlete?”

“Oh, let me tell you…”

Half an hour later, Kelley spread a blanket on the grassy shore of the lake and waited. Soon, there’d come the sharp bang of Hope apparating, and then the distance wouldn’t feel so long. Any minute now…

A breeze caressed the trees behind her – except there were no trees nearby. She looked over her shoulder; Hope smiled faintly and held a finger to her lips. Kelley furrowed her brow, but a smile pushed it back up. She moved to stand, but Hope reached her first and sat. “It’s been a loud week, Kell,” Hope said softly. “Can we just cuddle for a while?”

Kelley splayed herself out on the blanket and helped her girlfriend find a comfortable fit against her body, then wrapped her in her arms. “I love you. I’ll wait for you to talk.” Hope closed her eyes and let her face rest against Kelley’s. The weariness and tension in Hope's body was startling. Kelley matched the rhythm of her breathing to Hope's and imagined drawing the stress away with every rise and fall.

“I think I pushed myself too hard this week,” Hope said quietly. “I'm barely cleared to play, but I trained as if I had a shot at starting tomorrow.”

“How do you feel?”


“Only because you don’t know your own strength.”
“Hmm? Kell, if anything, I overestimated it.”

Kelley smiled and rocked her head in the negative. “Your mental strength, Hope. It sounds like you went mind-over-matter and ran your body into the ground.”

Hope’s lips twisted. “Is it okay to feel a little proud of that?”

“As long as you don’t keep doing it.”

After most of another minute of quiet, Hope asked, “Am I honestly strong, or am I just stubborn?”

“You’re a champion, Hope.” To emphasize it, Kelley ran her hands over the keeper’s muscled shoulders and arms.

“Ohmigod,” Hope groaned.

“What’s wrong?”

“I couldn’t even tell I ached so much. Don’t stop, just go light.”

“Oh, babe. Solace.” Soothing magic diffused from her hands into Hope’s skin, warming every fiber and seeping into her bones.

Hope groaned again, longer, weaker, and ending in a whimper. She asked, plaintively, “Why on Earth have I never heard of this spell before?”

“You haven’t? I guess…I don’t know. You wouldn’t learn it from sports, ‘cause it’s not actually a substitute for recovery. How did you get here so quietly?”

“I apparated here early and then skipped ahead with the time-turner. Like I said, I’ve had enough noise.”

“I can imagine some of my friends saying that you’re talking to the wrong girl.”

Hope’s eyes gleamed. “Then I’m honored to know you even better than your friends do.” Kelley heard an invitation in her girlfriend’s voice and brushed their lips together. Hope melted in her mouth.

“Tarpley, party of eleven?”

One professional seeker, one professional keeper, eight college students, and one retired champion followed the hostess, threading their way to the rear of an Edinburgh restaurant. The space was far better lit than the Three Broomsticks, featuring plenty of overhead lights and a mirror along one side.

“We totally look like a soccer team,” Amy remarked, upon noticing their reflections.

Ali shook her head. “Nah, there'd be more of us.”

“And we're all wearing different colors,” Alex added.

Kelley poked them both. “Lighten up, Nancys!”

After they placed their orders and caught up with Lindsey and Hope, Mia Hamm addressed the group. “I’m sure you’re wondering why I asked you all here today.”

Kelley smirked. “Um, not really.”
Mia rolled her eyes. “Thanks, Kelley. Yes, of course it's about U.S. Quidditch. It's time to begin our hostile takeover. The U-23 team has an open tryout in November. Their plan is to hold a camp at the end of December and play a series against Canada in January. You're going to sweep the starting lineup.”

“Is that what you meant by ‘hostile’?” Lauren asked.

“Yes. It's not as if the Federation leadership will give us the team because we asked nicely. You have to take it.”

“Wait, I'm lost,” Alex said. “‘Giving’ or ‘taking’ the team?”

Hope spoke up. “I think I get the idea. ‘The team’ isn't just the players. Whatever coaching staff they have now, we need replaced. That starts with us proving that we deserve better, right?”

“Right,” Mia confirmed. “They treat the national team as a hobby.”

“Why?” Alex asked the obvious question. “When did they stop trying to win?”

“Almost at the beginning, as far as I can tell,” Mia answered. “I've gone over the records and it's a short story. After the Revolution, Great Britain used its influence to keep us out of World Cup qualifying, and the War of 1812 cooled our enthusiasm for an English sport. The U.S. Quidditch Federation has been content to oversee rec, school, and semi-pro leagues ever since.”

Tobin held up two fingers. “Okay, let me make sure I have you right. We roll up to this tryout event, unknown, kill it so hard that the coach – who won't know what to do with our drive – chooses us over the players he knows, and return to Scotland in time, I assume, for Triwizard team practice?”

“That’s the idea, minus a few details.”

“I’ll help you with the timing,” Hope said, “but I can’t make myself a year younger.”

“We professionals,” Lindsay said to her, “will sit this one out.”

“And after that? When do we go after the senior team?”

“I'll get you in the loop for it,” Mia assured her, “but the best thing you can do right now – and this goes for everyone – is be awesome. We need to look like a solid investment. Once money enters the picture, we'll have bargaining power.”

“So we're basically buying out the team?” Julie asked.

Mia nodded. “I suppose you could say that, indirectly.”

“How confident are you that we'll beat the other players who try out?”

“I’m completely confident that you can, but don’t take that to mean you have nothing to worry about. To get the leverage you need, the first eight names on the roster must be yours, by a wide margin. It's not enough to just be better. You need to make a statement that you are on another level from everyone there. That should be your mantra: on another level. Your play must be on another level. Your results will be on another level. You'll bring media attention on another level. You'll attract sponsors on another level. It starts with proving that your coaching staff needs to be on another level.”

“Actually,” Ashlyn said, “it starts now, with practicing on another level.”
Mia leaned back in her seat and grinned. “I knew I picked the right women for the job. It’s high time we got you second-years some new brooms, don’t you think?”

Unfortunately, Alex’s aspirations for a new broom were short-lived. “I didn’t know Mia would announce it like that,” Lindsay told her. “She shouldn’t have, but I guess I should’ve talked to you sooner, anyway. The thing is, your raw ability and talent are still far ahead of your experience. If we help you buy a serious professional’s broom, you won’t – heck, if they even let you fly it in Hogwarts matches – you won’t learn anything for the next three years. It’ll take all the challenge out of the game and you’ll end up behind the learning curve.”

Alex made a face. “I was all excited to go broom shopping. What happens if the other seekers have better brooms than mine?”

“That didn’t bother you last year.”

There really was no arguing with that. “Alright, fine, I'll play with that handicap. What about practicing, though? Wouldn’t I learn-“

“Trust me,” Lindsay insisted, “I’ve set you up right. You'll never get the most out of a world-class seeker's broom, unless you learn to fly a mid-level broom, like yours, to its absolute limit.”

“Why not?”

“Gosh, lots of reasons. If you went from your broom to a premier broom, right now, the performance would seem infinite. It’d become a crutch. Five, six years down the road, your peers will catch up to you, because they learned to fly efficiently, while you're still brute-forcing everything. I know it’s not flashy, but great seekers learn to fly at a broom's limit first, and then increase the limit.”

“You keep bringing up performance. Do you think I can't handle it?”

Her mentor shook her head. “This is about learning to use a broom effectively, no matter how much performance it has. You don’t learn to drive in a racing car and you don’t learn to race in a Formula One car – you master the principles and then scale up. Alex, I promise, if you learn the right way, it’ll be worth the wait.” Lindsay chuckled. “Once we let you on a World Cup broom, we'll never get you down again.”

Going into the Gryffindor-Slytherin match, Alex knew she might come out a hero – again. Winning, she liked, but she could do without the looks, the lionization, and, of course, being hit on. Was it so much to ask for, to be just another student sometimes? Hugging Kelley on the field afterwards, she admitted, “I’m glad I'm going with you to see Hope play tonight.”

Kelley smirked. “You’re so modest for a Gryffindor.”

“It’s not modest, it's selfish. I get tired of everyone interrupting whatever non-sport thing I'm doing.”

“You do realize, if Mia's plan works, you'll be famous?”

Alex cheered on her lip. “Maybe there is a bright side to the whole incognito witch thing.”

Amy, finished shaking hands, joined them as they ambled towards the sideline. “I can't wait until we're on the same team. How did you time the catch so well?”

“Luck. Like, I still would've caught the snitch before you could score an equalizer, but catching it immediately after Nobber put us ahead was a lucky break.”
“You really wouldn’t have. Julie had a good line to me and Kelley’d lost her mark in the transition.”

“You had about ten seconds before I was in on Ash,” Kelley agreed.

“And that wasn’t an easy catch,” a voice called.

Kelley lit up like a neon sign. “Hope?!” Her eyes found her girlfriend, who stood behind the Slytherin bench. Hope held out her arms and Kelley rushed to accept her offer. “You said you couldn’t come because of your match tonight!” With her face buried in Hope’s chest, her voice was muffled, but Hope understood.

“I was wrong.”

After a warm, full hug, Hope stepped back and glowed with pride. “Look at you, Kelley O’Hat-Trick.”

Kelley laughed. “This is Quidditch, though, so that’s not as impressive. Amy had six.”

“How about a hat trick of hat tricks?”

“Challenge accepted.”

Hope smiled fondly at Kelley. “Let’s get out of here, so I can kiss you however I want.”

Waiting for Hope, after Montrose’s final match, Kelley and Alex embodied dejection and sympathy, respectively. “All they needed was one point,” Kelley said, for the third time. Alex nodded grimly.

“Just one thing needed to go right,” Kelley continued. “They could’ve caught the snitch, or not and just tied for goals, and they would’ve won the title.”

“It’s hard to believe,” Alex agreed. “I wonder what Ginny Potter will say about the match.”

“I’m worried about the rest of the team. They’d better not blame her for losing.”

Alex made a noise of concurrence. Hope hadn’t looked, in her view, like she was playing at one hundred percent, but that was to be expected in her first match since tearing her ACL. The rest of the team needed to take up the slack – surely, the coach worked out a strategy for keeping the pressure off of Hope? Whatever the plan was, the field players seemed less than one hundred percent committed to it. Their performances, at both ends of the field, weren’t sloppy, per se, but they were unbecoming of a team in a de facto championship match. “If they try to,” Alex replied, “the media will tear them to pieces. That was a complete team loss. Like, both six-second calls against her only happened because nobody was really trying to get really open. Where was she supposed to kick the quaffle?”

“I’m just worried they’ll try to pin it on her, like she’s the weakest link.”

“They won’t fool anybody, except maybe themselves.”

Kelley shook her head and sighed. “The second match of Hope’s career, and it’s the one that costs them the title.”

Alex hugged Kelley to her side. “Nobody will remember that when she’s holding the World Cup in one hand and the golden glove in the other.”

“Some will. Haters gonna hate.”
“Yeah, well, hopers gonna hope.” Kelley almost laughed.

Finally, the Montrose players trickled out of their locker room and into the night. None of them were talking. Last of all came Hope. As she passed a light, they saw tear stains around her eyes. Kelley felt her hand squeezed and heard Alex say, “I’ll head back to Hogwarts. Come to our room if you need anything. Hope’s welcome, too.”

“Thanks. I might spend the night at her place.” Alex squeezed her hand again, flashed the approaching Hope a smile, and left the couple to themselves.

Just before she came within Kelley’s reach, Hope spoke. “No PDA until we’re away. People would notice, tonight.”

“Then let’s get out of here. Where do you want to go?”

Hope chewed on her lip. “Let’s drop my bag at my apartment and then decide.”

“Okay. How do I side-along like we’re just friends?”

“Don’t look like you enjoy it.”

Kelley gripped Hope as awkwardly as was safe and compressed her lips. “Ready,” she said gruffly.

*Bang!*  

Hope shrugged her duffle from her shoulder and lobbed it at her bed.

*Bang!*  

Kelley looked around at the murky confines of a windowless, wood-paneled room. The space was unfurnished, unloved, and without an apparent point of entry. “Where are we?”


“I trust you.” Kelley relaxed her hold on Hope, but didn’t move away. “It’s true that it’s not haunted anymore?”

“Never was.” Hope sat against the nearest wall. “Some poor kid came here for his werewolf transformations while he was at Hogwarts, but that was decades ago. Now, it’s the perfect place for a hurting introvert and the one person whose company she wants.”

“Why not your and Tarp’s apartment? Did something happen?”

‘No. No, I just…” Hope shut her eyes and clasped one of Kelley’s hands. “I need to be alone for a bit, but I want you with me. Please don’t ask anything until I get talkative again.”

Hope was just different like that, Kelley had learned. Where she – and her family and friends – dealt with emotional blows and wounds by opening up to confidants, Hope closed down. Kelley still didn’t really understand how that worked, but she’d seen enough to satisfy her that it did work. It was just an introvert thing, she supposed – not moping, not sulking, but ‘processing’. Minutes or hours later, Hope would tune back in and share where she was at, with answers to the sorts questions Kelley would’ve asked, if they’d talked first. “You’re good and I love you. If I fall asleep, don’t feel bad about waking me up.” Kelley slipped her arm inside Hope’s, in the way that fit effortlessly for them both, and settled in for a quiet wait.
Much later, she heard Hope take an especially deep breath and swallow. “Everyone was pissed afterwards, at everyone – including themselves, which made it worse. About Tarp; she was the one exception, ‘cause she didn’t seem upset with me. I didn’t see any of her game, obviously, but she looked beat.” Kelley knew why – Lindsay had played near her best, yet still lost – but didn’t interrupt Hope. “In the huddle, the coach and our captain both tried to wind everybody down, but we could tell they were just as frustrated as the rest of us. I told myself that it was a bad situation and I needed to leave as soon as possible. Coming into the locker room, though, I heard one of the chasers say, ‘two bleedin’ six-second calls’, and I got defensive. I said, ‘Normally, you’re open by then’. I don’t think either of us meant it personally, but we were already upset, so it sounded like we did. That was the spark that sets a dry prairie on fire. It got heated.”

“Did they try to blame it on you?”

“Like I said, everyone blamed everything on everybody.”

“But they aimed some of it at you?”

Hope sighed. “Yeah, but what hurts – I mean, that stung, but I can take attacks. If someone’s wrong about me, they’re just fucking wrong. If they get nasty, I can fight back or leave. But this, they just shut me out of the fight, like I wasn’t even in the room. It was just the players who’ve been with the team for a while, yelling at each other about how much of the result was my fault and how much was everyone else’s. That’s what hurt. I gave this team everything my body had, all season, but they don’t even look at me when they're talking about me? It hit me that, even if they’d all agreed I was blameless tonight, they’d still only appreciate my performance, not me. That’s what started the tears. I didn’t want them to see…” Hope grimaced and made herself continue. “I grabbed my time-turner and hid in a stall, basically, skipped ahead until I heard everyone leave, showered, changed, and skipped back so you wouldn’t have to wait.”

“Hope, oh...” Kelley held back her impulse to cling to Hope, who didn’t seem ready to share her most personal space. Instead, she pressed about their fellow American. "What about Tarp? Did she defend you?”

“She did what I meant to do, which was be the first into the locker room, grab her things, and go change at home. She left just as it started.”

Kelley’s eyes narrowed and her nostrils flared. “She left you?!”

“No – no, not actually. I told her on the way inside that I wanted to get my bag and bolt. She said she did, too, and offered to stick with me, but I said, no, I was meeting you.” Hope looked up at the roof and sighed. “I mean, how hard could it be to leave a building?”

“Shame on her for asking,” Kelley growled. “She should've just stuck with you.”

Out of nowhere, Hope laughed. “Does that mean there is such a thing as being too polite?”

Kelley smiled wide. “You know there is. Since when do you ask permission to do the right thing?”

For a long, sweet moment, Hope’s eyes smiled back. In another, the light drained out of them again. “I did something else wrong. Some reporters cornered me on the sideline and stuck a microphone in my face. I lashed out at the refs.”

“Oof.” Kelley frowned. “We both know that you know better than that.”

“Yeah.” Hope slumped her shoulders. “There's gonna be some punishment from the league, I'm sure. They take that shit seriously.”
“Did you tell the refs afterwards? Apologizing before they hear it in the news might save some bridges from burning.”

Hope shook her head, slowly. “I can’t apologize for saying what I thought, without implying that I’m not convinced I was wrong. I'd sound passive-aggressive.”

“Mmm, and you only do active-aggressive.”

A smile flickered like candlelight on Hope’s lips. “I just wish it wasn’t hanging out past the end of the season. I want to move on from that game – you know how it is – but I'll have some disciplinary action hanging over me. If they give me a suspension, like, there’s no matches to miss until the new season. All the sportswriters will remind everyone why I'm not dressed for the first match of 2009.”

“It'll pass, babe.” Kelley sensed that Hope was through her ‘alone’ phase and open to closer contact. She reached out and caressed her girlfriend’s cheek. “Whatever they give you, everything else is the same.”

“You’re right. I'll probably feel better once I get back to training.”

“You always do.” Kelley gave Hope a kiss on her forehead, then her cheek, and then her lips. “How do you feel now?”

Hope smiled. “More tired, less upset, and a lot less lonely. Would you come back to my apartment with me?”

“I’d love to. Should I plan to spend the night?”

“Please. I want to fall asleep in your arms.”

“Anytime, Hope.”

Chapter End Notes

Your comments are always welcome :)
Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

I gotta confess, I wrote this like a year ago. I blame the Olympics for why it's taking so long to edit and post everything.

“So,” Kelley muttered, “the beach.”

Alex grunted in agreement. What else was there to say? It was raining.

“That’s Scotland for you,” Rachel said.

“Hope, you’re from Washington.” Tobin turned to her for answers. “How do you make the most of a rainy day at the beach?”

Hope shook her head. “I’m from the dry side of the mountains.”

“You were in charge of checking the weather,” Amy began.

Hope bristled. “It said a chance of showers in the late morning, clearing up by midday, and partly cloudy in the afternoon and evening. Obviously, it was wrong.”

“I wasn’t accusing you, just asking. I guess we can wait and see if it lets up.”

“If only we had a tent with a hearth,” Rachel muttered.

Julie gave her a reproving look. “Come on, we can work with this. Um…let's make some kind of rain fly.”

“Done.” Tobin conjured a campsite-sized transparent canopy overhead. “We should see if we can dry out the sand under here.”

“That’s much harder than it sounds,” Hope said. “I'll do it while the rest of you set up.” She aimed her wand down, intoned something, and spent the next ten minutes frowning at the sand. The rest tackled other camp chores: setting up tents and chairs, unpacking, and collecting stones for a fire ring. At last, they had a dry haven amidst the soggy shore.

“Who’s good at making fires?” Lauren asked.

Hannah volunteered. “I am.”

And that’s how Alex wound up watching Hannah swing an axe in a tank top. Hope and Kelley
gathered fallen wood for her and dried it, and she chopped it to size. Alex tried not to stare at Hannah’s bare arms and shoulders, but she mostly failed. Entirely failed. There was just so much of the tall New Zealander! Sooner or later, though, she’d catch Alex watching, and then what? Either that or someone else would notice. Better to get ahead of it. She approached Hannah and asked, “Can I help?”

Hannah rested the axe and smiled at her. “There’s only one person’s worth of work here, but you can help build the fire when I’m done. Unless you want to do the axe work?”  

Say yes! “If you teach me. I’ve never done this before.”

“Ah, yeah, you can do it. Stand over here where I am.” Hannah gave Alex the safety lecture, showed her the motions, and set her stance; Alex focused herself on meeting a new challenge.

She didn’t get off to a great start. “Nah, Alex, you’re swingin’ it like a girl. Put your body into it and swing like a woman.”

Woman, right, Alex thought. That’s taking a while to get used to. She ached to know whether Hannah watched her with a coach’s interest or something more personal, but she wanted to preserve her ears and feet even more, so she kept her eyes on her task.

“C’mon, you saw how I did it. Give the blade what it needs.”

She knew I was watching! Alex almost missed the branch completely.

“Stop, stop. Sorry, I’m clearly not helping you like this. Let me show you the motion again. No, hold onto it,” Hannah added, when Alex went to rest the axe on the log. “I’ll guide you through it. Get like you’re going to swing again.”

Alex picked up the axe, faced the log, and felt Hannah approach from behind. Sensing a gasp coming, she held her breath. When Hannah spoke again, the hairs on the back of Alex’s neck seemed to stand on end. Alex didn’t really hear what she said, but it probably had to do with Hannah’s hands closing over her own on the axe’s handle. The taller girl's forearms brushed her own. She tensed.

Hannah’s voice rolled above her ear. “Relax, Alex. Let me lead.”

Alex’s knees relaxed so immediately, she feared they might give out, and she might swoon, and she might land on the axe, and then she’d have to explain how she needed to regrow a kidney because of her crush on Hannah. Fear served her well; she kept her feet. It’s just skin, she told herself. Focus. “Ready.”

Hannah guided Alex through an axe-swing, then another. The first two were a warm blur of skin against skin; by the third, Alex could pay attention to the axe.

“Now, just like that.”

Alex tried to replay the movements. She missed her cut-in-progress, but the impact of the axe felt more satisfying.

“Yeah, that’s more like it! Don’t worry about missing to the sides. Take a few swings to get it down first.”

The second chop went better, the third was a dud, and then the fourth sent a perfect wedge-shaped woodchip arcing through the air.
“Sweet as, Alex!”

Alex knew what Hannah meant, but it still brought heat to her cheeks. Hannah surely had as good view of her as she’d had of Hannah. The mental image of herself chopping wood…raised another point in her mind; “Does this mean I’m officially a lesbian?”

Hannah looked deeply and profoundly confused. “Uh, context, please?”

“I was just thinking, like, I'm out here, chopping wood like a lumberjack – all I need is flannel and a haircut.”

Hannah pulled her lips in. “Honestly, I don’t know how to respond to that.”

“Sorry…” Alex didn’t know how to respond to that.

“I guess…like,” for a fraction of a blink of an eye, Hannah’s mouth twitched upward at one corner, “was it not official before?”

Alex absorbed every detail of Hannah’s expression and body language before replying. “I appreciate you trying to be cautious, but I wasn't being serious. And it’s been official for over a year,” she added. She needed that out there.

“Gotcha. Thanks, I couldn’t tell.”

Alex bit her tongue to keep from asking whether Hannah meant her seriousness or her sexuality. Her next axe swings carried extra energy, as she tried to drive the tension out of her body.

Another voice rang out, “Yeah, Alex! Work dat axe!”

Alex hid her face. Why, Kelley? Just why?

“What will you do, now that the season's over?”

Across the campfire, Hope answered, “I'm going to get loaned somewhere. Most likely, it'll be India or South Africa.”

“Why those two?” Julie asked.

Rachel preempted Hope's answer. “Because they're former British colonies in the Southern Hemisphere.” Hope gave her a side-eye glare.

“India isn’t,” Kelley corrected.

“It’s close enough to the equator to play in the winter,” Hope explained, “and they're both closer to our time zone than Australia and New Zealand.”

“You sure?” Hannah asked. “I could connect you-”

“No. Thank you, but I've thought about it and it just wouldn’t be good for me.”

Rachel, meanwhile, assembled a s'more. Smirking, she proffered it to Julie. “Here. Now, what’s this song you’re all coy about?”

“Fair’s fair.” Julie wiped her hands clean, borrowed Hannah’s guitar, and made one last disclaimer: “I’m from suburban Arizona, not a ranch in Wyoming, but here goes.
"Oh, give me a land, where the bright diamond sand
Flows leisurely down the stream;
Where the graceful white swan goes gliding along
Like a maid in a heavenly dream.

"Home, home on the range,
Where the wampus and the thunderbirds play.
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word
And the Muggles are out prospecting all day."

In the crackling firelight, under the night sky, with all her friends’ eyes on her, Julie came a little further out of her shell.

"How often at night, when the heavens are bright,
With the light from the glittering stars,
Have I stood here amazed and asked as I gazed,
If their glory exceeds that of ours."

She ended with an arpeggio up the final chord and rested.

Kelley, nestled in Hope’s lap, murmured, “You didn’t tell us there was a romantic version.”

“Romantic?” Julie asked, wondering if she’d soon regret her decision.

Hope explained. “Some of our best memories happened under starlight,” she said softly. “Thank you.”

“Oh.”

“I liked that,” Rachel said. “If I make you another one, will you sing the other version?”

Julie aimed a mock glare at her. “I’m not a slot machine.”

“Aww, Julie,” Lauren appealed, “we liked it.”

Julie felt embarrassment, but the good kind. “Oh, give me a home, where the hippogriffs roam…”

The moon – third quarter, Kelley told them – hung high amongst the stars when they turned in for the night. As the campfire huddle broke, Hope held her girlfriend back. “It’s not too cold. Want to sleep open-air, Kell?”

“Open-air?”

"Mhm. Here by the fire.”

“Yes! Let’s zip our sleeping bags together!”

They did. Hope snuggled in behind Kelley, whose red hair smelt of sea spray and wood smoke. She snaked her arm around Kelley’s side and embraced her across her chest. Kelley rested her hand on Hope’s side and breathed a contented breath. The sound elicited a matching sigh from Hope’s lungs. “I love you, Kell.”

“Mmm, I love you, Hope.”

“You know how much I love you?”
“Remind me, babe.”

Hope wrapped her leg over Kelley’s. The girl hummed and reached down to caress Hope’s thigh. “I was thinking about us the other day – as always,” Hope said. “I realized you melted every time I’ve done that.”

“Twice,” Kelley murmured.

Hope nuzzled behind her ear. “Well, now that I’m onto you, you’re gonna lose count.” She clasped her hand over Kelley’s and brought it to rest over her girlfriend’s heart,

“Hope.”

“Kell?”

“You are amazing. Also, three.”

With a giggle and a kiss behind her ear, Hope bid her love goodnight.
Chapter Summary

*I was so worried they’d butt heads,*” Alex admitted. “*They’re, like, at the poles of their Houses.*”

*Kelley smirked. “Hope said they had a little 'discussion' this morning.”*

Rachel slipped quietly out of her tent, conscious of her sleeping schoolmates, and into a chill North Sea dawn. She assumed she was the first to rise, but instead found a rebuilt fire, tended by Hope Solo. “I’ve got hot water going,” the graduate said, and pointed at their supplies. “There’s powdered drinks in all the colors of the rainbow.”

“Thanks. Straight hot chocolate will do.” Rachel dug a packet out of the box and summoned her mug.

Hope smirk-grinned. “What, you don’t like the sparkling grapefruit gillywater?”

Rachel scoffed. “I don’t know why they bother.” She sat across the fire from Hope and took in the scene. The sky was a typical Scottish wool-gray, the distant trees were bare of leaves, and a mist blanketed the surf. The campfire looked hand-built and a couple of spent matches lay inside the fire ring. The witch herself looked serene, especially when she looked down at a bundle by her feet. Belatedly, Rachel realized it was Kelley, still in her sleeping bag. “*Oh, sorry,*” she said to Hope, with her voice appropriately hushed. “Did you sleep out here?”

“Yes. Don’t worry,” Hope replied, “she let me charm her into extra-deep sleep. She'll wake when her body wants.”

Rachel’s eyebrows skyrocketed. “Was she that tired?”

Hope shrugged. “Tired enough. I needed to get up to stoke the fire a couple times, but she really needed to sleep through the night.”

“That takes a massive amount of trust,” Rachel observed.

Hope smiled a modest smile and gazed at her girlfriend’s peaceful face. Reaching down, she tucked a breeze-blown lock of hair behind Kelley’s ear. “*Thanks for beli.*” Her eyes flicked back up at Rachel and then away in embarrassment. Rachel developed an absorbing interest in a seashell near her foot.

Clearing her throat, Hope pointed her wand at the jug on the fire. “It’s ready now. Hold out your mug and I’ll pour.” Rachel extended her hand and the jug hovered, floated to her, and tipped to fill her mug. Finished, it floated across to Hope and filled hers.

Rachel thanked her and mixed her hot chocolate. “I notice you tend to do things by hand.”

“I do.” Hope gazed into the fire. “Mostly, it’s because my dad did it that way.”

“Was he a Muggle?” It seemed wise to match Hope’s past tense.
“No, actually, he just liked using his hands. My mom is.”

Rachel sensed Hope would say no more about it. She sat in silence, for a while, drinking her hot chocolate, until she couldn’t ignore something any longer. “Um, Hope… I’m sorry, but I can’t sit here one-on-one with you and not ask… how are you so nice with your friends, yet dreadful in public?”

Hope rolled her eyes. “By ‘in public’, you mean in the news? I’m only in the news because I’m a professional athlete. I don’t have time to sugarcoat things when I’m at work.”

Rachel minimized her automatic frown. “It takes no time at all to filter before you speak.”

Hope shook her head. “No, it does. Making the filter takes time. Learning to say the right things after a loss, or a contentious win, or a boneheaded ref ruins a match, takes thought and practice, and what does it get me? Softer edges? I can’t have that spilling over into my mental game.”

“But there are plenty of players who have both sides.”

“And you’re saying, what, that they’re better people than me?” Hope smiled mirthlessly. “I disagree, but so what? Being a ‘better person’ can be their consolation prize after I beat them.”

Rachel puckered her lips at her hot chocolate. “I think you just answered all my questions.”

“Rachel.” Hope took a softer tone, “I know I’m hard to like from some angles. I don’t ask anyone to, but I won’t change, either. I’m the player I am because I’m the person I am. I will never apologize for that.”

“You Slytherins are something else.” Rachel studied Hope for a minute. “What I ultimately saw in her is that she always says what she thinks is right, regardless of what’s the ‘right thing’ to say.”

“People who don’t actually want my opinion shouldn’t ask for it.”

Hope frowned. “And what?”

“I’m not interested in a life of repeating someone else’s lines,” Hope elaborated. “People who don’t actually want my opinion shouldn’t ask for it.”

Rachel worked her jaw. “Do you still think the officials fixed the Appleby match?”

“No, not after I watched the tape of it.”

“And?” Lauren prompted.

Hope frowned. “And what?”

“You saw you were wrong, and then you…?”

Hope squinted at Lauren, clearly not following where her friend was leading. Lauren hooked her thumbs together and flapped her hands like birds’ wings. “Oh! Those.” Hope returned to Rachel. “I
wrote apologies to all the refs.”

Rachel's eyebrows rose. “You could've apologized publicly.”

“To me, that's not really an apology.”

“We wouldn't even know,” Lauren said, “if Kelley hadn't noticed the letters on Hope's desk. If you get to know Hope, you realize she has all the traits you admire in a person, except for tact in the heat of the moment.”

“And the media is only there for the heated moments,” Hope added ruefully. “Thanks, Cheney.”

Rachel felt impressed, but not satisfied. “But tact isn’t just tact, it's self-control and empathy.”

“Rachel, seriously, it's fine if you don’t like me. You won’t lose any friends here over it.”

Rachel shook her head. “How can you be so blasé about that?”

Hope shrugged. “You barely know me, so why should I give a damn?” She answered Rachel’s shocked stare with a warm smile. “I truly respect you for challenging me. You’ve got guts, Rachel.”

“She’s a fighter.” Lauren grinned at Rachel. “Such a shame you're English.”

Hope sparkled with laughter. “No, we need good competition. It's also good that I graduated, because I wouldn't want Team Gryffindor to see me do this.” The big keeper slid off her seat and nestled herself against Kelley's back, spoon-style. A goofy smile took over her face, which she then buried in her girlfriend's hair. "Don't mind me. Just want to be here when she wakes up."

Rachel shook her head in amazement.
Time to remind everyone why I made our team. Kelley put on a pennie and her game face. Let's crush this tryout.

A minute later, Julie, watching the Triwizard tryouts from a distance, exclaimed, “Geez! I didn’t know people slide-tackled in Quidditch!”

“You rarely see that sort of flying toe-poke outside of professional play,” Rachel Daly told her.

“I mean, the way she shot in and knocked the quaffle out of his arm! She looked like a freakin' tiger shark!”

“It looked a bit reckless,” Rachel said, “like she hasn't practiced it much at full chat.”

“She's definitely fired up.”

“How long can she keep up that pace?”

Julie smirked. “More than long enough. Kelley goes to eleven.”

Rachel took her eyes off the flying figures to question Julie. “What? Until eleven?”

Julie stared. “Have you never heard…?”

“Is it a Muggle saying?”

Julie sighed and tried to explain the concept of a dial going to eleven.

“I know you are all aching to hear the all-Hogwarts team roster, so, without further ceremony! Madame Hooch?”

“Sonorous.” The professor rose and unrolled a scroll. “When your name is called, please come and form a line in front of the faculty. Please hold your applause until I've finished. Laura Bassett! Lucy Bronze! Emma Byrne! Siobhan Chamberlain! Lauren Cheney!”

Alex felt Kelley’s hand slip inside her own. She glanced at her friend and saw anxiousness written across her face.

“Toni Duggan! Jessica Fishlock! Tobin Heath!”

That made two of their cadre. Alex realized she'd have to stand before Kelley would learn her fate. She wanted to say something encouraging, but the chaser tryout had looked very, very competitive. Kelley would know she was just saying it to be kind.

“Stephanie Houghton! Ali Krieger!”
Almost halfway through the alphabet. Alex felt her pulse picking up.

“Kim Little! Alex Morgan!”

Alex took her time getting out of her space on the bench. If she stalled a little, she could still be there, in case…

“Fiona O'Sullivan!”

Kelley didn’t make it.

“Amy Rodriguez!”

Alex squeezed Kelley’s shoulder with one hand and tugged on Julie's sleeve with the other. Julie got the hint and slid close to her roommate.

“Witches and wizards, your two thousand and eight Triwizard Cup team!”

Madame Hooch brought her customary crispness to the first Team Hogwarts practice.

“Congratulations, once more, on making the cut. My role is finished; this tournament is contested entirely by students, which means no faculty coaching.”

“Seriously?” The outburst came from a Slytherin, who recovered quickly. “Madame, Durmstrang's never going to follow that rule. Why should we handicap ourselves?”

“We-” Madame Hooch found her rebuttal interrupted.

“We’ll play smarter.”

“We’ll work harder.”

“We have honor.”

_We sound really naïve_, Alex thought, but kept it to herself.

Lauren Cheney looked between the students from the different Houses. “If we break the rules and they don't, and they find out, won't that undermine the whole point of this?”

“Thank you, Ms. Cheney, for seeing the big picture. Remember, all of you, that you represent Hogwarts and the Isles as a whole. For many on the continent, Hogwarts and Great Britain are synonymous with the wizarding wars. Our conduct is of far greater consequence than the results on the field. Any last questions?”

Alex nodded. “Do we have ways to know if the other schools cheat?”

“Yes. Do you have questions about something else?” None were forthcoming. “Very well. Your first order of business should be to elect a captain. I'll leave you to it.” She turned to mount her broom.

A Ravenclaw’s voice turned her around again. “Won’t you supervise the vote?”

The professor swept them with a stern look as she replied, “Do Hogwarts's finest need supervision?”

She left them to their task.

The players looked around at each other. “Alright, then,” someone said, “I nominate Steph Houghton.”
“Why does it always have to be a Gryffindor?” All eyes snapped to a Slytherin. Judging by her expression, she hadn't meant to speak aloud.

“What do you mean, ‘always’?” It devolved from there.

Tobin sighed. “Here we go.”

“Faster than usual, too.” Lauren pursed her lips. “I don’t know if I should…”

“Mediate?”

“We’re guests in their country. They deserve to own their team.”

Next to them, Ali’s frustration boiled over. “Guys, guys! This is hopeless.”

“*She wouldn’t put up with this,*” Amy muttered.

Ali surprised her with a carbon copy of Hooch’s stern gaze. “But Hope *isn’t* here, so we have to make this work ourselves. As I was saying, it’s hopeless trying to pick a leader with all this House stuff in the air.”

Eyes sized her up. “So, it’s hopeless, full stop?” “Oh, *real* helpful. You have an actual suggestion?”

“Ali,” Lauren said in quiet warning.

Ali returned fire. “I suggest you all back off and deal with this like grown witches.”

Lauren cringed inwardly. “*This is exactly what I wanted to avoid,*” she told Tobin.

“We’re all ganging up on the Yank now,” a Ravenclaw muttered. “I guess that’s progress.”

“Aye, the hothead Gryffindor Yank,” someone else said.

Everyone who knew Ali reacted with, “‘Hothead’?!” Unfortunately, all but Amy were Gryffindor or Hufflepuff. The crashing and burning resumed.

“Hey!” Alex was the next to exhaust her patience. “Hey! You know what? Here!” Alex started undoing her red necktie.

“Yes!” Lauren caught on and did the same with her yellow one. “Until we gel as a team, let's check our House colors at the door.” She folded her tie inside her cloak and set it under the sideline bench. Amy did, too, and then a Ravenclaw, and the rest followed. Some did it willingly, others grudgingly, and the most vocal Slytherin and Gryffindor were last of all.

“Let's sit, too,” a short blonde woman, Scottish by her accent, suggested. “It’s easier to keep calm when you’re sitting.” She modeled and the others joined in a ragged circle. “I don’t really know some of you, so how about we do names?” A few concurred. “Good. I'm Kim Little, from Mintlaw, in Aberdeenshire. I play chaser.” Kim looked at the woman to her left.

“Jess Fishlock, chaser. From Cardiff. That's in Wales,” she added, glancing at the international students.

“Thank you.” Ali was next. “Ali Krieger. I'm from Virginia and also a chaser.”

“Alex Morgan. I'm from California.” She looked to the next person.
“Typical Gryffer,” someone muttered. Alex's face solidified into a mask.

“Come on, both of you,” Lauren chided, “that doesn’t help us win the tournament.”

Amy grinned. “Anyone who mentions another teammate’s House has to do ten push-ups. All in favor, say ‘aye’.” The motion failed, but it made a majority loosen up a little. “I'm Amy Rodriguez, from California. Call me A-Rod. I'm a chaser.”

“Tobin Heath, New Jersey. Also a chaser.”

“Lauren Cheney, beater from Indiana.”


“Fiona O'Sullivan, chaser.” She tossed a smile at Alex and Amy. “I actually grew up in California, too. My pa's from Ireland and my mom's part Native American.”

“Toni Duggan. I play seeker. Oh, and I’m from Liverpool.”

“Laura Bassett, beater, Nuneaton, England.”

“Steph Houghton, beater, Durham.”

“Lucy Bronze, from Berwick-on-Tweed. I play beater.”

“Emma Byrne. I'm a keeper from Leixlip, Ireland.”

“Cool,” Kim concluded, when the introductions had come full circle. “Now, how about we offer some suggestions of who would make a good captain? Let's say why, too, and not just toss names out.”

Amy spoke at once. “Cheney. She’s awesome at leading by example, she always puts her team first, and she reads the game better than anyone I've played with.”

“So seconded,” Emma Byrne said. “You’ve all seen Chen’s awesome on-field presence. She's the one you want rallying your team when your back's against the wall.”

“Thanks, A-Rod and Emma.” Kim looked across at the nominee. “Lauren, if we voted for you, would you be captain?”

Lauren struggled to keep a level expression. “I…yes. Wow.” She shook her head and gave up fighting her bashful smile. “I did not see that coming.”

A chorus of her Housemates' voices replied, “We did.”

“Anyhow,” Lauren said, “let’s hear some more nominations.” A long silence ensued. “Come on, there are fourteen of us! Someone, suggest someone.” Nothing. “Steph, aren’t you your House’s captain? You’re a prefect, too. Who nominated you earlier?”

“That was Lucy,” Stephanie Houghton answered, “but I'd prefer not to be captain. Like you said, I've enough else happening.”

“Ah, gotcha.” Lauren looked across the circle. “Kim, you seemed comfortable taking the lead. What about you?”

Kim smiled. “I’d be happy to, but it sounds like you’re more widely known and respected than I.
That’s immense.”

“Invaluable, in this group,” Jess Fishlock agreed. “Unless someone wants to add a name, I say we vote.”

Siobhan Chamberlain spoke up. “No name, but a question: Lauren, why the effort to find someone else?”

“I wanted a British subject to have the opportunity to represent their school,” Lauren explained, “and to make sure we chose the best candidate.”

“Thanks,” Siobhan said, “needed to know. So, all in favor...?”

Ashlyn greeted Ali on her return to their room. “How did the first practice go?”

“Good! Well…” Ali chuckled to herself. “It got off to a rocky start – shocking, I know – but it worked out. Cheney was voted team captain, unanimously.”

“Wow, awesome!”

“What do they say in politics, a ‘mandate’? Cheney took that mandate and whooped our butts with it.” Ali grinned. “It was kinda hilarious, actually. Someone grumbled about having to do fitness and she shouted, ‘How hard d’you think Durmstrang is training?! The competition is now!’ We all left feeling good.”

“That’s wonderful. Did you get a sense of the other chasers?”

“They’re really good. You know Tobin and A-Rod, but these two other girls, Kim and Jess…” Ali sighed. “I’m gonna grow massively just from practicing with this team, but it’s hard to see myself ranking higher than first alternate.”

“Don’t decide that in advance,” Ashlyn reminded her.

“I know. I’m gonna give everything at every practice. Really, Ash, I’m right where I want to be. If I’m ever the best player on my team, then I’m on the wrong team – or we’re world champions.”

When the opportunity presented itself, Kelley tugged the Hogwarts captain aside. “Lauren, tell it to me straight. Why do you think Ali got picked over me?”

“Hmmm…I think Ali has better field-sense than you’ve shown so far. When her team doesn’t have possession, or isn’t in the final third, I’d say her positioning and anticipation are ahead of yours.”

“And that’s enough to get the call-up from Hooch?”

“I’m not a mind reader, but I think that’s why. In a player pool with Kim Little, Fishlock, and Tobin, Ali stands out more than you, at this moment.”

Kelley sagged – just a little, but with all of her body. The effect was dramatic and it tugged at Lauren's heart. She pulled Kelley into a hug.

“I gave everything.” The russet-haired girl sounded on the verge of something. Whether tears or anger, Lauren couldn’t tell.

“I know. We all saw you and we know. Kelley, you know your ‘everything’ isn't static. You just
need to build your decision-making.”

“Yeah, but now Ali’s gonna improve even faster, and the House teams are on hiatus. I don't have…” she pulled back from Lauren's embrace. “I’m gonna go knock on doors at Montrose FC. Thanks, Chen-Chen!” She jogged away, headed for the Slytherin dorms.

“Glad I could help,” Lauren replied, though she doubted that Kelley heard.

“My name's Kelley O’Hara. I want three minutes with the Technical Development Director.”

“What do you wish to see him about?”

“Directing my technical development.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Kelley decided to start over. “I’m a student at Hogwarts. I missed the cut for the Triwizard Cup team, so I have no structure for the rest of this year. I'm looking for a club team or a training program, or something, to keep challenging myself. That’s what I want to see the Director about.”

The receptionist regarded Kelley with a long look, asked her to wait, and went down the hall to an office. In two minutes, she emerged and returned to her desk. “Director Drilling will see you, but he has a meeting in ten minutes, so that’s as much time as he can spare. His office is number one-oh-nine. Go on, he's expecting you.”

Kelley whooped internally. “Thank you!”

“Good luck, lass.”
The Hogwarts Express glided into Kings Cross Railway Station and came to rest with a final lurch. Kelley wondered aloud, “Why does it jolt like that?”

“It’s the bump from the carriage behind us.”

“Nah, ‘cause cars do it, too, unless you ease up on the brake pedal just right.”

“Hmmmm, maybe it’s…”

Julie heard none of it, because the jolt had parted her shoulder from Rachel’s. Something about that felt profound. She expected to miss her compatriots, but she already missed people from home, so that balanced. What Julie hadn’t considered was a summer – no, a week – without Rachel's company. Parting ways from her best friend just never occurred to her. Why would it? It was as inconceivable as her wand or her feet not being with her. Come to think of it, Rachel never mentioned being apart for the summer, either. Was that-

“J.J.?”

She felt a nudge and found a pair of sea-gray eyes peering at her. Rachel’s eyes. Julie felt another pang. “Oh, sorry. I was…It’s just sinking in that we’re really leaving.”

Rachel smiled and offered a hand to help Julie off the seat. “I’ll miss you, too.” The way she smiled, the way she pulled when Julie accepted her hand, the way she held her eyes the whole time – Julie missed her already.

At the foot of the stairs to street level, the group ran out of ways to procrastinate saying goodbye. Kelley had plans to go sightseeing with Hope, the other Americans had tickets home, and Rachel – Julie didn’t know Rachel’s plans. Probably, she'd go home via floo, but how had they not talked about this? Julie put on a smile, which instantly felt heavy. “What am I gonna do without my daily Rachel?”

“Awww, J.J. Enjoy your home, where the hippogriffs roam! I thought you wouldn’t exchange it for all the great cities so bright.”

“Yeah, but you don't live – I mean, we're both from sub-cities….” Julie gave up and groaned. “Auggghh, I'm so inarticulate today!”

“Inarticulate!” Kelley and Lauren roared with laughter, but Julie only heard them as an echo of Rachel, who laughed so hard her eyes watered. “Oh, J.J.” Stepping closer, she wiped her eyes and reached for a hug. “The only thing I’d change about you is the name on the back of your shirt. Have the best summer ever, Julie!”
The tightness of Rachel’s embrace surprised Julie, but she realized that she was holding Rachel just as close. “You, too.” Did she have to let go?

“I’ll write, I promise.”

Julie took that as a good line to part on. She backed out of the hug and grinned. “Ok, but I’m writing back with my Skype name.”

Rachel laughed again. “I’ll ask a Muggle-born to get me set up. Ugh, I guess I should really go now.”

“You know,” Alex put in, “you can still come with us to Heathrow.”

Rachel’s lips parted and her features stiffened. “I think…” She glanced at Julie. “I’d hate to undo and redo that whole goodbye. I should probably just go.”

To Julie's surprise, she felt a little relieved by Rachel’s declination. “I get you.”

“Yeah.” Rachel hefted her bag. “Goodbye, guys!” She waved, smiled at their replies, turned, and walked.

“Alright”, Amy said, gesturing for the group to proceed. “I believe America is this way.” Julie blinked and huffed at herself. Her eyes were damp, too, but not from laughing.

“The only thing I’d change about you is the name on the back of your shirt.”

Every time Julie found more than a moment's peace and quiet, her heart played Rachel’s words on a loop. “The only thing I’d change about you is the name on the back of your shirt.” How did she even approach that? Rachel looked and sounded like a best friend when she said the words – but the words. Julie tried and tried to find an alternative meaning for them. They had to be something other than an offhand marriage proposal. Had to! Was it a joke? A teasing compliment? Yeah, that sounded right; her best friend teasing her and affirming her at the same time. That fit their friendship – but why those words? Those weren’t ‘just friends' words. Why send a mixed message? Or was it not mixed and she was misreading it? Then what was the right reading?

Julie rolled over in bed, again. Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable…still can’t be right. Rachel was her BFF. She was Rachel’s BFF. They were BFFs. All this manic thinking put that in jeopardy. Why was she ruining everything?

People getting married say things like “I'm in love with my best friend” all the time.

With a groan, Julie shoved her face into her pillow. It was going to be a long night – especially since it wasn’t even night yet. Her body’s ‘midnight’ was the Arizona sun’s ‘four in the afternoon’. Maybe she's still up. It'd be good to talk to her, to see and hear her. Get a read on her. Reassure herself and put this anxiety to bed.

No, she'll see I'm upset and want to care for me. It wouldn’t help.

Casting a sleeping charm on oneself was always a questionable decision, but desperate times called for desperate measures. Julie set a timed dispeller and several alert charms for her vital signs and various emergencies, then committed herself to sleep's deep embrace.

Chapter End Notes
Next update coming tonight :)

Knowing

Chapter Notes

Yes, I changed my username to match my tumblr.

*I'm not going to change anything with Rachel, but I do need some advice.*

Julie navigated the last miles to the Morgan residence the old-fashioned way, if you could call printing directions from Google Maps ‘old’. Not when compared to magic, certainly, or compasses – look, Julie hadn't used it in almost a year, so it felt old, okay? The point is that she got there. Alex opened the door for her; “We’re home alone for at least another hour, like you wanted.”

“Thanks. I want to meet your family, but not now. I'm a wreck.”

“What happened?”

Julie's sigh came out raspy. “I don't…my best friend might have feelings for me.” After a breath, she added, “I don’t know how I feel about it.”

“And she's in England,” Alex added. Julie nodded and Alex hugged her tight.

“What do I do?” It came out a plaintive moan.

“You curl up on my couch and drink ‘POM’.”

Two minutes later, Julie, folded nearly to the fetal position, nestled in a corner of couch cushions. Alex sat in front of her with her legs crossed. “You know, whenever…” Julie stopped and shook her head. “No, that's too dark.”

“Maybe you should tell me, if it's that dark.”

Julie sighed. “There’s a Greek myth about a young goddess, Persephone, who's abducted by Hades – ‘cause, you know, that’s what Greek gods do. The other gods pressure him into letting her go, because her mom – goddess of weather and nature or something – is on the warpath. On her way out, though, Hades gets Persephone to eat a pomegranate. If you eat Underworld food, you can't leave. The gods come up with a compromise where she can leave, but has to spend part of every year with Hades. It breaks her mom's heart every time, which is why we have winter. Anyway, if I have pomegranate and too much time to think, it reminds me of that.”

Alex didn’t follow. “Winter?”

“Being stuck in hell.” Julie gave Alex a joyless smile. ”So, about Rachel.”

Alex pouted sympathetically and put a hand on Julie's knee. “I think, like – Julie, the first thing I want to say is, you’re not alone in this. I've cried on Ash's shoulder, Kelley’s cried on my shoulder, twice. We know how important it is to be there for you, because we know how bad this stuff hurts. We’ve been in love and felt hopeless about it, too.”

Julie had two concerns about that. “Was it?”
“Hopeless? No…yes, but no. With Kelley, it was about Hope, so that worked out. Mine, well, there wasn't any hope because it wasn't the right person. It sucked for a while, but I got past it.”

“And now, you are with the right person?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know?”

“I've asked myself that a lot. Ultimately, I know because we're working. Our personalities, our lives, and our values all fit together in a way that brings out the best in both of us.” Alex brightened. “Are you thinking you'll talk to her?”

“That’s the other problem. I'm not sure if I like her-”

“B.S.” Alex looked unimpressed. “You wouldn’t have all these questions if you didn’t.”

“I don't know, Alex. I-“

“Have you never had a crush before?!”

“I have, but never on someone close. Like, I’ve always liked her – like, dictionary ‘liked’ – but, now, I…but does she like me? That’s the first thing.”

This time, Alex had to stifle a giggle. “Yes, J.J., Rachel likes you.”

Julie, however, remained earnest. “How do you know?”

“Um, I couldn’t be more certain if she told me.”

“But then she hasn’t,” Julie objected.

“ Barely.”

“Then how do you know?”

Alex answered with wide-eyed exasperation. “J.J., pretty much everything she does with you points to ‘more than friends’. She suggested a camping trip, slept in a Muggle tent, even made you a s'more, just to hear you play one song on a guitar.”

“But that was last fall.”

“Her at the train station”, Alex countered.

Julie bit her lip. “We could also just by really close-“

“You’re just really close. She's wanted you since day one!”

“But that’s the thing!” Julie turned her palms up. “It's not day one anymore, Alex. It's month ten. She might’ve moved on by now.”

Alex compressed her lips. “I agree that she should have, but I'm pretty sure she never got over you. I don’t think she wants to.”

“But how do you know? ”

“Julie! Do I have to grab you and shake you?!” Alex did neither, but scooted closer. “Why are you
“I-I can’t – can’t – risk our friendship. She’s too special to lose.”

“Julie, your ‘friendship’ feels so special because she likes you.” Julie said nothing. “Look, if you don’t promise me you’ll talk to her, I’ll call Kelley and tell her everything you said.”

Anger shaded Julie’s face. “Way to go freakin’ nuclear.”

“Rachel’s my friend, too,” Alex said in a calm, firm tone. “If you’re going to use her feelings for you and pretend there’s nothing—”

Julie erupted. “I am not using her!”

“Maybe that wasn’t fair,” Alex allowed.

“It definitely wasn’t.”

Alex relaxed and touched Julie’s knee again. “Please, Julie, listen. Rachel cares for you as much as I’ve ever seen anyone care. She deserves to know if you’re on the same page, so, if you’re not, she can move on.”

Julie scrunched her mouth and gazed at nothing. “I don’t want her to move on…”

“Then either you date her or you really are using her.”

Julie sighed. “I’ll talk to her. I might…K.O. might not be a bad idea. I’ll talk to her about doing transatlantic with Hope.”

“I feel like I should warn you; that turned out to be a bit of an extreme case.”

“Maybe it’ll be that much more helpful. I could try and see Hope, too.”

Alex smiled. “Wait, was that optimism I heard?”
I don’t want to date Rachel, but I need to figure out what I'm feeling.

When Julie started the refrain of 'how do you know', Kelley volleyed it right back at her. “Why don't you know?”

“What do you mean?”

“What would she have to do differently for you to believe she likes you?”

“Say so.”

Kelley dismissed the easy answer. “But what would convince you without the need for words?”

Julie’s brow creased. “Um…touching me would send a strong message. Also, any sorts of little things to show she's thinking about me and cares for me – or just giving me the look.”

“The ‘my heart glows when I see you' look?” Kelley asked.

“Yeah.”

Kelley nodded. “How would you feel if she did all of those things?”

One long minute later, Julie answered. “I'd feel worried. If we didn’t work, I wouldn’t have my best friend to help to pick up my broken heart.”

Kelley shifted and made her voice a little vulnerable. “Would it break your heart?” She knew the answer immediately, because Julie shuddered at the thought.

“It honestly makes me feel sick, just thinking about a break-up with her. I don't think either of us could bear losing that much…closeness?”

“Intimacy?”

“Yeah. We couldn’t go back to being friends.”

“That could be why she doesn’t do things that would make you feel desired,” Kelley suggested. “All those would make her super vulnerable, wouldn’t they?”

“Yeah…” Julie sighed. “Nobody wants to rock the boat.”

“It is a really nice boat. Did you just include yourself as a would-be boat-rocker?” Julie let her eyes fall and puckered her lips. Kelley hung on. “Do you have feelings for her?”

Julie worked her jaw against a strained feeling in her throat. “I feel like…if I…if I take even a tiny step that way, I'll be sucked in.”

“Sucked in?”

“Like, I'm a boulder on the edge of the Grand Canyon, and if I tip just a little bit, I won't be able to keep from falling in.”

“If she were sitting as close as I am now, and she gave you the look, would you want to kiss her?”
Julie frowned at a vent in the wall behind Kelley. “Not when we left Hogwarts.”

“Stalling won’t make this easier.”

“I…no, but…hug her. I don’t want to say ‘snuggle’, it sounds too silly, but, like, try to get so close that our bodies, like…merge.”

Kelley’s reaction combined enthusiasm with ‘what took you so long?’ “J.J., what else could that feeling be?” Julie concentrated. “If you come up with something other than love, I’ll cut my hair and spike it.”

In the end, with clenched hands and drawn face, Julie failed. “I can’t.”

Kelley uncurled Julie’s fingers and held them. “Jay, your conflict isn't whether you have feelings for Rachel. Why not admit it?”

Julie looked down and gripped Kelley’s hands. “I'm scared. Obviously.”

“You have deep, intense, romantic and sexual feelings for your best friend. That's scary.”

“Sexual?”

“Merging bodies, remember? That's partly sexual.”

As Julie considered her friend's words, she felt a new need take hold in her body. Alongside food and water, sleep and oxygen, she needed to kiss Rachel Daly. Her heart flared up and burned with longing to kiss her best friend deep and hard, as though, by pressing deep enough, they might merge their minds, as their embrace fused their hearts into one.

“J.J.?”

The need subsided into an aching want. Julie blinked and forced her eyes to point at Kelley, but she couldn’t do anything about the glazed look in them. “I think I just went over the edge.”
I'm not going to start anything with Rachel, but I need to go talk to Hope.

Julie met the keeper in a hole-in-the-wall coffee shop, literally. The Wolf's Eye Café, magically concealed on the outskirts of Edinburgh, was a classy, cozy place to talk. Hope waved to Julie from a table and rose to greet her. “Julie!” Hope wrapped her in a warm embrace. “Ahh, how are you?

“Um…” Julie sat, feeling awkward. “Hope, um…look, one Slytherin to another, I'm here because I want something from you: relationship advice.”

Hope smiled. “I figured that was it. No need for the preamble, Julie.”

“I don't feel like I know you that well, is all.”

“You'll get over it.” Hope switched off her smirk. “Is this about Rachel Daly?”

Julie blinked. ”How’d you…?”

“Who else could I guess? She was into you, back when we went camping.”

“Everyone seems so certain that she's still interested in me.”

Hope shrugged. “I wouldn’t know. Has she cooled off any towards you since then?”

“Mmm, not really. It's…we're, like, closer and more comfortable with each other. She doesn’t flirt or anything, but she’s…warm.”

“Then that’s why everyone thinks she's still into you.”

“I still don’t know, but, what I want to ask is, how do you and Kelley handle long distance?”

Hope twisted her lip. “With difficulty. Have you talked to Alex?”

Julie nodded “Kelley, too. I think, between the three of you, I can triangulate what it'd be like for me.”

“Would this be your first serious relationship? Hers?”

Julie nodded. “Serious, yes, for both of us.”

“Then you’ll both learn a lot of lessons the hard way. Long-distance takes certain kinds of maturity, which most people your age don't have yet. I didn’t, last summer.” Hope chewed on the inside of her cheek. “Okay, I've got my official advice for you. Still want it?”

“Yes, of course.”
“Don’t start anything before you and Rachel live in the same place. It sounds like there's too much pent-up emotion for anything more than driving distance.”

Julie rocked under a wave of dismay. “Wait all summer?!”

“Don’t read between the lines. Next thing: no later than your second conversation, talk about next summer. If you two can make an honest plan for—”

“‘Honest’?”

“Keep your heart honest about what it can really handle. If you get together, after so long on the edge of being more than friends, you’re gonna have a huge emotional rush. Don’t let it convince you that love will waive all your needs. Like, for Kelley, just knowing that I love her is not a substitute for cuddling. When we're apart for long, she asks for extra hugs from her family and plans sleepovers with her childhood friends. That's an example of that maturity; of course you'll miss each other, but you can’t let neediness build up. If either of you do, you’re fucked.”

“That’s a lot to take in.”

Hope smiled sympathetically and added more. “Fights happen when someone feels neglected or disrespected. Don't set yourselves up for that. Talk about what she can do for you and what you’ll have to do for you. Right, that’s where I was – honest ideas for surviving next summer. If you both can agree on that, then talk about plans for after you graduate. Did Alex talk about that?”

“Yeah, she shared theirs.”

“Great. Aim for a plan that’s as satisfying as theirs is. Basically, I strongly recommend you and Rachel work out whether getting together is biting off more than you can chew.”

Julie hated to ask, but… “What do I do if it is?”

Hope smirked beneath sympathetic eyes. “We’ll burn that bridge if we come to it.”

“Yeah- wait.” Julie needed a second to recognize that Hope hadn't said ‘cross’, and another to notice the inclusive plural. “‘We’?”

“Absolutely. Call me whenever you need. You can crash on my couch anytime, too. I’m on your team.”

“Wow, thanks!”

One half of Hope’s mouth smiled and the other half smirked. “Told you you’d get over it.”

I’m not going to start something with Rachel now, but I’ll see what’s possible.

Hope answered cheerily through the phone. “Hey, Julie! What do you want this time?”

“Um…”

“Come on, you aren’t calling me to make small talk. Let me help you, Julie.”

“I…well, about…” It didn’t need any explaining, Julie realized. “Would Montrose hire me as a summer groundskeeper or equipment caretaker or something?”

“They don’t know it yet, but they will.” Hope's voice bore evident pleasure. “So, you decided to go
for it! Please, let me tell Kelley. She reads me too well to hide it from her.”

Julie put on the brakes. “Um, I'm not really ready to…”

“Oh, you just wanted to know if it's doable? I'm sure Tarp and I can get you some work, but I think all the clubs hired their summer help months ago. Nobody here will create a job for you if we can't say that your answer is already 'yes'.”

“I don’t want to commit to taking a job before I know what it is. Whether I'll make enough for room and board, too.”

“It'll be some mix of grounds and equipment maintenance, probably: water the grass, inventory the balls, clean the locker room. Pay will be either minimum wage or zero. If it's zero, you can put an air mattress on my floor and duplicate my food.”

Julie sighed. She felt as though she’d stuck her toes in the water and found a rip current.

“The only question is what you want, Julie. If you want to wait until school starts, then wait.”

“Um…I need to think about it.”

“Absolutely. If you do decide, then my home is your home.”

It was Kelley who opened the door. She stared, then lit up like neon and swept Julie into a spinning hug. “Hope! It’s J.J.!”

“For real?! Did she bring a bag?” Hope emerged from the kitchen and answered her own question. “Yep. Does this mean what Kelley thinks it means?”

“Partly,” Julie admitted. “I want experience being around a pro club, no matter what happens.”

“Alright, then. I guess your parents are cool with this?”

Julie grinned. “Yes, after some persuading. I suggested Good Will Hunting for a family movie night. The ending was a perfect segue.”

Hope smirked back. “Wicked smaht.”

“DO YOU LIKE APPLES?”

Julie deadpanned at Kelley. “No.”

The redhead rolled her eyes. “You poor thing. What's your plan? Does Rachel know?”

Julie shook her head. “I'm not gonna be a bum. First thing is to walk into Montrose FC and say, 'Put me to work'. Once that’s definite, I'll make a date to see her.”

“Sounds good to me.” Hope retrieved her cell phone and moseyed into the kitchen. “Tarp? Hey, listen, we're going to have company tonight….Mmhmm, Julie Johnston, like I mentioned last week. Also like I mentioned, it’s not just tonight…”

“Miss Johnson, we don’t have a rainy day fund for hiring. We can’t offer you a job, no matter how many references you have.”
Julie didn’t bat an eye. “I’ll volunteer.” The manager looked unprepared for that answer. “I want to see a championship club from the inside and I’m happy to do manual labor. Your staff can use an extra pair of hands somewhere.”

The manager stared over her head and rolled his tongue around in his mouth. “Come tomorrow morning at ten of seven,” he said at last. “I’ll have found a use for you by then. I’ll tell our receptionist to expect a Miss Julie Johnson.”

Julie smiled and gave his hand a firm shake. “Thank you, sir, and it’s Johnston.”

On the couch, Hope gave Julie’s shoulder a squeeze. “You’ve go this,” she said, and stood.

Julie bit her lip. “Um, Hope, could you stay?”

“Sure, I can stay.” Hope sat again, closer. “For moral support, as my mom says.”

“Thanks. Here goes…” Julie dialed.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Rachel, it’s Ju- J.J.” Julie flashed back to the last time she stumbled over words with Rachel. *The only thing I’d change about you…*

A stifled snort was her answer. “Uh…I…I’m sorry, I can’t! ‘Ju-jay-jay’!” Rachel broke down sniggering.

“Oh my god,” Julie groaned – and barely stopped herself from moaning, because Hope's ‘moral support’ included an emergency shoulder massage, apparently. “Should I hang up and start over?”

“I can’t stop you, but I’d rather hear how you’re getting on over there.”

Julie grabbed the segue. “Mm, about that. I’m actually over here.”

“You’re in England?!”

“Scoht-lnd. I’m staying with Hope Solo until school starts.”

“No! Are you working somewhere?!”

Julie was feeling comfortable again. “Yes! I’m volunteering as a handyman, basically, at Montrose FC. But – hang on a second, Rachel – since I’m here, we might as well catch up in person, right?”

“Yeah.” Rachel’s tone carried a great weight of something. “Are you working this afternoon? I'm free after si- no, I'm free after four-thirty.”

Julie caught her friend’s hesitation. “Do you have something else? I don’t want to-”

“No. I'm free.” Her tone inspired a rise in Julie’s eyebrows. “I can take the intercity floo and meet you somewhere at four forty-five?”

“Um, actually, I was thinking I might come visit you.”

“Oh, no, it's no trouble for me-”

“Rachel! I haven’t seen anywhere in England, other than the airport, the train, and the Alley shops.
C'mon, give me a place and time in Harrowgate.”

“Umm...if we're doing a lot of catching up, how about we start at my house and then get dinner later?”

“Sounds perfect.”

After the call ended, Hope agreed. “Did she bail on something so she can see you today?”

“I think so. I feel kinda bad about it.”

“Are you kidding? That means you’re more important to her than whatever she had planned.”

Julie’s eyes widened with sudden understanding. “Oh.”

“Now can you believe she likes you?”

“Hopefully.” Julie drifted into a distant smile and back again. “I almost lost it when you started on my shoulders.”

“Sorry, sort of,” Hope replied. “That was very ‘Kelley’ of me.”

Diing!

As her finger left the doorbell, Julie had a minor panic attack. What should she say? What if they both just said ‘hi’ or ‘hey’ and then stared awkwardly? She'd planned the big talk, but she forgot about the first, basic step. How do you greet someone, when you're about to upend a whole friendship?

The door swung inward, and there was Rachel. Before Julie even opened her mouth to speak, Rachel grabbed her and hugged her tighter than she'd ever been held before. “I missed you, too,” Julie said.

Rachel let go and turned away, gesturing inside as she did. “We should get in. Not all of our neighbors are magic.”

“Um, okay...” Julie found nothing about that noteworthy.

“I meant that I don't want to explain how I know you.

“Oh, right. Yeah, let's avoid that.”

Rachel closed the door behind them. “Um, to really be sure – come this way.” She started walking and Julie followed, glancing around at the interior as she went. In the kitchen, Rachel stopped at a closet or pantry door and produced a key. “Do you have these in America?”

Julie didn’t have much to go on. “Um...you don’t mean keys, I’m sure.”

“No, no. Alter-houses. Like this.” Rachel turned the knob and opened the door. It was a broom closet, in the Muggle sense. She closed the door, inserted the key, and opened it again. Inside was a floor-to-ceiling mirror – except they weren't in the image. And the kitchen didn’t look like Julie remembered. She checked behind her. Rachel smirked. “I'll take that as a ‘no’. Don't panic.”

“Wha-?” Rachel put a hand on her back and pushed. Julie, stumbling toward the mirror, realized she wasn't looking at a mirror image; it was a mirror house. No longer concerned about crashing into
glass, she regained her balance and stopped inside the mirror-kitchen. “Very funny. I've heard of things like this, but nobody I know has one.” She turned back to look through the closet at Rachel, in the other kitchen, who grinned.

“It's more fun to show than tell.” Rachel took a lanyard from the inside of the ‘closet’ door and hung it on the outside knob. “So my parents know I'm home,” she explained, closing it behind them. “How do you keep the magic side of your lives hidden among Muggles, then?”

“Same idea – entrance hidden in a closet – but, usually, it's just an extra room or two. Like, ours is a second basement. Most of my friends’ houses are that way, too.” Julie looked around and meandered into the hall. “Whole duplicate houses are more of an East Coast thing, I heard.”

“You spread from east to west, right? Maybe you felt less of a need for them, over time.”

“That’s what I think, too. This is really cool, though!” Julie stood in the center of the living room and turned a full circle. The primary version of this room held modern-ish furniture, a beige carpet, a television, and a lighted ceiling fan. Here, Julie stood on a hardwood floor, facing a hearth where the TV would be. The couches and chairs would've been at home in 221B Baker Street, the coffee and end tables had wrought-iron legs, and the walls glowed in the candle-yellow light from magic gas-style lamps. Somehow, the view out the windows was also mirrored. The late-afternoon sun even cast shadows inside. “I doubt there's this much Old World style in all of Arizona.”

Rachel smiled and sat on a couch. “If you keep calling my home the ‘Old World’, you’ll have to show me this supposed ‘new’ world.”

"Absolutely.” Julie sat facing her friend – maybe. “I’ll give you the grand tour of our secret basement.”

Rachel made herself comfortable. “I’d like that. So, tell me about your life! What brought you back to Britain?”

“Ambition.” Julie smirked at Rachel’s faux disapproval. “I’m literally the least significant person at Montrose, but just being there is like a Quidditch immersion.”

“So are you, like, the ball girl?”

“On a good day. Yesterday, I got sent to trim the trees around their practice pitch, which, honestly, sucked. The positive is that I got lots of fresh air and sunshine, and I watched as much of their practice as I could.”

“That’s – oh! If it works with your schedule, I'm on a summer league team here. I probably get discovery rights to you.”

About that. Julie glanced down and curled her lips in.

Rachel was on it in a second. “Is something the matter?”

Am I doing this? Julie took a long, shallow breath, and then a quick, full one. Yeah, I am. “Rachel, you said once that the only thing you’d change about me is the name on the back of my shirt.” Did you mean something by that? Are we more than friends? Julie swallowed. She noticed that Rachel did, too. “Does that offer still stand?”

Rachel stared, blinked against sudden tears, and grabbed Julie’s hands. “Yes! Yes, yes, of course it does.” Julie wrapped her in an embrace nearly a year in the making.
“I tried so hard to get over you.”

“Rachel,” Julie whispered.

“I wished to be rid of my feelings for you, because if all I could be was your friend, then I wanted to do it sincerely.”

“You’ve always been a great friend.”

“I tried, but I couldn’t be, not really. I was always wanting to be more, because it’s really true. The only thing I’d change about you is the name on the back of your shirt.”

_Much later...

“Do you need to go back soon? You could stay for supper at my house. We have a guest bed, too, if—”

“Please! I don’t want my first act as your girlfriend to be imposing on your family. Hope’s letting me stay at her place, remember?”

Rachel still objected. “You said Kelley is staying there, too?”

Julie shrugged. “Yeah, I know, but I won’t see them until morning. Hope lent me a key.”

“She’s just two steps ahead of me. You know, if you have time to get together tomorrow morning, you’d miss their morning-after.”

Julie smiled wider. “Actually, Hope said we can have her kitchen to ourselves for breakfast, if we want.”

“Falk’s oath, she’s pulled out all the stops for you!”

“Yeah.” Julie grinned. “She likes you.”

Rachel’s eyes widened a little. “For real? How can you tell?”

“She smiles when she talks about you.”

“That makes all the difference?”

“I mean, she volunteered to take Kelley out for breakfast. She wouldn’t skip cooking with her girlfriend so I could be alone with just anybody.”

Despite her concerns about Hope and Kelley, Rachel insisted on arriving in time to thank them before they left for breakfast. Julie let Rachel in shortly before the couple emerged from Hope’s room. Before Julie could think about where Kelley’s hands might’ve been, she’d hugged them both. “I’m so relieved! Finally!”

Hope followed into the kitchen. “Yeah, relieved that Kelley won’t rant about you two, every other week.”

“I didn’t rant,” Kelley protested.

“Oh, you did.”
“Okay, but not that often!”

“No. At first, it was more.” Hope poured herself half a glass of orange juice, chugged it, and grimaced. “I’m glad it worked out for you two – ugh, lemme try that again.” She wiped her mouth on the back of her hand, rinsed the glass, and drank a mouthful of water. “Sorry, that was my wake-up shot. For real,” and this time a sparkling smile accompanied her words. “I’m excited for you two. I quietly but firmly approve.”

“But, Rachel, standard disclaimer.” Kelley wasn't smiling. “If you break her heart, I'm coming for you with an axe.”

Hope reached for the suddenly-uncertain Rachel and hugged her. “She’s kidding about the axe. We're all for you. Now, I think we should get out of your hair.”

“Before I say something else, she means.” Kelley grinned and turned to Julie. “Such as, if you screw this up, I'll-”

“Yeah, I know. Blunt force trauma.”

“Take good care of her. She’s worth it.” Kelley hugged them and started for the door. “I’m watching you,” she said over her shoulder, pointing two fingers at her eyes and then at Julie’s.

“Welcome to the family, Rachel.” Hope followed her girlfriend, shaking her head.

“See ya' later, Hope.” “Bye, Kelley!”

“Later!” “TTFN!”

When the apartment door closed, Julie scrunched her eyes shut and hung her head back. “Oh my god.”

“Ah, I’m not bothered. She’s probably just wound up about missing their morning shag.”

Julie froze for a second. “That makes way too much sense.”

Rachel smiled suggestively and backed Julie towards the kitchen counter. “There's no one to walk in on us now. Fancy a snog?”

“Uh…” Julie’s head swam. “That’s just making out, right?”

“Right.”

Julie wrapped her arms around Rachel’s neck and gave it her all.

Chapter End Notes

I FINALLY got them together! Now I can get on to the good stuff ;) And by 'good stuff', I mean 'the twist I've been excited about since November'.

Chronic

Chapter Notes

I’m getting back into this story again. First up is the Julie/Rachel twist which I hinted at months ago. I hope to update the other plot threads over the next couple months.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Over the river and through the woods
To Hogwarts Castle we go.
The train knows the way to-” Kelley stopped short. “To… what rhymes with ‘way’?”

Rachel squeezed Julie’s hand and smiled. “Gay.”

Kelley smirked. “The train knows the way to carry the gay?”

“Across the wide and broken moor,” Alex suggested.

“That doesn’t rhyme with ‘go,’” Kelley objected.

“It’s slant rhyme. It’s more sophisticated, less sing-song-y.”

Julie raised her eyebrows. “Someone paid attention in English.”

“Alex,” Kelley replied, “I’m singing a song!”

Alex laughed and went back to looking out the window. Year three. Halfway finished.

“J.J.?”

Julie recognized her girlfriend’s voice and turned, welcoming the distraction from the desserts she wasn’t eating. The start-of-term feast – her first as a returning student – was winding down, which meant Quidditch season was almost upon her. Fit trumped flan.

Rachel Daly stood red-trimmed amid tables of green. In a level tone, she asked, “Can I have you tonight?”

Kelley raised an eyebrow at Julie, but said nothing. Julie raised both brows at Rachel. “Sure. You want to hang out?”

Rachel nodded. “Yes, after we talk about some stuff.”

“Sounds good.” Once Rachel returned to the Gryffindor tables, Julie described it differently; “That sounded serious.”

“Serious, yes, but she expects to still be your girlfriend afterwards,” Kelley pointed out. “She just wants privacy, I think.”

If asked, Julie might’ve suggested several places around Hogwarts for an intimate conversation, but a
storage shed for Care of Magical Creatures wasn’t among them. Rachel, on the other hand, insisted on it: “I have access. We won’t get in trouble.” Nevertheless, she kept surreptitious as she led Julie out to it. Inside, the couple made themselves comfortable on a pile of hay. “Julie, we’ve been together for over two months, but there’s something I haven’t told you yet. I needed to be perfectly, overwhelmingly certain about you, and even then – anyway, now we’re both here, so you need to know.” Rachel took a deep breath. “I’m… I have a chronic disease. It’s not contagious, under normal circumstances, but there’s a massive stigma about it. I need you to swear that you won’t tell anyone, ever, about it without my permission. Not your family, not your friends, not even your god, if you pray aloud to one.”

Julie took both of Rachel’s hands. “I promise. I’m here for you.”

“I have lycanthropy.”

Julie stared. “Like…werewolf?”

“Yes.”

Julie reaffirmed her grip on Rachel with one hand and rubbed her face with the other. “Gosh, I was expecting you to say ‘muscular dystrophy’ or something.”

“It’s a magic disease,” Rachel replied, shrugging. “The cold makes you cough to spread germs; lycanthropy turns you into a rabid wolf. Different means, same end.”

“You said you’re not normally contagious, though?”

“I’m only contagious as a werewolf and I take potions, before I change, to suppress the rabid-ness. Basically, I don’t bite.”

Julie shifted closer. “What do you need from me?”

“I need to know you understand and accept me. Also, lots of extra hugs in the days before and after the full moon. I feel, look, and act like a sick person, those days. You probably noticed at some point.”

“I… yeah.”

Rachel read Julie’s self-consciousness. “Did you think it was my period? You weren't all wrong; the bad days of both line up. The other part, acceptance. If you really want to stay with me, you need to see me transform.”

“Okay.” Julie kicked the word out before she could gulp, catch her breath, ask if it was safe, or do anything else to hesitate.

“You aren't expecting it to be cool, are you?”

“I have no expectations.”

“Because it’s not. This isn’t Twilight. It’s not sexy, I can’t change at will, and I’m not part of a ‘pack’ or some such foolishness. Lycanthropy is about infecting the greatest number of people in one night, nothing more.”

Julie nodded soberly. “How did you become a werewolf?”

“Same as most in Britain: I got bit by one during the War.”
“But you would’ve been just a child!”

“What difference would that make?”

“I guess…I think of adults when I think of war.”

“You Americans should be glad you haven’t fought a war at home in a long time.”

Looking down at the Slytherin crest on her uniform, Julie asked herself how she’d feel if it were the Confederate flag.

Julie resisted the urge to read up on werewolves. The accounts in books were sure to be more terrible than Rachel’s reality, weren’t they? Besides, Rachel didn’t need Julie to tell her what she was; she needed Julie to understand and accept her. Better to just go with it than try to become an expert. The night of the full moon, with a silver-dittany salve in one pocket and a hairbrush in the other, she met Rachel by the Whomping Willow. “I’m ready.”

“You aren’t,” Rachel warned.

“If you do anything threatening, I’ll apparate out first and ask questions later,” Julie assured her.

“Good. Be sure I don’t side-along.” She drew her wand and stilled the tree. “Immobulus.” When she touched a knot in the trunk, a passage opened underneath. “Through here.”

Emerging into a windowless, wood-paneled room, Julie waited for her eyes to adjust. The only light came in slivers, through cracks and gaps, yet Rachel moved with confidence. “I guess the first thing to know about the transformation is that it sucks.” She produced a vial from under her robe. “So, I take Numb-Wine, else I’d put the ‘shriek’ in ‘Shrieking Shack’. There’s nothing modest about this, either. Don’t look away, if the robe tears.”

“Do you have clothes for after?”

“This robe mends itself. It’s important to me that you see what the change back is like, too. Please, don’t avert your eyes.”

“Uh…” Julie hadn’t prepared for that.

To her relief, Rachel smiled. “Out of everything, that’s what daunts you?”

“Since you said this isn’t sexy, it just didn’t occur to me.”

“That’s fine. I only care whether you wa-would want to-”

Rachel’s face fell so fast that it gave Julie vertigo. She took her hands to steady them both. “Rachel.”

“Sorry. I’m going through all my issues again.” Julie held her close, until she pushed back and sighed. “Just a few minutes until I go. Time to drug out.” Rachel sat against the far wall and folded her legs skirt-style. Uncorksing her anesthetic potion, she chugged the entire flask. “It gets lost during the change,” Rachel assured Julie. “I won’t be foggy after I…after…y’ know.” She slumped away from her legs and assumed the fetal position. Julie waited.

Whatever sign or circumstance triggered the werewolf transformation, Julie never saw. She only heard Rachel’s breathing deepen, and then it began. The barely-visible blonde hair on Rachel’s forearms thickened, turned gray, and spread. Her body contorted as her limbs rearranged themselves.
Julie thought of Darwin’s Evolution of Man in reverse, and shuddered. In another moment, thankfully, the werewolf stilled.

Julie had several ideas of what a wolf looked like. There was the majestic, well-groomed creature in nature paintings, looking like a proud Siberian Husky. There were the vicious animals from Beauty and the Beast. In the pictures she’d seen of actual wolves, they looked like big coyotes with all the points rounded off. Rachel’s werewolf was none of these, but also all of them. She had a silhouette like a natural wolf’s, but a slightly shorter snout, more muscle beneath a tauter hide, and eyes which bore an uncanny resemblance to Rachel’s own. Light gray fur down her front, dark grey along her back, and a swath of burnt ochre on each side completed the image.

The werewolf rolled onto all fours and made eye contact with Julie. After a second, it shrugged and turned its front paws over. Julie gawked, caught off-guard by the human-ness of the gesture, but then grinned and came to sit with her. “I forgot to ask if you understand English as a wolf,” she said. “Do you?” Wolf-Rachel nodded. “May I touch you?” She nodded again. Julie reached out – and paused, feeling awkward. Rachel cocked her furry head. “Sorry.” Julie shook her head as though clearing out an idea. “I was about to touch you like you’re my dog, not my girlfriend. This is a little weird.”

Rachel made a laugh-like yelp and rolled her big eyes.

“Okay, fine,” Julie said, grinning, “it’s really weird, but not too much weirder than anything else about Hogwarts. Let’s try this.” She crossed her legs and guided Rachel to sit with her front paws between them, then draped an arm around the wolf’s back and shoulder blades. They were eye-to-eye. “Comfortable?” The wolf nodded. “I brought something which might make you feel more loveable,” Julie said, and pulled the brush from under her cloak. “Stop me, if it bothers you.” Rachel didn’t; instead, she let out a light pant, which might’ve been a sigh, as Julie combed through her fur. Not that it needed brushing, she noted – it hadn’t existed for enough time. Julie paused to run her fingers through Rachel’s coat. “This orangeish-tan color in your fur…” she wondered aloud. Rachel gave her a curt nod. “Is that why you have a tan all the time? Did your skin color change after you got bitten?” Rachel nodded again. “I remember what you told me, about this being nothing more than magic rabies. I just want you to know, Rachel, that being here for you like this isn’t a burden. I’m not freaked out by seeing you transform, and you are one good-looking wolf.”

Rachel licked Julie's face.

A yowl woke Julie. The wolf in her arms twisted away and stumbled to the center of the shack. The reverse transformation looked even more unpleasant than the first. Instead of smooth, blended reshaping, Rachel regained her own body in jerks and starts. Her wolf's fur retreated into her human skin, her dog legs straightened, and her skull and spine realigned. The sound of joints cracking punctuated each change, until the familiar, human Rachel lay still on the shack floor.

“Rachel?” Julie knelt behind her and put a hand on her shoulder. Rachel spasmed and let out a weak cry. “Shhh, shhh, it’s okay, it's Julie. I’m here, just like you asked.” Julie laid the robe over Rachel’s body. “You don’t need to say anything before you’re ready.”

“Mmmmm.” Rachel needed another minute to regain her voice. “Thank you. I forgot to tell you that I’m terribly sore afterwards, especially my joints.”

“Did I hurt you? I’m sorry.”

“No worries.”

“Is there a way I can help with that? Like, I know some charms.”
"Might be worth a try."

"Can you roll on your stomach for me?"

"Um, I don’t want to lie on this floor."

"You can lie on the robe."

Rachel tried to turn her head toward Julie, but winced and stopped short. "Um, naked?"

Julie shrugged. "I kept my eyes open, like you asked. I’ve already seen everything."

"True. Sure, why not."

Despite the nude figure stretched out in front of her, sex was far from Julie’s mind. Not only was her girlfriend in pain, but she’d also been right about lycanthropy’s un-sexiness. Julie didn’t feel repulsed by Rachel’s transformation, but it was about as erotic as a surgery. She was Rachel’s nurse in the post-op ward, except, instead of a hospital, it was a windowless shack, with floorboards for a mattress, a robe for a sheet, and an incurable patient.

The simple reality of touch eased the seriousness Julie felt. Intimacy was as inevitable as gravity. Rachel whimpered whenever Julie massaged deep into her aches, and tears glinted under her eyelashes, but the only words she spoke were “Thank you.” Julie tried every healing and soothing charm she knew, until she settled on a good combination of magic and massage. “Are you still afraid I won’t want to touch a werewolf?”

"Yes, because fear needn’t be rational."

"I’ll just have to do this again, next month.” A minute later, Julie had a question. “So, um, I can’t help wondering, where's your scar?"

"My scar?"

"From the werewolf bite. I thought they left permanent scars."

“Oh, yeah.” Rachel rolled her right forearm and pointed at the outside of it. “It was here. The bite tore up this whole area. You could see bone and everything.”

“But it looks perfectly fine! I didn’t feel anything different when I massaged there.”

Rachel nodded. “They cut off the whole affected area, which left an injury they could heal, and regrew half of my arm with magic. Literally, cut, with a scalpel and a bone saw.”

“That’s awful!”

“But it worked. I couldn’t live a normal life with a chunk missing from my arm. Wizards and Muggles would all find it alarming. This way, I’ve no scars at all.”

“Why don’t they teach us that?”

Rachel shuddered. “Because hardly any wizard doctor would think, let alone actually dare, to cut a patient with a blade. I can’t understand how the Muggles do it. It's barbaric!”

Julie bristled. “When it's either that or suffer from a disease, what would you do? What did you do?”

“I’m sorry, Jules. The thought of cutting through flesh still freaks me out. Needles, too.”
“Plenty of Muggles are with you on that one.”

The next morning, Rachel had a few things to say. “Now that you know, I want to set a couple things right. Since we met, I’ve lied to you once and misled you a few times.”

Julie smiled. “About already having plans on nights with full moons? I’m glad you care about honesty, but I don’t feel wronged.”

Rachel shook her head. “Those were the times I misled you. The lie was about why I chose Quidditch over football. The truth is, Quidditch wasn’t my first choice. I wanted to be a footballer.”

Rachel sighed. “The transformations are hard on my joints. At a moderate level of activity, I can manage it with potions and charms, but…”

“Not if you stuck with soccer?”

Rachel nodded. “The doctors said, if I trained hard enough to make it as a professional, I'd have no cartilage left in my lower body by my twenty-seventh birthday. If I tear a ligament, it might not have time to heal enough before my next transformation, and there’s no telling what that’ll do to it. One bad plant or fall could cripple me for life.”

The next few days, Rachel leaned on Julie for support. Once she was past the transformation’s after-effects, though, she seemed lighter and happier than ever. “It’s because I'm not alone anymore,” she told Julie, who spent the rest of the day walking on air.

Their friends noticed. "You two look like you just fell in love all over again," Alex observed at dinner.

Rachel smiled at Julie and squeezed her hand, which she'd hardly let go of all week. "We did."

They were the last to leave the Great Hall. “Maybe, instead of going to Hogsmeade on Friday,” Rachel suggested, "we could make some time for just us?"

“I’d like that.” Julie made sultry eyes. “And maybe we'll find out what makes you howl at the moon.”

Rachel impaled her with a lethal look. “Don’t sexualize it.”

“I'm sorry!” Julie felt gutted. “I only wanted to make you smile, but I’m sorry, I really don't know what it's like. I’m trying to imagine if something foreign were grafted onto my sense of self…” Julie drew her lips in. “I wonder – and this is the only time I'm going to suggest this – whether it'd be healthier – emotionally healthier, in the long run – to adopt the wolfish-ness rather than reject it.”

Rachel recoiled. “Adopt something forced upon me?”

“Well…” Julie turned a palm up. “I mean, do you hate your tan?”

“When it reminds me of everything else, yes, I hate it! Same with rare meat, too. Would you have me adopt a cancer, if I had that disease?”

Julie's eyes pleaded with Rachel. “I would urge you to make the most of what you have, while you still can.”

“That’s not at all the same.”
Julie sighed and tried again. “What if…listen, what if you'd lost a leg, instead? Would you spend the rest of your life on crutches? Or would you be one of those people with a fancy prosthetic leg? Like, with flames painted on it and stuff?”

With visible effort, Rachel made herself consider it. “And play soccer in the Paralympics?”

“Would you?”

“Absolutely.” Rachel’s face settled into a mask. “You’re saying I should own my condition, on my own terms.”

“What I’m trying to say is, life’s too short to spend hating yourself.” Julie closed her eyes, took a breath, and met Rachel’s gaze again. Now that she'd seen the transformation, she recognized traces of the wolf's eyes in Rachel’s. “Even if that self isn't one you'd choose, if you could.”

Those eyes grew guarded. “That’s dangerous thinking, Julie.”

“Rachel, if there's any of that wolf in you during the day, don’t you want it when you chase the snitch?”

Rachel answered with a forbidding frown. “I'll pretend you didn’t say that. That’s some twisted Slytherin shite, Julie.”

“Is that how you see me?!?” Julie couldn’t have kept the shock off her face. “A year and you still see my House instead of me?”

“If you make a suggestion like that, yes, I do! Change my identity to win a game? How can you say that?!”

“That’s not what I said!”

“It’s what you meant.”

“It wasn't! I meant – I just want…” Julie stopped to wipe dampness from her eyes.

“Oh? You want what, exactly?”

“You! I want the best for you! The best life, the best happiness, the best success…” When she saw Rachel remain unmoved, Julie let her words trail off. Rachel's eyes were neither cold nor hot, but simply chagrined. Somehow, that hurt even worse.

“I'm starting to think we have different ideas of what ‘the best’ means.”

“Don’t you know by n-” Julie bit it off and sighed. “I'm sorry. I didn’t mean for this to get personal. I hate that I've hurt you, Rachel. Listen, if Slytherin is the problem, I'll leave it for Gryffindor.”

Rachel’s eyes grew wide and her voice, soft. “You’d do that for me?”

“I'll move out right now.”

The same eyes narrowed into daggers. “Empty words. You can't switch Houses.” She clenched her jaw and stood. “You expect me to say, ‘Oh, no, you don’t need to’? What a typical Slytherin move. We’re done talking.”

Julie let her go.
Rachel woke with tears in her eyes. *How could she? How?! How did I get her so wrong?* She rolled over. *Could it be that she didn’t? What if I’m wrong and she’s right? But then why didn’t she come after me? No... Why... How...*

“What in Godric’s name is this?!” A shrill voice from the common room brought Rachel to full alert. “You’re bloody right, I’m making a scene! You think the rules don’t apply because you aren’t from here? Is that it?”

Rachel threw on her bathrobe and went to see what the commotion was about. In the center of the common room, a prefect stood, glaring with bulging eyes at three uniformed Gryffindor students on a couch. Two were Alex and Ashlyn. Between them sat-

“Julie!” Rachel pushed through the gathering onlookers. “And just where did she get that uniform?” The prefect demanded of Alex. “If I find out that’s yours, I swear, hot-shot seeker or not-”

“It’s mine.” All eyes swiveled to Rachel.

Julie shook her head. “I didn’t move here for you to make yourself a liar,” she said. Rachel’s mouth opened and didn’t close.

“Maybe you two should take this somewhere more private?” Alex suggested.

Julie nodded and rose. “Yeah. Rachel, let's go to my room.” She headed for the girls' dormitories. Rachel followed.

The prefect blocked their way. “*Your* room? If you go anywhere but out of our House, I'm going straight to the Headmistress’s office!”

Rachel stepped in front of Julie and fixed the prefect with her fiercest gaze. “To do what?” The prefect’s eyes widened. “Have you even read the rules about this? Go ahead,” her voice descended to a growl, “see how the Headmistress likes having her time wasted.” The fight went out of the prefect and the couple pushed past her.

As soon as the trapdoor closed behind them, Rachel threw herself onto Julie’s mercy. “I’m horribly sorry I doubted you! I had you completely wrong.”

“I’m just glad to have you back.” She moved to embrace Rachel, who caught her hands and held her off.

“I’m not ready to be forgiven, J.J.. I think I wanted to hear bad Slytherin in what you said. It was easier than trying to face what you actually meant.”

Julie smiled wistfully and pulled Rachel’s arms around her neck, slow-dance-style. “Me caring for you only works if you’re open to it.”

Rachel’s smile was weak, but promising. “Maybe I'm more open now than I was last night.”

“Then I want to see you stress less and laugh more! The way you are now, any reminder of your condition kills your mood. I’d like to see you able joke about it. Like, I wish I could say something about how awesome you were just now. The way you made that prefect back down!”

Rachel’s smile opened up. “I let the wolf out.”
“The…” Julie grappled with that statement.

“Figuratively.”

“Okay, but I thought you said it didn’t cross over into your human self. You didn’t want it to, too.”

“It doesn’t, but I still remember how it feels to be a wolf. I reached down into that.”

“Wow, and it was…” Julie turned bashful. “If you hadn’t been defending me, I probably would’ve been terrified, too, but, honestly…that was hot. The line about the rules was a nice touch, too.”

“I figured she probably hadn’t read every last line in the student manual.” Rachel smirked. “A little doubt was all it took.”

“A little doubt and your best alpha female impression!”

Rachel ducked her eyes away. “I’m a bit ashamed by how much I enjoyed that.”

Julie gasped. “No! That’s good, that’s really good! You deserve to enjoy the things that make you you.”

“I’m not saying you’re wrong, but I’m not gonna go around intimidating everyone.”

“No, of course not, but you could go around feeling wolfish and awesome.”

Rachel smirked and her eyes flashed dangerously. Julie felt her stomach burst with butterflies. Rachel seemed to know, because her smirk became a grin, then a smile, and then a long kiss. “You know what finally convinced me? When you refused to let me take the blame for your uniform.”

“It just seemed wrong.”

“And that’s how I knew I could trust your intentions. I worried that curiosity or lust or something was behind your interest in my werewolf aspect.” Rachel smiled and held Julie closer. “Now I know better.”

“Both those things are there;” Julie cautioned, “but they’re footnotes, not the reason why.”

“I know.” Rachel kissed her again. “You really can’t change Houses, though. Get changed back into your own uniform, or you’ll ruin breakfast for everyone.”

Julie gestured toward a cloud-like mattress on the floor. “Who’s gonna stop me? I’ll move my things up after-”

Rachel pulled her back in for kiss number three. “If ’the only thing I’d change about you’ didn’t include Slytherin before, it does now. I trust all of you. Although…” an idea flickered behind her eyes, caught fire, and made her grin. “You know what would really spoil breakfast for everyone?”

When, hand in hand, Julie and Rachel entered the Great Hall, the nearest students looked up and fell silent. The silence spread through the hall like a ripple through a pond, until it reached Kelley. She burst out in laughter, which echoed unflatteringly from the vaulted ceiling. Then, from the faculty on the dais, a chair scraped and Headmistress McGonagall stood. Kelley’s voice quieted.

The head of Hogwarts began clapping.

Dr. Couture rose and added her applause, followed by Madame Hooch. Ashlyn was first among the
students to stand, joined immediately by Ali and Alex, then Lauren and Tobin, Amy and Kelley, friends, roommates, study partners, professors…

When Julie looked back at Rachel, her eyes were wet. “You'd think we just came out,” Rachel mumbled.

Julie took her other hand and smiled. “We’re hardly a secret, but we could do that, too, if you like.”

“It’s not like it'll alienate more people than trading uniforms,” Rachel said, put on a brave face, and kissed Julie to the sound of their friends’ cheers.

Chapter End Notes

I know, I know, four Julie/Rachel chapters in a row. More sports, Hannex, and maybe some O'Solo are in the works.
Kelley couldn’t sleep. The full moon over the lake gave her room a dim light, but that wasn’t the problem. She missed Hope. Sometimes, it was as simple as that. She just missed Hope.

Maybe…maybe she just needed to not be lonely? Share someone else's bed? Maybe Alex would let her, like that night two years ago. It was a little late, but worth a try. Kelley rolled to the edge of her bed and got the Marauder's Map from her dresser. “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.”

The halls looked clear. She could probably make it – but something caught her eye. There was a gap in the pattern of green dots in her room. An empty bed. Julie's bed. Kelley scrawled her friend's name in the margin, but instead of zooming in on her location, the map drew an arrow pointing northwest of the castle.

Kelley considered. On the one hand, whatever Julie was up to was none of her business. On the other hand, she couldn’t sleep. She picked up her broom and stole out of her room.

Outside the castle, she opened the map again. The arrow was still there, pointing in a slightly different direction than before. Kelley turned the map in her hands and the arrow moved to stay pointing in the same direction, like a compass. She mounted her broom and followed the arrow.

After a few minutes' flight, she saw two dark, moving shapes below. The arrow was definitely pointing at them. She flew closer and the dark shapes resolved into animals. Not small ones, either. A wolf and a cougar. Okay, I know there are no big cats in Britain.

They looked up at her.

The wolf barked at the cougar, which growled back. The two animals locked eyes, and then the cougar put a front paw on one of the wolf’s. Next thing Kelley knew, she was looking at Julie. Her jaw dropped.

“Come down here,” Julie said. “It’s safe.”

Kelley landed but asked, “Why wouldn’t it be?”

Julie gripped her shoulders. “You kept one secret for me. I need you to keep another. Forget you ever saw us here.”

“Us?” Kelley looked at the wolf again. “Oh my god, I should've checked to see if Rachel was gone, too. I’m sorry for interrupting your shapeshifting couple time.”

Julie frowned. “Checked how?”

The wolf barked. When Julie and Kelley looked at her, she traced L-A-T-E-R on the ground with her
“Why can’t she talk?”

“Kelley. We’ll talk before breakfast tomorrow. Don’t say a word to anyone.”

Kelley cocked her head. “So you sneak out at night. What’s the big secret?”

Julie’s eyes were hard. “Trust. Me.”

Kelley took a breath. “Okay. See you in the morning.” She flew back to Hogwarts.

As soon as Rachel’s reverse transformation finished, she turned on Julie. “How could you do that!!”

Julie held out her hands. “Please spell out what you mean.”

“How could you tell Kelley anything about me?”

“I didn’t tell her anything.”

“You told her that I couldn’t transform back to talk. She flew out and back under the full moon; she’s probably put two and two together by now. How could you just out me like that?”

Julie didn’t argue, but simply answered. “We can’t risk her going back and telling people how she saw a wolf and a cougar. Rachel, I’m sorry that this happened when you didn’t have a voice. You deserve to be in control of who knows.”

“And you knowingly took that away from me.”

“I tried to keep as much of it for you as I could. I admit, I shouldn’t have let slip that you couldn’t talk. I’m sorry. But Rachel, Kelley found two animals, which don’t belong in Britain, one of them a wolf, during a full moon. Do you see a way to handle that without talking to her?”

Rachel heaved a heavy sigh. “Forgive me, I just feel more vulnerable than I ever have. Of all the people in Hogwarts, it’s Kelley!”

“She’s more discreet than you think. I trust her.”

“I’d rather *oblivi ate* her.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“Julie, everyone who ought to already knows. It can only go downhill from here.”

Julie bit her lip.

Early in the morning, the three sat down in an alcove outside the Great Hall. Rachel spoke. “I don’t think I need to tell you what you saw last night.” Kelley gave the slightest shake of her head. “Then you know why it’s imperative that you don’t tell a soul.”

“Kelley,” Julie said quietly, “you’ve been trustworthy with what I told you when I was new. This isn’t like that. This is Rachel’s whole life, and she didn’t choose to share it with you.”

“It isn’t your whole life, Rachel,” Kelley said. “I know you well enough. This is just one part of
“Th-thank you, but it will be my whole life if people find out. Most won’t be as accepting as you.”

“It’s mostly because I trust J.J.,” Kelley admitted.

J.J. had something to say. “Since this is Rachel’s life at stake, there’s something I’d like you to consider.”

Kelley looked closer at Julie. “Why do you look sad?”

Kelley entered Headmistress McGonagall’s office but didn’t see a single thing in it. Her mind was fully occupied. “Excuse me, Headmistress?”

“Yes, Ms. O’Hara?”

Kelley swallowed. “I need…to forget something.”

“To forget something?” Headmistress McGonagall repeated.

“Yes. Last night, I found out…about Rachel. Daly.”

“How?”

“I’d rather not say. I just want to forget.”

“Why?”

“Because I…” Kelley looked down at her lap. “Because, if I accidentally give some hint, or say the wrong thing, or do anything to betray a secret that she never entrusted to me in the first place, the only person more devastated than me would be her. She has enough problems without worrying about me. I want you to erase my memory of last night and my talk with her this morning.”

McGonagall cocked her head. “This is serious, Kelley. You don’t trust yourself to keep a secret?”

“It’s not about me. It’s about her. I can’t do anything for her with what I know, only hurt her.”

The Headmistress pursed her lips, then nodded. “As you wish.” She picked up her wand and spoke into it. “Rachel Daly, please report to the Headmistress’s office.”

In a few minutes, she arrived. “Yes, Headmistress- oh.” She stared at Kelley.

“‘Sup, Rach’,” Kelley said softly.

Rachel joined her in front of the Headmistress’s desk. “Hey.”

“Do you know why Kelley is here, Rachel?”

“I…don’t want to assume.”

“She wants to forget what she learned about you last night.” McGonagall steepled her fingers. “Well. I will not erase your memory, Kelley. What I am willing to do is remove your memories and give them to you, Rachel, for safekeeping. If she, in her own time, chooses to trust you with her secret, she can return them to you. Would that be acceptable to you, Kelley?”

“Yes, ma’am.”
“What about you, Rachel?”

Rachel wet her lips. “That seems like at least as big a burden. Keeping someone else's actual memories? Where would I keep them?”

“Hmmm…” McGonagall aimed a finger across the room. “I recommend that cabinet over there.”

“That sounds quite a lot better. Thank you.”

“Well, then. What I'm going to do, Kelley, is draw out your memories into the Penseive. You'll be able to look them over and check if I took too much or too little. When we're satisfied, I'll seal them in a vial. Then, I'll put you unconscious and seal your memory of what just happened in a second vial. That way, if you put your memories back in your head, you'll know you aren't missing any.”

Kelley nodded. “Okay. I'm ready.”

“One last thing,” Rachel hugged her tight. “Thank you. You'll never know how much this means to me.”

“I guess not.” Kelley stepped back to make eye contact. “Don’t think this means you owe me. You don't owe me your secret, or the memories, or anything.”

Rachel squeezed her again. “You have the biggest heart of any Slytherin I've ever – don’t tell Julie I said that.”

“I won’t.” Kelley smirked. “I can’t.”

“She did it.” Rachel sounded dazed. “When you suggested it to her, I didn’t think she'd even consider it, but she did it.”

Julie smiled. “That’s why we trust her.”

“She was so…good. Is.”

“You seem surprised. Is this a Slytherin thing?”

“Maybe. I guess I've only really seen her be either silly or driven before…” As she thought, though, she remembered details, looks, expressions, all signs of attentiveness and thoughtfulness. “It sounds crazy to say it now, but if I were going to tell anyone else, it would be her.”

“Even before Alex?”

“Maybe. I'm not going to tell, though.” She put her hand on Julie’s leg. “The right people know for me to feel cared for.”

Chapter End Notes

I miss all of you, so don't forget to leave comments :(
This Is It

Chapter Notes

I wrote the following four chapters in one choked-up sitting in late December 2015. I promised myself that, if I ever felt I wasn’t going to continue this story, I’d post them. Two years later, I think it’s time. I’ve loved these characters, but I don’t think I ever recovered from the Olympic disaster. To all my readers, this is goodbye for the foreseeable future. I’ll miss you.

These chapters have some references to details from the first several chapters, like the commands for calling brooms to your hand. It's been a long time, I know.

“This is it. This is the World Cup championship. Everything we’ve done, everything we are, is for this moment. We go out there and we get them! ‘USA’ on three. ONE, TWO, THREE!”

“USA!”

Who’s laughing now, Alex thought, remember the strange looks and mocking comments she’d received while doing fitness training at Hogwarts. Controlling a broom looked effortless, and at slow speeds it was, but when streaking at eighty miles per hour it was Alex’s muscles on the broom versus the air on her body, and the air didn’t get tired. She wanted to look back over her shoulder at Sweden’s seeker and see how tired he was, but she was afraid she might give her ploy away. She was leading him on a wild goose chase. She had no idea where the snitch was, but she was Alex Morgan. No seeker who wanted to win strayed more than a yard from Alex Morgan. She could feel the end of his broom handle bumping against her heels and her broom’s brush as they flew. Zipping behind the stadium, she decided to take a risk and answer all of her questions at once.

She kicked and twisted against her broom and then she was climbing vertically along the back of the stands. She chanced a look back and saw her opponent grimace as he followed her path. He’s struggling, she thought, but not as much as I’d hoped. She pulled her heels away from her body and arced inverted over the top of the stadium. Oh-05, the scoreboard said. No, we’re up 50-40. It took her a moment to read while upside down, but the important thing was that they were ahead. Behind her, Alex heard what she assumed was a Swedish swear word and knew that her game was up. She rolled upright and made a slow turn high over the pitch, eyes flicking between the game below, her rival seeker, and her surroundings. She hoped to catch a glint of silver-gold or see some distracted reaction among the players or crowd. Any sign of the snitch was welcome. They were an hour into the match, ahead on the board, level in tournament goals, and it was her job to end it as soon as her team claimed the lead. Where are you, snitch?

Sweden had the quaffle. Ali read the oncoming chasers and dove low to get out of their field of view. Lauren watched her bank right and then saw a bludger curling towards herself. With a last-second sideways skid, she set up her shot and swung. Her bat connected with a resounding crack and the bludger careened towards the chaser on her left. In front, the chaser with the quaffle saw that his path to the goals was guarded and one of his teammates was occupied with dodging Lauren’s bludger. He hurled the quaffle to the other chaser.
Ali rocketed up from below and bicycle-kicked the quaffle out of the chaser’s hands just as soon as she’d caught it. Kelley was ready and, with her foot, volleyed the quaffle ahead to Tobin. Ali zoomed past a Swedish beater, dodging a bludger he sent her way, and curved towards Sweden’s scoring area. Kelley set up behind the two in the center of their attacking third.

The Swedish keeper shouted to her team, seeing the possibilities. Either Ali was bait and would leave the scoring area while another chaser went for the goals, or the Americans could anticipate the defense’s response and send the quaffle to an unguarded Ali. She needed her team to shut down both options.

“Bludgers center! Mark left!” She shouted in Swedish, and her beaters managed to hit both bludgers at Kelley in quick succession, then shifted to cover Ali.

Alex forced back a smile as Kelley did consecutive hanging rolls to dodge both bludgers without slowing down or changing course. This could be the moment when her team needed their seeker to put away the win. *Dammit, where are you?*

Tobin was running out of space on the left side and the retreating chasers were spreading vertically to screen her path to Kelley. She could see one of the beaters sticking tight to Ali and the other hanging between Ali and Kelley, trusting her teammates to stop a pass to Kelley. Tobin looked at the stack of players and suppressed a grin. *You’re mine,* she thought.

Tobin tugged back on her broom and shot up, drawing the highest chaser apart from the others. His teammate rose below him to cover the gap. In a flash, Tobin had darted back down and the third chaser mirrored her, opening a gap above, and the middle Swede descended to close the new gap. The highest chaser, seeing a pattern, stayed put. Sure enough, Tobin zoomed back up – and kicked the quaffle between the middle and high players. She cut tight over the top of the high chaser and caught the quaffle on the other side of the screen.

Kelley would’ve been astonished by Tobin’s display but she was in the zone today and nothing was going to take her mind off of winning. Tobin was racing towards Sweden’s goals from the left, the chasers were hopelessly behind and the beaters were guarding Ali, who was already pulling back on-side. Tobin hurled the ball across the scoring area. This was her moment.

To Alex above, Kelley looked like a ninja. She was stretched out sideways on her broomstick, holding it tucked under her left arm with her right leg extended far in front of the handle. Kelley chose the left hoop and rammed her foot through the quaffle. The keeper threw herself sideways but the shot had far too much power. The quaffle was through the hoop before she could even get near it.

The stadium exploded in noise and photo flashes. Alex knew she’d see Kelley’s goal face all over the news tomorrow. They had this if she could just spot the snitch. *Where the fuck are you?*

Hope would’ve jumped for joy if she’d been on the ground. She wanted to run and tackle Kelley while their teammates showered her with congratulations. For one moment, she missed soccer.

A keeper had no time for distractions, however, and she focused on the coming counterattack. Sweden wasted no time and Tobin and Kelley were scrambling back to cover them. Hope barked instructions to Lauren, Julie and Ali. Her beaters found the bludgers and knocked them forward, trying to squeeze the Swedish attack towards Tobin and Kelley.

It was going to be close. The chaser with the quaffle was rushing right for her. Hope readied her hands for the save and twitched her broom left and right below the center goal. Lauren was rushing in from the right and Julie was holding her place on the wing, discipline winning over nerves.
Something behind Julie caught Hope’s eye.

The snitch was hovering just past the right goal hoop.

A keeper had no time for distractions. "ALEX!"

Alex heard Hope’s shout and dove for her. She saw the snitch and the bludger in the same moment. Then Hope was on the ground and Sweden had tied and there was nothing for it now; Sweden’s seeker had probably seen the snitch and she had to be there first. She that she hadn’t and stooped like a falcon.

Ashlyn’s heart was in her throat as she watched what had to be Sweden’s last play. Then everything was a blur and she had her penny off and her broom in her hand before the substitution request was out of Coach Tarpley’s mouth. The assistant referee drew in the air with his wand: “1” in red, “9” in green, and a blue question mark. The referee whistled for play to stop but she shook her head at Ashlyn and flew towards Hope. Ashlyn, Lindsay and Amy looked at each other. Amy threw the discarded penny to Ashlyn and they took off running.

The four seconds after Hope was hit tore Kelley in half. She had to be at Hope’s side and she had to play on for Hope. As soon as she heard the whistle, she was racing for Hope’s body. A rush of air nearly knocked her off her broom as a diving Alex flared hard and then they were both kneeling over Hope. “Hope, Hope, oh my god, Hope, say something Hope.”

Alex grabbed her arms and held Kelley back from doing more than stroking Hope’s head. “The trainers are here. Let them do their job,” Kelley nodded through tears and focused on breathing. The trainers examining Hope looked at each other and then one swung a finger in the air in a ‘get moving’ signal. EMS. It’s worse than bad. Kelley sank back into Alex and sobbed.

“Are you staying or going?” Alex asked.

“What?”

“Do you want to stay here or go with Hope?”

What kind of a question was that? “Hope.”

“Sub Kelley out,” Alex spoke to someone else. Kelley realized the whole team was around them.

“Amy, warm up.” Lindsay said. “Ashlyn, you haven’t yet either.” They nodded but didn’t move.

“All of you, get moving,” Coach Tarpley raised her voice. “EMS is here,” she pointed to the figures racing towards them. “Hope is in their hands now.” She softened her tone. “I know you’re shocked and hurting. I am, too, but let’s not resign ourselves now. Until we know what we’re doing next, let’s run the basic drills to keep your blood flowing and your minds occupied. It’s not over ‘til it’s over.”

She herded the dazed team away, leaving Kelley with Hope and the paramedics. Kelley looked to one who was unfolding a stretcher. “I’ll do whatever you say, including sit a corner and shut up, but I’m staying with Hope.”

She gave Kelley an appraising look. “Ok. It’ll be exactly that.”

A voice croaked from the ground. “Kelley.”

She grabbed Hope’s hand and cried.
“There are a few ways we can handle this,” the referee said to the team captains. “You can continue the match. The match will begin with a restart: coin toss, snitch release, and so on. There’s also the gentlemen’s agreement variation; you continue the match with an agreement to make no plays on the quaffle and the bludgers, making it a contest of the seekers. It will be on your honor to uphold the agreement, and I will have to award the win to whether you abide by it or not. Second, you can agree to decide the match by penalty shootout and I will go knock the dust off of the rules for that. Third, you can agree to end the match now and it will be a draw. I don’t know how FIQA will handle a voluntary tie for a World Cup championship, but the option is there.”

“We will agree to whatever the U.S.A. team decides,” Sweden’s keeper said.

“Thank you,” Lauren replied. “We’d like time to discuss the choices as a team.”

“You may. Please do not delay,” the referee said.

Team U.S.A. met in a huddle. “Those are our choices,” Lauren told them. “The Swedes are being gentlemen and letting us make the choice.”

“What is a penalty shootout in Quidditch?” Julie asked.

“It’s pretty much what you’d expect,” Coach Tarpley replied. “The referee releases the snitch, then levitates the quaffle in front of the goal hoops at the edge of the scoring area. The keeper goes in and a chaser tries to score. They can do anything they want with the ball within five yards of where the referee places it. While that’s going on, the seekers try to catch the snitch, as normal. The shootout ends when the snitch is caught and both sides have taken an equal number of shots. If one team catches the snitch before the other team has taken its shot, and that team ties it with an equal number of goals in an equal number of shots, it’s a draw and it starts all over.”

“So,” Amy said, “We can play it out, we can watch Alex and their chaser play it out, or we can take shots while Alex and their chaser play it out?”

“Or we can call it a draw and go home,” Lindsay added.

“Anyone here actually ok with that?” Amy asked. Heads shook all around. “Didn’t think so.”

“I can do whatever you need me to do,” Alex said. “Their chaser is wearing out.”

“If you still have the heart for it, our best chance is to play it out. That way we only need one goal and then Alex can lock it down for us,” Lindsay said. “If you aren’t truly up for that, we can take one of the other options.”

Tobin spoke up for the first time. “Whatever we do, I think we should win as a team. Either play it out or take penalties.”

“I can only speak for myself,” Ali said, “but I trained for eight years to win at Quidditch, not sort-of-Quidditch.” Others nodded agreement.

“Alright then. I don’t like to put you on the spot over this, but it has to be a team decision. In half a minute I’m going to ask each of you which option you want. Think and pick one.”

They closed their eyes. Opened them, looked around at each other. Looked at the stands, at the sky,
at the ground in front of their goals. Closed their eyes again.

“Ashlyn,” Lindsay began.

“Play it out.”

“Julie.”

“Play it.”

“Tobin.”

“Finish the match.”

“Alex.”

“Match.”

“Amy.”

“Beat ‘em for real.”

“Ali.”

“Play and win.”

“Lauren.”

“See it through,” Lauren concluded, “for Hope. And Kelley.”

“A goal that badass deserves a World Cup win,” Alex smiled.

“Saw that, did you?” Amy smirked.

“Yeah, I was taking a moment to take stock of the match.”

“Did you see the sweet moves that set up the cross?” Tobin grinned.

“Did I ever! I nearly fell off my broom just watching!”

Coach Tarpley was overjoyed that her players’ spirits had returned. “Alright then, ladies. You want it, you go get it. Sweden knows we want to keep this match short, so they’re expecting us to come at them hard. Their winning strategy is to hang on until your adrenaline burns off and you lose heart. This is where all that fitness training pays off. Bring it twice as hard as they can imagine for twice as long as they can handle.” Lindsay brought out the clipboard. “It’s time for the 1-1-3 opening we’ve kept up our sleeve.” She sketched the play to refresh their memories. “Do not telegraph that something unusual is happening. Lauren, if I were Sweden, I’d hit a bludger straight at the quaffle to nip our momentum in the bud. You need to be lightning and find a chaser, preferably Amy in the center, on your first look. Alex, we can’t wait until the snitch decides to show itself. We need you to get down and search for it instead of orbiting high. It’s a risk but it’s what the team needs.” She folded the sketch over and clipped it closed. “Every day that we worked our asses off and went home with windburn was for this moment. You are prepared, you are the best, and I believe that we will win.” Lindsay looked at their captain. “Any words, Lauren?”

“I couldn’t have said it better than you did: let’s go get it. We go hard, we go fast, and we put this away in the first ten minutes. ‘U.S.A.’ on three- no. ‘Hope’ on three. ONE, TWO, THREE,”
Ashlyn felt eyes on the back of her head and turned. Looking up, she found Whitney Engen in the section for family and guests. Even from this distance, she could tell that her friend had been crying. She waved and Whitney waved back and shouted something. The sound got lost on the way down but Ashlyn thought she knew what it was. She shouted back and grinned. Whitney did, too, made a heart with her hands and then pumped her fist as her mouth made an unmistakable “U.S.A.!”

They lined up on the edge of the pitch and the stadium rose in a roar. Ashlyn felt the first tremors of choking up. She risked a glance at Ali next to her; Ali smiled and wrapped an arm around to grab her shoulder, rough and playful, and it was exactly what she needed. The referee waved to the sidelines and they were moving. Ashlyn’s mind raced through every defensive play and save scenario she knew. Stretches helped calm her nerves while the referee set up the restart. She watched Lauren and Julie settle themselves in front of her and found a new surge of confidence; they’d made it this far together and they were going to finish it. After an eternity, the whistle came. This is it. This is for you, little Ashlyn. She whispered the word to summon her broom to her hand. “Hero.”

The game was on and Ashlyn bolted to goal height. Alright, this is my house now.
This Is It, pt. 2

Kelley tried to cheer up. *Hope’s going to be fine, you scored a beautiful goal, and everyone says you’re the most fun person in the world. Be happy.* It was no use. Hope was in the ER and that was all that mattered to her. She wouldn’t be ok until Hope was back. *Or maybe never.* She forced down a sob and told herself, for the fiftieth time, to stop thinking that way.

A growing commotion at the nurses’ station drew her attention. The people there sounded happy about something. *That can only be an improvement,* Kelley thought, and made her way over.

“I can hardly believe they’re going for it.”

“They’re tough. They may yet win this.”

Kelley turned the corner and found a clump of nurses and staff huddled around a screen.

“What are you watching?”

A nurse in the back answered over his shoulder. “Quidditch World Cup.”

“The trophy ceremony?”

“No, the final. The match.”

“Wait, what?!”

A woman turned around, annoyed. “Can you keep it down- oh my god.”

This kept getting more confusing. “What?”

“Oh my god, you’re…you’re Kelley O’Hara.”

Kelley stared at her.

“Oh my god, and you’re still in your jersey – come here, come here!” She grabbed Kelley’s arm and dragged her forward. “Out of the way!” She pried open a space between her fellow hospital staff and shoved Kelley through. The nurse seated in front of the screen turned to see what the disturbance was and came face-to-face with a confused Kelley O’Hara. He stood up and waved Kelley into her chair.

“If you’re just joining us, this is Arlo White with former Quidditch pro Ginny Potter. If you’re tuning back in, we forgive you for thinking this was over but, really, you should’ve known better than to count this U.S. side out.”

“That’s right, the officials gave the teams the option of agreeing to a draw or going to tie-breaking methods and the U.S. said, ‘no, we came here to win,’ and that’s what they’re taking the field now to try to do.” Kelley realized that she knew better, too.

The teams lined up on their sidelines. The crowd in the stadium roared and a wide sector of the roar resolved into words.

“*I!*”

“*I!*”
“I believe!”

“I BELIEVE!”

“I believe that!”

“I BELIEVE THAT!”

“I believe that we!”

“I BELIEVE THAT WE!”

“I believe that we will win!”

“I BELIEVE THAT WE WILL WIN!”

“I BELIEVE THAT WE WILL WIN!”

“I BELIEVE THAT WE WILL WIN!”

Tears welled in Kelley’s eyes as she watched her family jog to their places on the pitch. They looked even more confident than when they’d first started.

The broadcast cut to a field-level camera to show Ashlyn doing some final limbering exercises.

“U.S. starting keeper Hope Solo, who posted a record 28-minute shutout streak during the U.S.’s 54-minute quarterfinal match against Hungary, is in hospital after a bludger knocked her from her broom at height. Taking her place in goal is Ashlyn Harris, whose sole World Cup experience came in the group stage match against Korea Republic this year, after the U.S. was secure at the top of their group.”

“There’s no doubt that Harris is a world class keeper but she still has some very big shoes to fill. Hope Solo was nearing the record for least goals-against average in World Cup history.”

“Do you think a lack of big-game experience could become an issue here?”

“The rule for that question is, ‘if you have to ask, the answer is yes,’ but there’s an exception to every rule. I was talking with Hope Solo about her couple days ago and Hope said, ‘With Ashlyn, every match is a big match because there’s only one audience that matters to her. Whenever she steps on the field, she plays as if her childhood self is watching, because somewhere there’s a little witch who needs the inspiration that she didn’t have.’ If that isn’t convincing, Hope told me later, ‘I’ve watched her in international friendlies, and the Hungary game, and her game face intimidates me.’”

“That’s a Hope Solo compliment if I’ve ever heard one.”

The broadcast switched to another angle to frame Lauren, Tobin and Amy at half-field.

“Look at her eyes,” someone said, and a finger pointed at Lauren over Kelley’s head. Lauren was staring steel at an off-camera Swedish player.

“I’d never have guessed she could make a face like that,” a male voice said.

“Do you think we give her the captain’s armband for her looks?” Kelley asked, indignant. She heard awkwardness behind her and felt satisfaction.
“The U.S. side certainly brought their game faces, Ginny.”

“That isn’t a game face, Arlo. That is a ‘this just got personal’ face. Hope Solo’s injury seems to have lit a whole new fire under the U.S. players. The Swedish side has played championship-worthy Quidditch today but, right now, I am glad I am not in their shoes.”

“We’ll see how the mental game plays out. I’m sure the U.S. coach is hoping that her players’ adrenaline lasts longer than Sweden’s defense. Here comes the referee to restart the match.”

The referee whistled the first of three signals. Lauren maintained her gaze and snapped her fingers. Her broom was in her grip in an instant.

“Damn,” said several voices from behind Kelley.

“That never gets old,” Kelley grinned. “She is such a badass.”

“I still don’t understand how she gets her fingers out of the way.”

“Years of practice”

“Can you do that, Ginny?”

“As the Americans say, I plead the Fifth.”

The broadcast cut to a wide shot of the pitch.

“You can feel the anticipation here. The crowd can sense that they're witnesses to something special today…”

The referee released the snitch and the bludgers and whistled again. The players mounted their brooms. She tossed the quaffle in the air, waited, and whistled a third time.

Lauren, who’d stared down Sweden’s keeper until the last second, shot up and right towards the quaffle. Amy, in the center, ignored it and raced forward. The chaser opposite her hesitated and got out of her way, giving Lauren the extra second she needed to be first to the quaffle. Amy, Tobin and Ali were already pushing deep, surprising a Swedish side which expected a chaser to go for the quaffle and fly it forward. Sweden’s outside chasers and a bludger all converged on Lauren, who didn’t stop for the quaffle but kicked it up behind her with her heel. Now out-of-plane from her opponents, she back-flipped her broom over the ball, swung her bat and hit it long to meet Ali in Sweden’s scoring area.

“And they get something special! A creative opening by the U.S. has put all their chasers in the open and the quaffle in Sweden’s scoring area. Sweden is scrambling to not give away the lead on the first play.”

“YEAH, girl!” Kelley had practiced the play but had never seen it from the outside. It was pretty damn impressive.

“Full throttle, like we expected, and stylish as well. That was clearly a rehearsed set-piece.”

Sweden’s keeper knew she was in trouble and barked for her beaters to guard against a cross. One hit the second bludger to slow Amy, the obvious target for Ali. She made her dodge look easy. From above, Lauren saw that Sweden’s retreating chasers blocked Julie’s view; she shouted a warning and Julie skidded and twisted for a better angle and batted the oncoming bludger back through Sweden’s formation towards their right goal hoop.
Kelley, watching a high-angle camera, saw that the bludger would pass between the keeper and Ali on a path through the hoop. “Oh, you got this, Ali,” she said to herself. “That goal is all yours.”

”A good hit by Johnston. You have to wonder if Sweden’s keeper is bludger-shy after what happened to Solo. She can’t do much against Krieger unless she puts herself in the path of that one.”

“The question she’s asking herself right now is-“

”And the U.S. scores! Hat trick for Ali Krieger! 70-60 U.S.A.”

”I’m not sure which is more impressive, that display by Holiday or Johnston’s perfect interference shot at a goal she couldn’t see.”

Kelley was out of her seat and the whole group was cheering. “I didn’t know there were U.S.A. fans here,” she observed.

“Honestly, most of us aren’t,” said a man behind her, “but you can’t help but cheer for a team that comes back after a blow like that.”

“I imagine what you were about to say is whether Ali was going to try and put the quaffle through ahead of the bludger or behind it and of course she put it through ahead of it.”

“Absolutely. At this level, you’ll take your chances with a bludger over a keeper.”

“No question about it. An hour ago, I’m sure the keeper would have gone for the early save, but now the U.S. is up a goal in the first minute of restarted play. Sweden’s moving the quaffle back into the U.S.’s half.”

“It’s time for the U.S. to show it can still defend, too, but all I can think right now is ‘Where’s Alex Morgan?’”

“I haven’t seen her since the starting whistle. As soon as one of our camera crews spots her, I’m sure we’ll know.”

“Come on, Alex,” Kelley said, not caring who heard, “Come on, you’re literally the best in the world. Snatch that snitch for-“ she stopped as she realized where the name came from. “Oh.”

“Sweden’s beaters have spread Johnston and Holiday and now it’s Ashlyn’s first test of the match.”

“If there’s one thing Sweden’s chasers have, it’s pace. Ashlyn’s going to need all the help she can get to close their avenues down.”

“I would’ve thought that was height, Arlo.”

“You got me, pace and height. Here come Johnston and Krieger.”

Kelley watched, trying and failing to not worry. Julie moved in from the Schelin’s forward quarter and Ali rushed in from her rear. A perfectly-aimed bludger shot between Ali’s body and Schelin forced Julie to brace her bat in front of her to deflect it. The Swedish chaser did a sloth-grip roll under the startled Julie and Ali had to slow to avoid colliding with her disoriented teammate.

“Oh, what a display by Sweden! They’re through and on a breakaway towards the U.S. goals. They are certainly still in this game.”

Kelley’s heart was in her throat. Ashlyn was good but this was bad. They did not need Sweden to
level the score only two minutes in. Her veteran ears picked up the crack of a bat on a bludger and she cringed for Ashlyn.

"Sounds like – no, it was Lauren Holiday, she’s hit one across in front of Schelin – she’s going for the angle Holiday’s left her…"

No one at the nurses’ station was breathing. The Swedish chaser angled to face the farthest hoop and Ashlyn drifted towards it along her line. It was a feint and she drop-kicked the quaffle towards the center goal as the bludger zoomed between her and the nearest.

Ashlyn threw herself back towards the incoming quaffle, stretching out as far from her broom as she dared.

The quaffle hit her fingers.

Then the hoop.

And missed.

The nurses’ station crowd, now doubled in size, erupted in cheers. Kelley jumped for joy and high-fived everyone around her.

"OH! What a save by Ashlyn Harris! That one’s going in the ‘Saves of the Tournament’ reel."

“They could make the World Cup 2015 highlight reel just from this match: Ali’s hat trick, Kelley’s goal, more than an hour’s brilliance from Lauren and Tobin, the way the team came together after Hope’s injury…"

“I can think of several sides which would have a fair grievance with that, but we’ll see. For now, the U.S. is up a goal and they have the quaffle."

“Anyone see some pink pre-wrap?”

“For real, Alex,” Kelley murmured. “Now would be the time.”

The broadcast cut to a lone broom-rider against the sky.

"Well, there’s one seeker – Sweden’s."

“That’s either a very good sign for the U.S. or a very bad one."

“No shit.” The nurses closest to Kelley chuckled. The broadcast cut back to a view of the pitch. The U.S. chasers were making smart darts and passes to move the quaffle into Sweden’s territory.

“Heath is working it down the left side."

"Playing possession, playing smart, giving Morgan time to find the snitch. They’re up and they want to end the match before fatigue and emotion start dragging them."

“That’s a mistake by Sweden’s beater, she took that shot too soon and now Heath’s got time for a good look at the scoring area. Rodriguez is in the center, farther to the right than she probably should be but an ideal target for a cross. Rodriguez is coming back towards the center and now the defense has to track her and Krieger at different angles. Here’s the cross from Heath…Rodriguez flicks it on to Krieger-”

A blur cut across the field and the quaffle reappeared on the other side of the rightmost goal.
"What...AND ALEX MORGAN has a goal as well! Good Lord, Ginny, how fast do you think she was going?"

"I don’t know and I don’t think I want to know. She followed the quaffle through the hoop and I don’t think I’ve ever seen that at pro speeds. I can’t believe that wasn’t a haversacking foul but the new quaffles can tell if they’re carried into a hoop. I’d rather she’d spotted the snitch, but it’s hard to begrudge such a gutsy play."

"The referee has ruled that it was a goal. The score is now U.S.A. 70, Sweden 50. I don’t think Ali Krieger’s too disappointed to not get that cross either, what with being the first American to record a hat trick in a World Cup final."

Kelley had been too excited to sit down after Ashlyn’s save. Now she was jumping and laughing and crying and yelling and hugging everyone around her. Her best friend had just scored in the World Cup final. It was enough to forget why she was in a hospital.

The broadcast replayed a goal-level view of Alex’s streak through the play and her arch up out of the stadium, trailing streams of vapor from her heels.

"Let me tell you, Arlo, it is not fun flying that hard on a humid day, but I think Morgan will say it was worth it for the photos that were just taken."

"Here’s Sweden’s seeker moving in to mark Morgan. It’s hard to believe he hasn’t been stuck like glue to her since the restart."

"I suspect it has something to do with how tired he looks. Remember that we hardly saw either of them in the first hour? I bet Alex Morgan was using her reputation to run him ragged."

Kelley smiled at that. Alex had to be the fittest seeker in the world.

"Is it really that tiring?” Someone asked behind her. “I get that Quidditch isn’t easy but the flying itself – I mean, flying a magic broomstick never wore me out.”

“Oh, no.” Kelley shook her head. “It’s magic, yes, but the magic is shoving you into the wind and the wind shoves back. Changing direction is a fight between you pushing on the little broom and the wind pushing on all of you. The faster and harder you want to turn, the more work it is.”

“Then how does Alex Morgan make it look so easy?”

"By training to be a human fighter jet,” Kelley grinned. She focused back on the screen and saw Alex’s face change. “Oh, this is it, she’s seen it! Game’s over.”

Alex tucked into a vertical dive and rushed towards the stadium. The camera jerked down to keep her in frame. Sweden’s seeker chased after but he had no hope of overtaking her.

"Oh, Morgan looks like she’s onto something. She’s coming down fast."

"Sweden has the quaffle in their attacking third. It looks like they’re trying to find Schelin in the scoring area but Heath is covering as tightly as the rules allow."

The broadcast cut to another camera and Kelley had a view of Alex coming nearly straight at her. Her face was the image of determination.

"Wow, which camera is that...bloody hell, is the snitch right on top of the press box?!”
They cut again, this time to a camera on the opposite roof of the stadium. Alex was flying straight down, as fast as Kelley had ever seen her go, and getting faster. It was terrifying. “Alex. Alex. Alex…”

"Sweden’s keeper’s broken off and is taking a more conservative spiral downward. Do you think he suspects a Wronski feint?"

"When your opposing seeker makes a dive like that, you don’t much care if it’s a feint or not. I think he just doesn’t want to join Hope Solo in the hospital."

As Kelley watched, Alex’s acceleration slowed to normal free-fall. She twisted in midair, then began to decelerate rapidly. “Oh my god, you did not…”

"No…she did not just command her broom off mid-dive…”

"I can’t believe it, either, but now she’s using the broom’s greater forward thrust to slow herself. I hope it’s enough…”

Alex slowed, slowed, but was still headed for the stands far too fast.

“Couldn’t she just use the broom to rotate around?”

“At that speed it’d take too long.” it still might, Kelley didn’t add. She held her breath, knuckles white, as Alex continued decelerating and reached her hand out in front of her. The crowd around her was silent. The commentators were silent. There was nothing to say.

Alex needed another dozen feet which she didn’t have and smacked into the crowded stands. She tumbled down several rows and came to a stop, sprawled between shocked spectators.

She groaned and, limbs shaking, stood up.

Holding the Snitch.
If you're returning to this story and skipped to the last chapter, STOP READING and go back to chapter 43. That's where the latest updates start.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bright…lights.

White walls.

Bright lights and white walls mean…mean…

Hospital.

I’m in a hospital bed. Ok, what else?

Flowers. Are flowers good or bad?

They’re not good. What else is here?

A Kelley.

That’s very bad. How about my hands? Do they still work?

At the sound of fabric sliding against fabric, Kelley looked up and gulped back a sob.

That’s very, very bad.

Kelley stood and came to Hope’s side. “Hey,” was all she could manage.

“Hey,” was all that Hope could croak back.

“It was close for a while—” Kelley swallowed again, “but the doctor said that, as long as you were conscious by morning, you were going to be fine. And you are. That’s the good news.”

Hope braced for the bad news.

“The bad news is that nobody’s going to remember your incredible hour in goal after Ashlyn’s one epic save.”

“Ashlyn…save?” Hope didn’t understand.

Kelley nodded towards the opposite side of the room. Hope hadn’t looked in that direction yet.

There was a table with more flowers.

And a trophy.

“They won, Hope. We won. 220 to 50.”
Hope shivered and felt tears coming. She reached for Kelley’s hand. Kelley held it and smiled.

“Fifty…Ashlyn didn’t let any in.” Kelley nodded. “Damn right.”

Kelley grinned back through her own tears. “Sweden only took one shot before Alex ended it, and Ashlyn came up big time. Like, the news is going to have a horrible time deciding whether to put that save or Alex’s goal on the front page.

“Alex’s goal?”

“We need to have a team watch-party for you.”

“I remember a certain Georgia girl had something to do with the win, too,” Hope said. Her voice still cracked but it was only emotion now, not weakness.

“I think that was the best goal of my life,” Kelley beamed.

“You were amazing! I wanted to rush out and bear-hug you when you scored.”

“I know, I wished it was soccer so that I'd have time – and footing – to celebrate with you.”

“I did, too.” Hope admitted, “but we have plenty of time to celebrate now.” She pulled on Kelley's hand and Kelley leaned down to her. She tried to wrap her arms around Kelley, but the girl’s bedside position made a bad angle. Kelley swung one leg across Hope and the bed and climbed over it, allowing Hope to get her arms around her and pull her flat for a kiss. It was awkward and sweet and delicious and hotter than Hope intended. Kelley’s tongue made it clear that she did not want it to stop. Hope’s concurred.

Ashlyn stopped abruptly. Whitney ran into her back and Christen nearly ran into Whitney. “What’s wrong?” Alex demanded behind them, all of her concern for Hope rushing back.

“Nothing.” Ashlyn turned away from the window to Hope's room. “I think they just need another minute to themselves.”

Two hours ago, the wizard’s sports bar watch party had been an awkward collection of strangers. Most were there reluctantly and were questioning their decision to come at all. There was a minority in odd, robe-like clothing, and the parents in the majority were wary of allowing their kids near them. The parents and children in the minority looked askance at those in Muggle clothing and kept to themselves. Then food and drinks were brought forth and the adults resigned themselves to sitting at the tables and watching their kids watch the game.

To those in Muggle attire, it was a very strange game. They had little else to occupy themselves, though, so they’d soon worked out the general concept.

It had been a close game.

Then it had been a heartbreaking game.

Then it became an inspiring game.
In the last minutes the adults were cheering as loudly as the kids and holding their breath just as anxiously. Then the woman with the pink hair-band and “U.S.A” on her chest held up the little golden ball and children and grown-ups alike exploded in celebration, laughing and cheering and high-fiving and hugging as if they’d all been friends for years.

A little girl ran out of the crowd and threw herself into her mother’s arms. “We won! We won!”

“I know! We won!” Her eyes, worn, lined and tired, were shining with light and tears.

“Mommy,” the girl said seriously.

“Yes, sweetie?”

“I want to be like Ashlyn when I grow up.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you again to all of you :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!